

## Assyria Council of Europe attends first Conference 27<sup>th</sup> November 2007

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Brussels - On Tuesday 27<sup>th</sup> November the Assyria Council of Europe (ACE) attended their first conference in the European Parliament. The conference dealt with the issue of Iraqi Refugees in the Mashreq Countries and had speakers from various respectable organisations such as Amnesty International, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and also the International Rescue Committee (IRC). The conference was also attended by two commissioners from the European Commission.

This conference is the first of many which ACE plans to attend in order to gain more information about the current situation of Iraqis in the Middle East and also to raise awareness of the plight of the Assyrians.

The following is a brief summary of the meeting written by the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE):

### **Debate: The situation of Iraqi refugees in the Mashreq - a major challenge for the European Union**

The EU and its Member States should provide more financial support to the work of the UNHCR in the Mashreq area and to the Mashreq States (Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan), Member States should make sure that asylum seekers coming from Iraq are able to access EU territory and obtain international protection and finally more resettlement places should be made available for Iraqi refugees in EU Member States. These are the main appeals made to Member States and Institutions by the representatives of UNHCR, the Norwegian Refugee Council, the International Rescue Committee and Amnesty International EU in the course of a debate on the situation of Iraqi Refugees on 2 November. The debate, which focused particularly on the situation in Syria and Jordan, was organised by the European Parliament Delegation for relations with the Mashreq Countries.

The speakers stressed that the situation for Iraqi refugees in the region is extremely critical and that the support of the EU to the hosting countries is absolutely necessary in order to provide refugees with their basic needs, such as food, health care and education. The speakers also expressed concerns with regard to the closure of the Jordan and Syrian borders. During the debate calls were also made for a more coherent European policy towards Iraqi refugees and asylum seekers, which should follow the UNHCR and ECRE guidelines.

For the Commission, Gianluca Grippa, DG External Relations, stated that in the next weeks funds will be allocated to strengthen already existing projects in the region and that the budget for 2008 will be decided on the basis of studies from external competent organisations, such as the study of UNDP on Syria. The Commission also called for more efforts by the Member States.

Finally it was pointed out by the speakers that despite the recent news of Iraqi refugees voluntarily returning to Iraq, the country should not be considered as safe yet and no forcible return should be carried on.

Source:

ECRE