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UNAMI's Office of Constitutional Support holds a Roundtable on the Iraqi Legislative Framework on Women and Children's Rights



Main Speakers at the Opening Session of the Roundtable

By Randa Jamal

UNAMI's (United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq) Office of Constitutional Support, together with the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), funded by the European Union through the United Nations Development Group Iraq Trust Fund (UNDG ITF), organized a roundtable discussion at the Iraqi Parliament in Baghdad on the Iraqi Legislative Framework on Women and Children's Rights on 23-24 November 2008.

Mr. Andrew Gilmour, Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary General for Political Affairs, initiated the discussion by emphasizing the importance of developing legislation for the protection of women and children's rights. He identified this as an area of importance to UNAMI and affirmed, "UNAMI stands ready

to facilitate and support the Iraqis towards this endeavor". He also pointed out that as women comprise up to 60% of the Iraqi population, and another 15% are children under the age of eighteen, these are hardly "minority" issues but rather very mainstream, and it is imperative that their needs and rights are addressed. Mr. Gilmour encouraged the Committees of the Council of Representatives and all the various Ministries that are involved in drafting legislation on women and children issues to cooperate with each other on the laws aimed at the protection of women and children. He also suggested that a coordinating body should be established, a process in which UNAMI would certainly be prepared to assist. The UN's experience elsewhere in the world showed that if there was no coordination of effort, then the effort to

promote the rights of women and children would be considerably less effective.

While the State Minister of Women's Affairs, Dr. Nawal Al Samarra'i, reiterated Mr. Gilmour's remarks, Mrs. Samira Al Mussawi, the Chair of the Women, Family and Childhood Committee expressed her hope for a common vision to emerge from the roundtable. She highlighted the importance of a legislative framework to incorporate women into the political process, protect their rights and secure social equality. Similarly, Ms. Ala Talabani, Chair of the Committee on Civil Society Institutions, emphasized the need to come together to find both short and long term solutions to support women and children. Short-term solutions include, for example, strong Iraq wide social security services law, while in the longer term, strengthening civil society institutions will be critical to campaigning, proposing ideas, creating networks and giving a real voice to women. Ms. Talabani added, "Another key area that needs attention is educational reform to promote the role of men and women as equal citizens in society". She suggested that teaching human

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Speakers Conveying their Presentations and Speeches

rights in schools could help to embed women's rights throughout the system.

Education and law were also central issues for the Chair of the Parliament's Legal Committee. Mr. Baha Al-Araji emphasized the challenge of women's diverse social, professional and family roles and the harsh realities they and their children face. For instance, he spoke of the devastation he found during several visits to Al Ahwar (the Marshlands), where a woman "works ten times as much as any man: she is the one who works the land, harvests, bakes, fishes and does the house work. However, she is treated with immense discrimination and is the recipient of ill treatment". The solution, Mr. Al Araji insisted, is educating women about their rights and creating laws to guarantee those rights.

Shirouk Al Abayachi, a civil activist representing the Iraqi Women's Movement, invoked a constitutional right to suggest that a National High Council for Women's Affairs be established. She stressed that such a body would need to be totally independent from the government and political parties, in order to empower Iraqi women and to assure the implementation of international conventions, particularly the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination (CEDAW). She said, "Parliament needs to approve the creation of such an independent committee", and responded to comments saying, "we need affirmative action based on international laws and conventions that guarantee the rights of women".

International comparison was key for NONO Mmabathhara Dihemo, a Political Affairs Officer of UNAMI, who said that comparative studies could

be instructive in the Iraqi legislative reform process aimed at the advancement of women and children. She provided a global overview of best examples and practices for the protection of the rights of women and children. The analysis focused on constitutional and legislative reforms and programmes aimed at advancing the rights of

women and children in South Africa, India, Jordan, Turkey and Morocco.

Additional instructive sessions focused on international indicators for the protection of children; the current legislative constitutional framework on the rights of children and the challenges they face; international and regional indicators for the protection of women and widows; strategies for coordination between institutions and legislations and exchanging recommendations; dialogue on cooperation and developing unified policies and main challenges; and, finally, recommendations and future directions. ■

UNESCO hosted an International Conference on the Right to Education in Crisis-Affected Countries: "Stop jeopardizing the future of Iraq"



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On October 30, 2008, UNESCO hosted a two-day conference at its Paris Head Quarters on the critical need to assist Iraq through addressing the plight faced by Iraqi children, students and educators, and to mobilize international support for the rehabilitation of the education system and raising awareness of the

key challenges and needs, to define the way forward.

The event gathered more than 200 participants including an important delegation of Iraqi officials, presidents of universities, teachers, and civil society representatives. Senior representatives of other key partners from UN Agencies, the World Bank, the European Commission, NGOs and members of the academic community in Iraq and worldwide were also in attendance. Former United Nations Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali and the President of the Parliamentary Education Committee of Iraq, Dr Alaa Makki made a keynote address at the conference's closing ceremony.

