

Iraq: Children Starved of Childhood

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BAQUBA, Feb 11 (IPS) – The violence around the continuing U.S. military operations in this city has robbed children of their childhood.

Only two provincial schools and one private kindergarten school are functioning in this city of 280,000, located 50 km north of Baghdad. Most children know neither school nor play.

Or even the food they want. “We parents can hardly meet the basic requirements of food,” Mahdi Hassan, a father of four, told IPS.

“Nobody even mentions chocolate or pastries or anything else because Iraqis know they are not important,” Baquba resident Wissam Jafar told IPS. “Children eat what the other members of the family eat. Toys and games are offered only at festivals and on special occasions.”

Baquba city, capital of Diyala province, has been at the centre of major U.S. military operations to fight al-Qaeda like forces. People have suffered from the violence from both sides.

By now Iraq has seen a generation of children pass with just survival a major issue. During the period of economic sanctions imposed on Iraq in the 1990s, more than half a million children died, according to the United Nations.

In 1996, former U.S. secretary of state Madeleine Albright was asked by Lesley Stahl on the CBS *60 Minutes*’ show if she thought the price of half a million dead children was worth it. She replied, “I think this is a very hard choice, but the price — we think the price is worth it.”

One in eight children in Iraq died during that period of malnutrition, disease, and lack of medicine.

The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq during March 2003 brought hope that things might change, but that change has only been for the worse.

“During the nineties, they were malnourished but they could find a place to play in the streets,” Khalid Ali, a local economist, told IPS. “Nowadays, they cannot even get out of their home because of the violence. And a large number of children have been killed through the violence.”

There is one park in Baquba with some basic swings for children; another was recently renovated by an Iraqi NGO. Both get overcrowded on festivals and holidays. Parents feel obliged to take their children out on these days, despite the risk.

On other days, no more than two or three families visit the parks.

Sajid Asim who earns 175 dollars a month from his job in the water department says the money is barely enough for food for the family. “Surely, there won’t be any extra money to bring the children special food or clothes, or games, or even taking them to picnics.” For those without work — and there are many — the situation is worse.

Schoolteachers and managers spoke to IPS of the problems facing children who do manage to go to school.

“Teaching has been hit by the political situation in Iraq,” said Salma Majid, manager of a local primary school. “Children can often not get to the school, and we may have more than three days off in a week. The whole academic year may be delayed because the violence has been so extreme this year.”

Schools can provide children a chance to play but sometimes it is not safe,” she said. “A number of school buildings have been hit by mortar.”

According to an Oxfam report on Iraq released Jul. 30, “92 percent of children had learning impediments that are largely attributable to the current climate of fear. Schools are regularly closed as teachers and pupils are too fearful to attend. Over 800,000 children may now be out of school, according to a recent estimate by Save the Children UK — up from 600,000 in 2004.”

The Oxfam report also said that child malnutrition rates in Iraq have risen from 19 percent before the invasion in 2003, to 28 percent. “More than 11 percent of newborn babies were born underweight in 2006, compared with 4 percent in 2003.”

Scarcity has brought all sorts of difficulties for children. “I put a sandwich in the bag for my son to take to school,” said a mother who declined to give her name. “When he got back home, he said he could not have it because his classmates do not bring their own sandwiches; their parents do not give them sandwiches.”

A local primary school teacher, Ali Abbas, said it is common now for students to arrive at school without breakfast.

“One day, one of the children suddenly passed out,” Abbas said. “We immediately took her to the administration room. When she regained consciousness, I asked her why she fainted. She told me that she did not have breakfast because there was no breakfast at home.”

Ahmed, IPS correspondent in Iraq’s Diyala province, works in close collaboration with Dahr Jamail, our U.S.-based specialist writer on Iraq who travels extensively in the region.

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