Iraqi and Palestinian Refugee Issues addressed at workshop for Syrian Journalists

Dates: 25-27 October 2010

Country: Syria

At a three-day workshop, held 25-27 October 2010 in Damascus, some 30 reporters discussed with representatives from the UNHCR the obstacles Iraqi and Palestinian refugees face in their everyday lives in Syria. The purpose of the course was to help journalists develop their professional skills to better represent the issues of refugees in Syria through fair, well-researched and sensitive coverage; and to develop ideas for features that will offer the Syrian public fuller and more accurate information on refugees in their country.

The workshop was organised by the Media Diversity Institute with the support of the UNHCR in Syria. Two prominent trainers, Abdelouahhab Errami, Professor at the prestigious ISIC Moroccan Journalism Institute and Thabet Al Salem, a leading Syrian media consultant and journalist, used inter-active exercises, films and guest speakers in order to convince the trainees that it is important to cover refugees issues sensitively and that their deeply moving stories are very newsworthy.

The workshop participants expressed the need for more practical training in reporting not only on refugees, but other vulnerable groups, such as women, children, and the poor. A particular interest was expressed in the ethical dilemmas Western journalists face when reporting on faith or ethnicity.
One of the participants stated, ‘It might sound paradoxical, but we first reported on domestic violence among refugees. That opened the door to exposing domestic violence among Syrian families. Maybe by criticising the ways Western societies treat their marginalized communities we can open the doors for the criticism of our own wrongdoings. That’s one of the reasons why we are interested in Western societies and their media’.

The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) has revised downwards the number of Iraqi refugees it has registered in Syria. The true number of Iraqi refugees is considered to be higher than UNHCR registrations, although significantly lower than the 1.2 million figure given by Syrian officials.

There are nearly 400,000 Palestinian refugees in Syria, representing 3% of the total population. They also represent 10.5% of the total refugees registered by UNRWA.