The conference was attended by special guests, including Sheikha Mozah Bint Nasser Al-Missned of Qatar, UNESCO Special Envoy for Basic and Higher Education, who played a vital role in setting up the International Fund for Higher Education in Iraq in 2003 and in mobilizing international support for Iraq. Also present, Baroness Nicholson, Chairperson of the Amar Foundation with whom UNESCO has been collaborating closely in Iraq in such key areas as peace education and adult literacy.

Over the past two decades the education sector in Iraq was greatly weakened and "access to quality basic education has become a major issue, with low and declining enrolment rates at every level", UNESCO Director-General, Mr. Koichiro Matsuura told the attendance in his opening remarks. This is due to several factors including but not limited to insecurity, child labour, and distance from schools, lack of adequate learning facilities, in addition to the lack of skilled professors, and a shortage of material and equipment.

Another pressing concern is to provide education to the internally displaced and refugee students, most of whom lack access to education and for which UNESCO and the Iraqi Ministry of Education have recently launched the "Distance Learning Project", through TV broadcasting of educational programs.

Today, less than 60% of primary school-aged children are attending school. The ratio for secondary edu-

cation is below 50%, while girls, particularly in rural areas, are the most affected at both levels.

In addition, and according to a UNESCO study in 2007, over 280 academics have been killed since 2003, including 186 university professors. Some 6,700 educators have fled Iraq, the vast majority of who have not returned.

At the conference, *“five key areas have been identified where the international community must reinforce its support to national education efforts in Iraq”*, Koichiro Matsuura said. These are access to basic education, thoroughly rebuild the Iraqi higher education sector, protection of Iraqi intellectuals, academics, teachers, students and educational institutions, as an absolute moral priority, special provision for education of internally displaced students and support to governments of nations hosting Iraqi refugees, notably Jordan, Syria and Lebanon to help refugee children enroll at school in their countries of asylum, he explained.

Discussions during the working group sessions enabled the participants to commonly define a set of recommendations that will be the basis of future actions/projects to be implemented with the support of the donors.

“UNESCO committed itself to do all it can to support Iraq and to bring the education needs of the country to the attention of the international community”, the organisation’s Director-General concluded, expressing his *“delight to join (its) efforts with those of Iraqi institutions, other multilateral agencies and the many NGOs active in the country”*.

Education remains the major area of UNESCO assistance to Iraq and the organization is the deputy leader of the Education Sector in UNAMI. Assistance focuses on overall support to the reform of the system, increasing access to quality education and learning for vulnerable students, especially internally displaced and refugees. ■

Launch of the “Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Assessment in Iraq, 2008”



By Robin Lodge, WFP – Baghdad

Baghdad, 12 November 2008 - Irrespective of its potential wealth, Iraq is a country in turmoil, with an estimated 1.5 million people displaced as a direct result of war and violence. As the *“Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Assessment (CFSVA) in Iraq, 2008”* shows, despite recent improvements in the overall security situation, there remain nearly one million people who are food insecure, despite existing safety nets. The World Food Program (WFP) is in Iraq at the request of the Government to provide food assistance to 750,000 of the most vulnerable among the displaced.

Theoretically, Iraq’s Public Distribution System (PDS) entitles the entire population of 27 million people a monthly food ration. But when people are displaced, they are frequently unable to register in their new place of residence and therefore do not qualify for the PDS.

To give an accurate picture of food security and vulnerability inside Iraq, WFP has carried out three surveys since 2003. The latest CFSVA was published on 12 November, 2008 in Baghdad, based on data collected by the Iraqi government in every district of all 18 governorates of Iraq. A total of nearly 26,000 households were covered by the survey. WFP’s role was to provide expertise in designing the questionnaire, training for the data collectors, analysis of data and compi-

lation of the report.

As far as food security is concerned, the survey found that the numbers of food insecure went down from some four million in 2005 to 930,000. However, an additional 6.4 million people are at risk of becoming food insecure and would do so without safety nets such as the PDS. It also examined malnutrition rates, and access to basic services, such as clean water, power and education.

As far as food assistance is concerned, the report recommends targeted food aid for the most vulnerable and food insecure; food for training to teach mothers childcare and nutrition best practices, food for education in the poorest areas, to encourage children to remain in school, with particular emphasis on girls’ attendance; and the scaling up of micronutrient programmes including vitamin A and iron fortification, as well as salt iodization.

Non-food interventions include capacity building for government institutions to improve their ability to monitor and evaluate food security trends; capacity building for public and private institutions to establish adequate food-based safety nets; working to improve nutrition through appropriate actions in agriculture, rural development, water supply and sanitation, social protection, education and gender and community driven development.

