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Detainees in Iraq offered free legal aid through EU and UNOPS initiative

Amman, 28 April 2010 Lawyers, legal consultants, representatives of the Iraqi Bar Association and civil society today agreed on the way forward for free legal defence services offered to detainees in Iraq under a project supported by the European Union (EU) and implemented by the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS).

Between September and November 2009, the project established 20 Legal Defence Centres (LDCs) in 16 governorates of Iraq, providing free services to beneficiaries with reduced access to legal representation due to their financial, gender or family status.

"We have provided these services to vulnerable individuals for about half a year now and the purpose of the meeting was to identify remaining challenges as well as ways to reach out further to detainees that fall through the cracks in the legal system," says UNOPS Iraq Director Mr. Gerhard Pansegrouw.

The aim of the three day meeting was also to improve networking among the centres and other stakeholders in the provision of legal services for detainees such as the Iraqi Justice Network for Prisoners (JNP) and the Iraqi Bar Association.

During the first seven months of operation, a total of 613 cases of vulnerable individuals in need of legal defence were referred to the LDCs by police stations, lawyers' syndicates, courts, prisons, rehabilitation centres and shelters. 513 of these concerned males and 100 females, and a total of 365 cases were found to be eligible to receive free legal representation by the LDCs.

"To be able to release a person wrongfully detained awaiting a verdict of life in prison or execution is very important," said a participating lawyer from Basrah LDC.

His colleague from Salah al-Din LDC added: "After 12 years of working as a lawyer, this is the first time I work with humanitarian cases. We try our best to offer our services to the highest number of detainees possible."

The centres, each operated by about three to seven permanent and volunteer lawyers, also offer hotline services where free legal consultation is provided over the

phone. Since September, a total of 1376 individuals have benefitted from phone consultation and received information about the services offered by the new centres.

“The programme has successfully offered free legal consultation to detainees leading to an increased legal knowledge of citizens in general,” said a participating lawyer from Babil. “The significance of the legal defence project also lies in strengthening the relationship between civil society organisations (as organising parties of the centres) and the legal and executive authorities, including the police and courts. This will open way for these organisations to spread a human rights culture in Iraq.”

The umbrella project “Programme for the Protection of Detainees and Torture Victims” is funded by the European Union (EU) through the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) with a budget of 6,435,623 EURO (11,555,200,418 IQD). It is being implemented by the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) with the assistance of the NGO Un Ponte Per ... (UPP).

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