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Iraq War

U.S. must keep its word

As military officers, we took on the mission and risk of helping the Iraqi people. We made sacrifices, as did the soldiers and Marines we led. So it is alarming to us to find now that nearly 5 million of those same Iraqi people have become displaced, more than 2 million of whom live as refugees in neighboring countries. According to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, this represents the highest percentage of people seeking asylum worldwide.

It appears that rather than rescue them from a desperate situation, we have merely altered the form of their predicament. Today, there are about 750,000 Iraqi refugees living in Jordan. They are not permitted to work, and so they either live on dwindling savings or subject themselves to shameless exploitation, working for a fraction of an appropriate salary.

Medical care is scarce and frequently cost-prohibitive. Housing is difficult to come by. Only recently has Jordan allowed Iraqi children to attend schools, but the policy shift means little because there are simply not enough school seats or teachers to handle the sudden influx of students. Iraqi children must often work to help their families stave off destitution, and young girls are frequently compelled by desperation into a life of prostitution.

Many Iraqis living in Jordan have had no choice but to overstay their visas, and so they live as fugitives from the law, perpetually fearful that they, and their families, will be forcibly sent back to Iraq where death most certainly awaits them.

With the price tag for hosting refugees climbing into the billions, and with little financial assistance from the international community, Jordan is anxious to see them go. To compound this dreary scenario, Iraqis are discovering that there is nowhere else for them to go. Virtually no Western countries are willing to resettle more than a pittance of refugees.

We find it disappointing that the United States, our country, which staked our lives on saving the Iraqi people, is among the worst performers in this crisis. What is further disheartening to us is that many of these applicants at one time risked their own lives to aid our military forces in Iraq.

As service members, we view our nation's role in the world as a leader. We joined the military to be leaders ourselves and to fight for just causes. But we can hardly claim righteousness when the very people we went to liberate find themselves imprisoned in such dire circumstances — circumstance that we helped create — and then refuse to offer them further support. Millions need our help, and they need it now.

With the highly unstable security situation lingering in Iraq, they cannot go home. With the dire conditions in Jordan and other countries hosting refugees, they cannot stay where they are for long. And with the fact that 63 percent of refugees hold college degrees, making them invaluable to the reconstruction effort, we feel it is imperative to safeguard them while Iraq climbs back to her feet. The most substantial way we can do that is to provide meaningful financial assistance.

The United States pledged its support to the Iraqi people and sacrificed the lives and health of many service members to give it. We believe the honorable thing to do is keep our word. If the United States wishes to remain a leader in the world by virtue of both strength and humanity, it must not forsake its promises.

— Luis Carlos Montalván, retired U.S. Army captain, Brooklyn, N.Y., and Tyler Boudreau, former U.S. Marine captain, Newton, Mass.