

EMBAROED: 10:00 GMT, Friday 21 December

UNICEF: Little Respite for Iraq's Children in 2007

But Window to Reach More Vulnerable Families Opening for 2008

ERBIL/AMMAN/GENEVA, 21 December 2007: An estimated 2 million children in Iraq continue to face threats including poor nutrition, disease and interrupted education.

Iraqi children were frequently caught in the crossfire of conflict throughout 2007. Insecurity and displacement continues to cause hardship for many in the most insecure parts of the country and further eroded access to quality essential services country-wide. Iraq remains volatile; however conditions begin to allow for more a concerted effort to deliver assistance.

"Iraqi children are paying far too high a price," said Roger Wright, UNICEF's Special Representative for Iraq. "While we have been providing as much assistance as possible, a new window of opportunity is opening, which should enable us to reach the most vulnerable with expanded, consistent support. We must act now."

Available information from different sources shows that:

- ^a Only 28 per cent of Iraq's 17 year olds sat their final exams in summer, and only 40 per cent of those sitting exams achieved a passing grade (in south and central Iraq).
- ^a Many of 220,000 displaced children of primary school age had their education interrupted, adding to the estimated 760,000 children (17%) already out of primary school in 2006.
- ^a Children in remote and hard-to-reach areas were frequently cut off from health outreach services.
- ^a Only 20 per cent outside Baghdad had working sewerage in their community, and access to safe water remains a serious issue.
- ^a An average 25,000 children per month were displaced by violence or intimidation, their families seeking shelter in other parts of Iraq. By the end of the year, approximately 75,000 children had resorted to living in camps or temporary shelters (25% of those newly-displaced since the Samarra shrine bombing in February 2006).
- ^a Hundreds of children lost their lives or were injured by violence and many more had their main family wage-earner kidnapped or killed.
- ^a Approximately 1,350 children were detained by military and police authorities, many for alleged security violations.

And yet 2007 also saw positive progress for Iraqi children, against the odds. Thanks to donor assistance and internal resources, UNICEF invested over \$40 million dollars during the year – despite the lowest funding levels since 2003 – to deliver critical health care, safe water and sanitation, education and other essential services to millions of children and their families.

The funds enabled Iraqi health workers conduct house-to-house immunization campaigns protecting over 4 million children against polio and more than 3 million against measles, mumps and rubella – in close partnership with the World Health Organization (WHO). As a result of these campaigns, Iraq remains polio-free and measles cases are dramatically down -- from 9,181 in 2004 to just 156 up to November in 2007.

Approximately 4.7 million Iraqi primary school children benefited from UNICEF-supported investment in education: including distribution of critical school materials, rebuilding and restoring schools, adding extra classrooms for displaced children and providing accelerated learning opportunities. A government-supported assessment of school attendance rates in 2007 is now in process (83% of Iraq's primary school age group was estimated to be attending school during the 2005/2006 school year).

Partnerships made these achievements possible, most notably with the European Commission (EC), Canada, Japan, other UN Agencies and NGOs.

Relief agencies and local Iraqi communities also provided a lifeline reaching up to 500,000 displaced persons and victims of violence in 2007, delivering medical and hygiene support, safe water, shelter and other critical care. UNICEF-supported water-tanking is currently the only supply of safe water for at least 200,000 Iraqis facing poverty, violence or displacement.

Children's needs inside Iraq will become clearer as security improves, UNICEF stressed. Returning families are one of many vulnerable groups in need of support. To meet the challenge, UNICEF and its partners are spearheading *IMPACT: Iraq* – an initiative creating a nationwide network of UN and NGO teams, able to rapidly assess and respond wherever families are vulnerable, and promote early local recovery.

To help seize the current opportunity, UNICEF calls for support to:

1. rapidly increase attention and action to meet the immediate needs of children and families *inside Iraq* - focusing on all vulnerable groups;
2. widen humanitarian access to Iraqi children and their families in conflict zones, behind security barriers and in detention centres; and
3. strengthen Iraq's capacity and initiatives to improve governance and mobilize its own resources to invest in national recovery.

Wright stressed that meeting the needs of Iraq's children in 2008 depends, to a great extent, on sufficient financial resources being made available. Children can and should be the priority for international investment in Iraq, he said

"Iraqi children are the foundation for their country's recovery," he added. "Where children's lives are protected and revived, community recovery will swiftly follow. We continue to owe them our very best in 2008 and beyond."

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