

IDPs arriving in Hajj Ali, 8 August

Overall Situation

Because of overcrowding in Debaga camp, the Iraqi Army has changed its approach regarding civilians in newly liberated towns in the Al Qayyarah area. Rather than evacuate villages and leave them empty, they are now trying to encourage civilians to stay in their homes. However, there are still many IDPs fleeing the violence and destruction.

IDPs have been gathering in Ijhalla village, near to where the Iraqi Army has constructed a temporary bridge across the Tigris to Hajj Ali. They come from other villages around Ijhalla, and as far south as Shirqat. It's difficult to gauge the precise population of Ijhalla as there is a lot of movement, but estimates vary from around 5,000 to 15,000. IDPs arriving in Hajj Ali from Ijhalla have reported mass overcrowding in the latter, with many people living on the streets with little or no food and some having to drink water from the Tigris (which has been heavily polluted with oil upstream in Al Qayyarah).

Because Ijhalla is close to the fighting and has repeatedly come under attack, endangering the lives of civilians, Hajj Ali, over the river, has been deemed a safer place for them to stay by the Iraqi Army.



Hajj Ali and surrounding villages. In this map, orange indicates villages belonging to the Lehaib tribe, green to Sobawi, yellow to Khafaja, and white to a mixture of tribes.

RNIDPO in Hajj Ali

RNIDPO (Representative of Ninewa IDPs Organisation) is a local NGO with its roots in Mosul. It's a volunteer organisation and is self-funded, chiefly by its director. It also benefits from some private donations, but these are limited.

RNIDPO's director, Dr Orfan, has authorisation from the Ninewa Operational Command (NOC) to run five shelters for IDPs in Hajj Ali. All five are schools – three are located close to each other in Hasiyah, and the other two are in Kharabah Jabbr. RNIDPO's core staff numbers only four (including one female staff member) but they are able to call upon a network of up to forty volunteers, some of whom are qualified medical professionals.

The Schools in Hasiyah

Only the three schools in Hasiyah were inspected. Each school is built around a large courtyard with a walled perimeter and a gate. The first school (school 1), with a large playground area in front of it, has two storeys and is surrounded by a 10-foot-wide grassy area on three sides before the wall. It has 17 large classrooms. The other two schools (schools 2 & 3), a minute's walk down the road, are smaller, single-storey, and have 14 and 11 classrooms respectively. All have operational water tanks that feed outdoor taps. In school 1, water for washing is supplied from a well with hoses leading to tanks on the roof. A water tanker was also available, but larger tanks are needed to accommodate the needs of the IDPs.



School 1.



School 2 and school 3.

There are four toilet cubicles in each school which, on 8 August, all seemed blocked up with leaves and debris and in need of cleaning out. There is a large bathroom (containing three of the cubicles) with sinks in school 1. A number of classrooms were in an untidy state, with broken glass, rubbish, and desks and other furniture still filling the rooms, but not in a state that could not be improved easily. The Iraqi Army confirmed to RNIDPO that they had scanned each school for IEDs.

There was no electricity in any school to start with on 8 August, but later in the night the local Sheikh agreed to connect school 1 with electricity.

There is a health centre between schools 1 and 2, but it is nothing more than an abandoned building.

Supplies

On the afternoon of 8 August, eleven large truckloads of supplies, packed and paid for by the Ministry of Migration and the Displaced (MoMD), were driven to Hasiyah in Hajj Ali. They were split into three groups. The first group (three trucks) was taken to the playground area outside school 1. The trucks were loaded with 1,000 food boxes (flour, rice, lentils, tea, sugar, tomato paste, formula milk, cooking oil), 1,000 basic food

boxes (biscuits, water, condensed milk, orange squash concentrate) and 1,000 hygiene kits (soap, toothpaste, toothbrushes, baby shampoo, Dettol, sanitary towels, moisturiser, washing up liquid). Another truck containing a further 1,000 basic food boxes turned up later that night. It is thought it came from the group allocated to the local Sheikh. All items were unloaded and stockpiled in school 1. Bottled water and mattresses/pillows were already stockpiled nearby, out in the open.



Three trucks being unloaded outside school 1, with IDPs being unloaded off a truck in the distance at the same time.

The second group of trucks (four) contained the same items. The local Sheikh – a Hashd leader and member of the Ninewa provincial council – took charge of them, although it seems one was in fact added to the number given to RNIDPO. It is not known at the moment how these were unloaded. There is a strong suspicion that many of these items will end up going to the Hashd and police and not to the IDPs for which they were intended.

The remaining four trucks contained a total of 400 deconstructed tents. These were unloaded at a site just outside Hasiyah village where 100 of the same basic tents had already been erected. For now, these tents have been erected on an unfenced plot on their own without any visible plans for WASH facilities. Reportedly there are plans to expand the site to hold 1,000 tents. There is a dispute between the local sheikh and the Baghdad MP who ordered the tents over the rent for the land on which they have been erected.



