



U.S. EMBASSY - BAGHDAD

## 2008 Provincial Reconstruction Team News

### -PRT Kick-starts Soccer Outreach to Iraqi Kids-

By Barry Greenberg  
Special Correspondent

April 25, 2008

**Muthanna Province** - Barefoot kids and trash-strewn lots describe the state of soccer in this impoverished southern province today. Even the province's elite "Soccer School," the only one of its kind to develop the talents of its most promising young athletes, has no soccer field to call its own.



Sports initiative targets local youth in poor, rural province

Muthanna Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) Leader Paul O'Friel knew the situation was not only bad for the kids but also dangerous for the stability of the province. "The militias are targeting these kids — trying to recruit them as foot soldiers in their bloody campaigns," he said. "We want to give them an alternative."

More than 800 volunteers in 25 PRTs and 4 smaller provincial support teams now operate reconstruction and stabilization programs in Iraq's 18 provinces.

On April 14th, O'Friel hosted a meeting with local representatives of the Iraqi Ministry of Youth and Sports to discuss the PRT's plan to create dedicated sports fields and promote a youth soccer league.

O'Friel agreed to establish a network of 13 soccer fields across the province and sponsor a "home team" for each field—providing soccer jerseys, shoes, balls, and other equipment to players 8-18 years old.

The PRT team leader hopes that these fields will be safe havens for the local kids -- keeping them engaged in a constructive way and shaping a positive impression of the U.S. presence in the local communities. "If kids are having fun on the soccer field, maybe even wearing an American jersey," he noted. "The militias and other insurgent elements have much less sway."

The families of Muthanna province are mostly underprivileged, subsistence farmers who were long neglected during the years of Saddam's regime. On the United Nations's Deprivation Index, Muthanna ranks dead last among all Iraqi provinces -- eighteenth out of eighteen. Unemployment hovers around 60% of the population.

But it's the type of rural area filled with good, salt-of-the-earth folks who had a raw deal under the old regime.

The PRT has recently sent an appeal to the U.S. soccer community for donated apparel and equipment, and the first shipment of goods is already on its way -- courtesy of the Virginia Youth Soccer Association (VYSA). In a letter announcing the PRT's first incoming soccer donation, VYSA President Denise Edwards wrote, "We hope these efforts will make life a little more pleasant for the Iraqi people."

Once the fields are complete and the kids duly outfitted with soccer gear, the PRT will sponsor the “Muthanna Cup,” a soccer tournament for local teams on the new fields. The grand prize will be the cup itself -- specially-designed trophy engraved in Arabic.

Team Leader O’Friel hopes the tournament will become an annual tradition with the trophy proudly displayed for that year by the winning club.

He also hopes to engage in a similar initiative for basketball in Muthanna by targeting inner-city areas in the province’s main population centers of Samawa, Rumaitha, and Khidr. O’Friel envisions the construction of a series of new basketball courts as well as the creation of a basketball youth league.

Donations of soccer equipment and apparel can be shipped to the following address:

PRT Muthanna  
Camp Adder / Tallil Air Base  
APO AE 09331