

## **Iraq urges citizens to flee violence in Syria**

**By The Associated Press LARA JAKES (Associated Press), QASSIM ABDUL-ZAHRA (Associated Press)**

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BAGHDAD - (AP) -- Iraq's government called Tuesday for all its citizens living in Syria to return home immediately to escape the escalating civil war after the recent killing of two Iraqi journalists covering the conflict.

Thousands of Iraqis fled to Syria to escape widespread sectarian fighting during the worst of violence in their homeland between 2005 and 2007. Now, the traffic is heading the other way, with Iraqis and Syrian refugees heading east, and out of the conflict that the International Red Cross just days ago deemed a civil war.

The U.N. estimated there were 1 million Iraqi refugees in Syria and 3,000 more seeking asylum as of January, the latest figures available. But Iraqi government spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh put the number much lower, at about 200,000.

Al-Dabbagh said Baghdad called on the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad and the opposition forces seeking to overthrow him to resist harming Iraqis who may be caught in the crossfire.

"They are not part of the conflict going on in Syria now," al-Dabbagh said in a statement. He cited a "rise in killings and assaults on Iraqis residing in Syria" and said 12 Iraqis have been killed so far this month alone.

Baghdad's urging came as Syrian government forces, backed by helicopter gunships, battled rebels in heavy clashes in Damascus over the past three days. The uprising against Assad broke out in March last year, and activists say more than 17,000 people have been killed.

The Iraqi government will pay for the costs of transporting Iraqis back from Syria, al-Dabbagh said.

Late Monday, the bodies of two Iraqi journalists killed in Syria were handed over to authorities at the al-Waleed border crossing, according to Iraqi Brig. Gen. Qassim al-Dulaimi.

Al-Dulaimi, an army commander in Iraq's western Anbar province which borders Syria, said the two journalists died in the Damascus suburb of Jaramana but it was still unclear when or how. There has been no fighting there over the past few days. He said cards from the Iraqi journalists' syndicate were found in their pockets, identifying them as Ali Juburi and Falah Taha.

The Baghdad-based independent Journalists' Freedom Observatory said Juburi was an editor of a weekly newspaper while Taha was a freelance reporter. JFO is warning Iraqi reporters not to travel to Syria.

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