



U.S. EMBASSY - BAGHDAD

2008 Provincial Reconstruction Team News

-PRTs Mark Earth Day in Iraq with Palm Tree Donation-

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Al-Hillah - Iraq's reputation as one of the world's leading producers of dates is being resurrected with the help of a Provisional Reconstruction Team (PRT) that recently donated 1,000 date palm trees to Babil Province.

The Babil PRT -- one of 31 that now operate in all 18 of Iraq's provinces -- kicked-off a provincial tree planting campaign with a ceremony that took place in the garden of the Regional Embassy Office April 2, the day after International Earth Day.

PRT Babil Team Leader Ken Hillas presided over the event that also commemorated Iraq's National Tree Planting Day (March 21st).

Guests included Provincial Council Chairman Muhammad ali Hussain al-Massudi, Deputy Governor Hassun ali Hassun, several director generals including: Ahmad Nasir Hussain al-Shalah of agriculture, Kareem Hussain Kadhum of Environment, Abdul Hussain Hadi Mahmood of Municipalities.

Babil provincial council members and more than a dozen civic leaders from local agriculture and woman's organizations also attended the ceremony.

Team Leader Hillas welcomed his Iraqi guests noting the date palm is recognized as the Iraqi national tree and "carries special meaning for all Iraqis as a symbol of peace. This is one of more than one 1,000 trees -- a gift from the American people -- that are being planted in Babil."

Hillas added, "These palms absorb pollution, reduce soil erosion, produce Oxygen, and are a legacy for future generations. We hope that what we plant together this today, both in the ground and in our hearts, will grow, prosper and, by the will of God, bear fruit."

Both agriculture and the environment were severely degraded under the previous regime. Part of the \$32 billion the U.S. Government devoted toward reconstruction and stabilization in Iraq since 2003 has been devoted those sectors; especially critical since more than 20% of the nation's workforce is employed in agriculture.



PRT Team Leader Ken Hillas (in foreground) helps Iraqi officials plant one of 1,000 date palm trees donated to Babil Province in commemoration of Earth Day 2008.

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has been instrumental in working with the PRTs to help rebuild Iraq's rural infrastructure. Since 2003 USAID has devoted more than \$266 million to strengthening Iraq's agribusiness through improved irrigation, reflooding of marshlands, and training for farmers.

Included in the agencies' efforts was the establishment of eight date palm nurseries with 4,500 trees with a 90 percent survival rate.

The PRT in Ninewa Province recently pioneered an innovative partnership with local farmers by helping form three multi-ethnic, multi-sectarian farmers associations dedicated to finding common solutions to shared problems in diverse communities.

They reached a decisive milestone with the delivery of nine TFBSO factory-built tractors. The tractors will create profit generating opportunities whereby rental income will be ploughed back into the associations' coffers for the use of all association members, regardless of ethnicity or sect.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) currently has 20 advisors in Iraq, many of them on PRTs, providing a variety of technical assistance to farmers and livestock breeders.

Following a recent agricultural conference hosted by the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad and attended by Iraqi Deputy Minister of Agriculture Dr. Subhi Al-Jumaily, USDA Secretary Ed Schafer praised the efforts of his advisers pledging their numbers would be raised by 15 in 2008.

Schafer said Iraq's improved security situation "allows our agriculture advisors to meet Iraqi citizens face-to-face; to assess their needs, to begin the hard work of pulling together Iraq and U.S. and aid organization resources to plan and implement reconstruction and agricultural development projects and rebuild Iraq's institutional capacity."