Tents erected outside Hasiyah.

The arrival of IDPs in Hajj Ali on the night of 8 August

At around 6 pm the first truckload of civilians crossed the bridge from Ijhalla and were taken to the playground area outside school 1 in Hadiyah. By midnight, 477 individuals had arrived, the majority being young children.

The first group numbered 70 people and they were calmly split into women & children and men, given biscuits and cold water, and lined up to be registered by an official in the Iraqi Army. The atmosphere was peaceful and relaxed and the women especially were smiling. Later, when it became dark and more people arrived in greater numbers, the registration system, managed by the Iraqi Army, fell apart and the situation became chaotic with soldiers (Hashd and Iraqi Army) shouting aggressively at each other. The local sheikh wanted the IDP men to be transported to Debaga camp but RNIDPO refused to allow this.



The first arrivals being registered, and later that night.

The men, numbering around 70 in total, were taken to school 2, most without having undergone any detailed form of security screening, meaning that there was a chance that some of the men could have been associated with ISIS. The Iraqi Army handed over responsibility for registration to RNIDPO, and this was not done until the following day due to a shortage of staff. The men were given water that had been left all day in the sun, and only biscuits were readily available for food. To address these problems, RNIDPO today organised and paid for the delivery of ice. They are also procuring large gas stoves for each school.

Some men and women have relatives in Debaga and therefore want to be reunited with them there. Others have houses in Hajj Ali belonging to members of their family and want to live in them – as long as they can be supplied with food – despite the potential threat of IED contamination. Others are happy to wait in the schools in Hajj Ali, staying a relatively short distance from their homes across the river, until it is safe for them to return.

Political situation

There is a political dimension to providing support and supplies to IDPs in Hajj Ali. The local sheikh and mayor want to retain control, reportedly for their own gain. RNIDPO felt frustrated a number of times by interventions made by the sheikh: stopping mattresses from being handed out to IDPs until he was overridden by the Baghdad-based MoMD; trying to insist that men were taken to Debaga while their families remained in the school; and falsely asserting that workers were available in the village to unload supplies. RNIDPO ended up having to recruit their own team of workers on arrival, which delayed unloading and increased confusion when IDPs began arriving in large numbers. Reportedly, the sheikh has also begun talking about paying rent for the schools, which are public buildings. In person, however, the sheikh was hospitable and accommodating.

Security

It's hard to know the extent of IED contamination in Hajj Ali, although it's recognised that a threat undoubtedly remains. Fighting persists just over the river, a few kilometres away. On 7 August an ISIS attack on Ijhalla

prevented civilians from crossing to Hajj Ali as arranged. Throughout the afternoon and night of the 8th, and into the next morning, gunfire and explosions were clearly audible, although intermittent. We were told that a small boat containing ISIS members had managed to sneak across the river after dark on the 8th night, although this was unconfirmed. Nothing more has yet been heard about this incident. On the positive side, the Iraqi Army advance on Al Qayyarah town is expected to take place soon, which would reduce the threat posed towards Hajj Ali.

Situation now

- Thousands of IDPs are currently trapped in Ijhallah without support, which is the most dangerous place for them to be.
- RNIDPO have told the Iraqi Army that they cannot accept more IDPs in their school shelters as they are already overwhelmed and need time and support to be able to prepare and provide the necessary services.
- There are no permanent health services available for the IDPs, nor any medicines available for vulnerable infants and old people. A fully qualified doctor is, however, expected to volunteer with the organisation on 10 August.
- RNIDPO have asked for help with the supply of larger water tanks and generators with fuel to avoid any dependence on local political actors.
- Only a fifth of the tents so far supplied by MoMD have been erected just outside Hasiyah, and there is currently no clear indication of which organisation will take responsibility to manage the area if IDPs are taken there. There are no WASH facilities or any services currently available at the site.
- Events may soon change with the advance on Al Qayyarah, pushing the frontline further north towards Mosul, thereby increasing standards of safety within Hajj Ali.

Recommendations

- Prioritise the removal of IDPs from Ijhallah where their lives are in greatest danger and where access to basic necessities like food and water are extremely limited.
- Advocate to relocate IDPs to an area that international organisations can access safely, while being acceptable to KRG and Ninewa Governorate authorities, keeping in mind that events may change the situation.
- In the meantime, urgently coordinate with and support RNIDPO in Hajj Ali, where civilians are in greater safety and services are more readily available than in Ijhallah.
- Coordinate also with MoMD to help ensure that goods supplied for IDPs residing in Hajj Ali go to the IDPs and are not diverted according to the interests of political entities.