

# Red Cross says millions of Iraqis lack water and healthcare

Sun 16 Mar 2008, 23:07 GMT

By Stephanie Nebehay

GENEVA (Reuters) - Five years after the United States led an invasion of Iraq, millions of people there are still deprived of clean water and medical care, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said on Monday.

In a sober report marking the anniversary of the 2003 start of the war, which ousted dictator Saddam Hussein and unleashed deep sectarian tensions, the humanitarian body said Iraqi hospitals lack beds, drugs, and medical staff.



Some areas of the country of 27 million people have no functioning water and sanitation facilities, and the poor public water supply has forced some families to use at least a third of their average \$150 monthly income buying clean drinking water.

"Five years after the outbreak of the war in Iraq, the humanitarian situation in most of the country remains among the most critical in the world," the ICRC said, describing Iraq's health care system as "now in worse shape than ever."

The Swiss-based agency is mandated to help victims of war and monitor compliance to international rules of war, enshrined in the Geneva Conventions.

Its report said tens of thousands of Iraqis have disappeared since the start of the war. The conflict was grounded in faulty U.S. intelligence suggesting Saddam was hiding weapons of mass destruction. No such arsenal was ever found.

"Many of those killed in the current violence have never been properly identified, because only a small percentage of the bodies have been turned over to Iraqi government institutions such as the Medical-Legal Institute in Baghdad," it said.

MATCHING DNA SAMPLES

The ICRC is providing forensic equipment to medical and legal institutes enabling them to examine DNA samples and match them with those of families searching for their loved ones.

Iraqi violence rates have fallen 60 percent since last June, but the U.S. military commander there, General David Petraeus, says the security gains are fragile and easily reversed.

Declining civilian casualties have been hailed by Iraqi and U.S. military officials as proof that new counter-insurgency tactics adopted last year have been working.

But Beatrice Megevand Roggo, the ICRC's head of operations for the Middle East and Africa, said those who have fled their homes to escape violence in Iraq, including many children, women, and elderly and disabled people, remained extremely vulnerable.

"Better security in some parts of Iraq must not distract attention from the continuing plight of millions of people who have essentially been left to their own devices," she said.

Tens of thousands of Iraqis -- nearly all men -- are in detention, according to the ICRC. They include 20,000 inmates at the country's largest detention facility at Camp Bucca in the south near Basra, which is run by U.S.-led multinational forces.

The ICRC regularly visits people held by the multinational forces in Iraq, the Kurdish regional government and the Iraqi justice ministry -- altogether some 5,000 detainees last year.

It is still seeking a comprehensive agreement for access to all prisoners held by Iraqi authorities.

Iraq is the ICRC's largest operation worldwide with an annual budget of 107 million Swiss francs (\$106 million). It deploys 600 staff in the country, including 72 expatriates.

(Editing by Laura MacInnis and Jon Boyle)