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2008 Provincial Reconstruction Team News

-First Ever Journalism Conference Held in al Kut, Iraq-

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August 11, 2008

Al Kut, Wasit Province, Iraq - "You are all making history today by attending the first journalism conference in all of southern Iraq," said Vanessa Beary, Wasit Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) Public Diplomacy Officer at a recent two-day gathering sponsored by her team.

Iraqi journalists gathered at the al Kut Hotel July 21-23 to discuss problems, challenges and solutions facing their profession. "Some of what will be discussed over the next couple of days will inevitably be the role of a free press in a democracy," Beary added.

The conference, organized by Salah Al Rubaiee of Al-Sharqiyah satellite television, included Dr. Saad Mutashar, the head of the journalism department from the University of Baghdad; Dr. Raad Tahir Goran, the Dean of the College of Arts from Wasit University; and Dr. Ali Al Majdawi, the Dean of the College of Education at Wasit University.

Majdawi led the panel and provided advice to the journalists, listened to ideas and posed possible solutions to the problems facing the journalists in Iraq.

Iraqi journalists labor under extreme conditions sometimes involving personal danger. They have faced kidnappings and even in the past jail time for their reporting. Now, after security has improved due to the efforts of the Iraqi Police and Iraqi Army, circumstances have changed.

"Journalists' rights are guaranteed by the Iraqi constitution and protected by the Iraqi Security Forces," said Beary. This is in contrast to the Saddam years and during sectarian violence when "journalists were targeted for merely exercising their rights as journalists."

Lieutenant Colonel Timothy Bush, 2nd Battalion, 20th Field Artillery Regimental commander, also addressed the journalists at the conference on the challenges that America once faced in developing freedom of the press.



Participants of the Wasit PRT journalism conference listen to opening remarks by Vanessa Beary, PRT Public Diplomacy Officer.

“We had to change our constitution, to protect the rights of journalists,” said Bush, a graduate of Bowling Green State University with a major in journalism. “That change was the First Amendment. In a free and open place of ideas, the truth will prevail.”

On the economic side, Iraqi journalists face a number of hurdles to making a living that the participants discussed. For example, they often have to pay out of their own pockets to send their stories to different media outlets. Also, their equipment is often bought with their own money, instead of by their employers.

“Everybody has problems with finance,” said Dr. Mutashar. “Help them with finance; help them by giving them training outside of Iraq to give them a broader perspective; and support them by buying equipment to do their jobs.”

Mutashar emphasized the need for academic training in Wasit and southern Iraq where there are no schools of journalism. “All of their experience comes from on-the-job training, which makes professional development difficult,” he said.

Despite obstacles, the journalists attending the conference believed it was a worthy challenge to accept the responsibilities for balanced reporting and writing inherent in a free and independent press as well as oversight of public institutions.

Beary drove home the point that “a free press serves as the citizen watchdog over the government. The media inform the public about governmental activity and spark debate.

“Your job is not easy, as you are expected to hold public officials to the highest standards and report whether or not the government is maintaining the public trust,” she told the journalists.