The CFSVA is primarily for the use of the Government in setting out strategies and policies to deal with the needs of the most vulnerable sectors of the population. It set out to identify the food insecure, how many of them there are, where they are located, what the causes are of food security in Iraq and to recommend future interventions. ■

UNHCR chief Guterres visits Baghdad, Ramadi and Najaf and meets Grand Ayatollah Al-Sistani



High Commissioner Guterres with Officials and Tribal Leaders in Ramadi, Anbar Province © UNHCR/R.Redmond

...With Ron Redmond in Iraq

Between 25 and 27 November 2008, UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres paid a three-day visit to Iraq, aimed at showing solidarity with UNHCR staff, and with the refugees the agency serves. The High Commissioner also announced the soon opening of 4 new offices in the country.

During his first Baghdad stop on 25 November, Guterres met with several Iraqi top ranking government officials, to discuss a variety of steps toward successful and sustainable return, including property restitution and compensation, reintegration and basic services, public distribution systems and cutting bureaucratic red tape to make assistance more efficient.

The next day, UNHCR chief travelled to the city of Ramadi in Anbar province, where he announced his agency will soon open an office – one of 14 expected to be operational in the country by early 2009.

"We are now expanding our presence inside Iraq", Guterres told some 20 officials from Anbar Province and Ramadi municipality as well as tribal leaders. "We

will have a presence in 14 governorates by early next year, including here in Ramadi".

Guterres, on his third visit to Iraq in 18 months, noted that the UN refugee agency already has a presence in 10 of the country's 18 governorates and will soon open four more. He said the expanded UNHCR presence reflected a decision to place more focus on preparations for the possible eventual return home of hundreds of thousands of refugees.

At the same time, the agency will continue its assistance and protection operations for Iraqi refugees in the region, particularly in Syria and Jordan.

"We have a lot of work to do with the Iraqi government to build on what's already been done to get the proper conditions in place for the voluntary and sustainable return of refugees in safety and dignity", Guterres said of the stepped-up UNHCR presence. He said those conditions included increased efforts for property restitution and compensation for returnees, as well as ensuring essential infrastructure such as schools, medical facilities, employment opportunities and deliv-

ery of assistance.

Guterres also noted that UNHCR's budget for operations inside Iraq would double next year to some US\$81 million.

The chairman of Anbar Provincial Council, Abdul Salam Al-Ani, said officials were extremely pleased with the High Commissioner's announcement of the opening of a new office in Ramadi. He also thanked Guterres for an offer of more assistance to some of the most vulnerable of the estimated 11,000 internally displaced families in Anbar.

Daniel Endres, UNHCR's Baghdad-based representative in Iraq, said the opening of the Ramadi office would "open a new chapter" in the agency's efforts to aid uprooted people in the region.

On his last day in Iraq, Guterres travelled to the holy city of Najaf where he met with Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, briefing him on UNHCR's work on behalf of the world's uprooted people.

Guterres, wrapping up a three-day mission to Iraq, told Al-Sistani he considered his visit symbolic on the eve of the Eid Al Adha holiday.

"I undertook this mission at this time to show solidarity with our staff – who come from many cultures and religious traditions – and with the refugees we serve", the High Commissioner said. "I am honoured to meet Grand Ayatollah Al-Sistani in this holy city and I want to express UNHCR's solidarity with all of the Iraqi people. Many Iraqis have resumed normal lives following the upheaval in their country, while others continue to face hardship".

The High Commissioner praised the Grand Ayatollah for his tireless efforts toward reconciliation and stability in Iraq. He also explained UNHCR's Iraq operation and its global mission in some 120 countries on behalf of more than 32 million uprooted people, whom he described as the most vulnerable of the vulnerable.

Guterres, who was accompanied by Staffan de Mistura, the UN



A displaced Iraqi woman waits for someone to help her carry aid items home in central Iraq. © UNHCR partner

Secretary-General's Special Representative in Iraq, said UNHCR's operations for uprooted Iraqis had until now focused primarily on refugees in neighbouring states, mainly Syria and Jordan. He told

Al-Sistani that the two nations deserved praise for their generosity to Iraqi refugees. UNHCR supports both nations' efforts to assist the Iraqi refugees.

"More than 140,000 Iraqis re-

turned to their homes between June and October of this year, the vast majority of them internally displaced people", said Guterres. "We are fully committed to cooperating with the Iraqi government in continuing to establish the necessary conditions for further voluntary returns in safety and dignity".

Guterres also met in Najaf with Governor Assad Sultan Abu Gelal and members of the provincial council. Although Najaf has produced no internally displaced people, it currently hosts more than 8,000 families uprooted from elsewhere in the country.

UNHCR staff in the area is supporting local authorities in providing humanitarian assistance to the displaced and are also assisting those who wish to return to their places of origin.

In addition to refugees, there are an estimated 2.4 million internally displaced Iraqis. ■

UNAMI Focus

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