

IRAQ: Farmers in Dire Straits

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BAGHDAD, Nov 16 (IPS) – Despite the Iraqi prime minister’s optimism for the agricultural sector, the farmers who are struggling to survive tell another story. In an address to Iraqi politicians this week, Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki praised his government’s performance in agriculture. Maliki highlighted the new state-supported crop prices, through which farmers would receive subsidies and encouragement to continue growing their crops — but he did not mention how much the price supports would be.

“The prime minister seems not to be aware of the real problems we are facing here,” Haji Jassim, a farmer from the rural Al-Jazeera area near Ramadi, told IPS. Speaking from a relative’s home in Baghdad, he added, “What he is talking about would have been good if prices were the only problem, but someone should explain to him the other obstacles we are facing.”

Jassim said that one of the main problems is lack of manpower, “since most of our young men who were not killed by U.S. and Iraqi troops are in jail or missing.”

The frustrated farmer added that obstacles like lack of electricity, fuel and security in the field and “dozens of others, should be known to the man who claims to be our supporter.”

Under the regime of Saddam Hussein, overthrown by U.S.-led forces in 2003, the government purchased crops from farmers in order to encourage them to continue planting. In this way, the government guaranteed that farmers would sell their crops, regardless of how bad the market was under the economic sanctions imposed by the United Nations in 1990.

Many farmers now even wish the Saddam Hussein dictatorship had remained in place, since economic hardship has become so severe under the U.S.-led occupation.

“What they call the ‘condemned regime’ used to supply us with everything we needed. Seeds, fuel, trucks, harvest machines and anything we might need,” Ali Abdul-Hussein, a farmer from Diwaniya who used to produce rice but now works as a simple laborer in Baghdad, told IPS. “We were happy to get rid of Saddam, but now we wish to get half the services he used to offer us.”

The Iraqi economy as a whole has been affected negatively by the occupation and the related problems it has brought to Iraq. Some estimates of the unemployment rate are as high as 50 percent, which is significantly higher than it was under the sanctions.

According to the Integrated Regional Information Networks, which is the UN’s humanitarian news and information service, “Up to half of the national population is currently unemployed

in Iraq, where women represent almost 60 percent of the total populace.”

In 2005, Iraq’s Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs estimated a 48-percent unemployment rate.

Further hampering farmers is the fact that Iraq’s inflation rate has soared to nearly 70 percent, according to the country’s planning minister, Ali Baban.

Baban told reporters in September that prices had increased for all goods used to measure inflation, including food, fuel, transport, medical services and medicine, clothing, property, furniture and other essential goods.

Across Iraq, petrol and electricity, both of which extremely important to Iraqi farmers, have seen the highest increase: 374 percent over the last year. Also bad news for farmers is that the transport sector saw a 218-percent hike in prices.

Thus, the cost of farming, along with the average Iraqi’s increasing inability to afford rising market prices, has made everyday life extremely challenging.

Lack of security is another problem that has hampered farmer’s productivity.

“How can one deliver any crops to Mr. Maliki’s warehouses? Militias are taking firm positions there and so if you are Sunni, they will kill you and take your money. But if you are a Shi’ite, then they will only take your money and release you for ransom,” farmer Latif Hameed said in an interview.

One of the first and at the time famous sectarian killings carried out by Shi’ite militias was in the main Jameela wholesale market in Baghdad. Death squads killed 14 Sunni farmers from Madaiin while they were selling their vegetables to merchants there.

Since that time, the market has been effectively paralysed because the sharp increase in militia activity means most farmers no longer feel safe there.

In addition, some Iraqi farming experts blame malfunctioning infrastructure for hampering farmers’ work.

Agriculture in Iraq will not improve in the near future “because our soil was corrupted by the water table rising due to a failure of functioning drainage systems,” a university agriculture professor, speaking on condition of anonymity, told IPS in Baghdad.

Drainage systems depend on pumping machines that have come to a nearly complete stop because of electricity and fuel shortages.

“Lack of supporting material like fertilisers and soil treatment has affected agricultural operation in the country, and even when it is available it is too costly and badly manufactured,” the professor added.

In a study to be published soon by an Iraqi economics institute, over 75 percent of the vegetables and fruit consumed in Iraq are imported from Syria, Jordan and Iran.

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