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Last Updated: Friday, 13 October 2006, 17:39 GMT 18:39 UK

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Iraqis 'fleeing rising violence'

Pam O'Toole
BBC News

Thousands of Iraqis are fleeing the country every day, in what the UN's refugee agency describes as a steady, silent exodus.

The number of Iraqis claiming asylum in the West is growing, says the UNHCR.

The agency also says the number of internally displaced is growing, with some 365,000 Iraqis uprooted this year.

Earlier this week the Baghdad government estimated that about 300,000 people had been internally displaced since February.

It was in February this year when Shia Muslim shrines in the town of Samarra were destroyed in bomb attacks blamed on



Tens of thousands of Iraqis leave the country each month

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Sunni militants.

The UNHCR had previously been concentrating its operations in Iraq on helping exiled Iraqis return home and helping non-Iraqi refugees living there.

'Silent exodus'

The agency says that last year about 50,000 Iraqis returned from neighbouring countries. This year only 1,000 did.

"UNHCR is monitoring the border in Syria, for example," said UNHCR spokesman Ron Redmond.

"Our staff [are] seeing about 2,000 people a day coming across, so it's more than 40,000 people a month just into Syria."

There are also increasing numbers of people leaving their homes but staying in Iraq.

"The estimate now is something around 50,000 people per month are joining the growing numbers of internally displaced inside Iraq," Mr Redmond said.



The UN estimates 50,000 Iraqis are internally displaced each month

Most of those Iraqis who have fled to Syria and Jordan have not registered with the UNHCR, in what the agency calls a "silent exodus".

The UNHCR says that tens of thousands more are moving on to Turkey, Lebanon, Egypt, the Gulf States and Europe.

Statistics from the first half of this year show that Iraqis were the biggest single national group claiming asylum in Europe, while the number claiming asylum in industrialised countries had risen by 50% compared to the same period last year.

The UNHCR says it has had to rechannel its efforts from helping exiled Iraqis return home to assisting those who have fled insecurity.

It says it will be working with neighbouring countries like Syria and Jordan to identify the most vulnerable among the Iraqis arriving there.

Between them, Jordan and Syria are home to almost a million Iraqis.

Some have been there for a decade or more, but the UNHCR says many have also arrived since the fall of Saddam Hussein.

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