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Iraq's future - soccer balls?

By Joanne Leedom-Ackerman

BAGHDAD - The future of Iraq may in part depend on soccer balls, jump ropes, and volleyballs.

Half the Iraqi population is under 18. This fact is important to keep in mind amid all the contradictory reports coming out of Iraq these days - that people are jubilant to have freedom but despairing over lack of security and services, resistant to occupation yet reluctant to have troops leave while chaos reigns. It is crucial, therefore, that reconstruction efforts focus on the youth.

If the children of Iraq are at the center of the planning and funding, half the country - the next generation - will be served.

"The kids are the best part of this country," a sunburned US Army sergeant in Baghdad told me. "If we can take care of the kids, the rest will take care of itself." The sergeant, who is from Boston, patrols Baghdad neighborhoods where children frequently run up and surround him, some kissing the patches on his uniform. However, he recounted how one afternoon, a boy around 16 walked toward him waving a pistol.

"Put down the gun!" the sergeant urged. The boy kept coming, still waving the gun, a big smile on his face. "Put it down!" the sergeant insisted, gesturing to the ground, as he tried to assess whether this was just a boy or a potential enemy. "PUT ... IT ... DOWN!" Finally, the boy put the gun down.

"I'd love to get them all to turn in their guns for soccer balls!" the sergeant says now. "Can you get me a thousand soccer balls?"

Soccer balls, shoes, jump ropes, and books are as necessary to mending the social fabric of Iraq as beams and girders are to mending the damaged buildings. The children - many of whom struggle with malnutrition, disrupted education, and family dislocation - have been hit the hardest by this war, the 1991 war, and by the 12 years of sanctions in between. Postwar reconstruction could still leave the children behind. Schools have been interrupted, girls are afraid to go outside for fear of kidnapping and rape, and young boys are in the streets with guns.

"There is fear for security among people," says Noor Mahdi, a former primary-school teacher dressed in a green and white head scarf and long green skirt as she escorted us through the garbage-strewn streets to schools that were trying to reopen. "There have been many kidnappings of children, especially of girls. I saw schools full of guns. The market is full of machine guns and weapons."

Before coalition troops entered Baghdad, Saddam Hussein's men went into the neighborhoods and passed out guns. They also stored weapons in schools, including in one girls' school I visited in Baghdad where 27 trailers of munitions had been left. Because it was too dangerous to drive the trailers away through the streets, American forces chose to blow them up - and in the process, damaged half the school and surrounding homes. Though the Army returned to clear away the debris, there were still unexploded shells laying around in the fields.

Children play in school-yards all over Iraq where unexploded ordnance is scattered. Dr. Mohamed al-Hakin, the temporary coordinator of the Ministry of Planning and an Iraqi exile who lives in Boston, says there are

an estimated 42 million land mines in the country, almost two per person in this nation of 24 million. There is an urgent need for education about land mines and unexploded ordnance.

Schools and youth centers are gradually being cleared and reopened, but the restoration of activities - education, sports, health services - is slow. Teachers need to be paid, materials need to be replaced, and parents need to know their children are safe.

To date, the largest reconstruction funding and efforts are focused on rebuilding infrastructure - airports, bridges, ports, government ministries. The US estimates more than \$1 billion will be used for these purposes. While infrastructure needs are important, the funding of these "hard" assets has far outweighed the dollars and effort directed toward health care, education, and child development.

The transformation in Iraq will not be as easy as exchanging guns for soccer balls. In some neighborhoods the gun in the boy's hand may turn lethal - but the sooner activities, education, and jobs for young people are facilitated, the sooner the next generation will own its future.

• *Joanne Leedom-Ackerman, who serves on Save the Children's advisory board on early childhood education and on the boards of the International Crisis Group and Human Rights Watch, recently returned from a fact-finding trip to Iraq with Save the Children.*

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