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2008 Provincial Reconstruction Team News

-Iraqi Children Jumping Onto Global Net Thanks to PRT-

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Muthanna Province, Iraq - The Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) operating here in Iraq's poorest province recently celebrated a milestone with the completion of an important phase of its One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) distribution program.

The PRT's Senior Business Advisor Richard Torborg, in charge of the OLPC program in Muthanna, partnered with the Cambridge, Massachusetts-based non-profit company, OLPC, and the Muthanna Department of Education to provide cost effective, cutting-edge educational computers – the XO Laptops – to the children of Muthanna Province.



Muthanna PRT Team Leader Brad Lynch hands out laptop computers at Namuthaj Elementary School.

“With the academic year just beginning here in Iraq, these XO Laptops arrived at the perfect time,” Torborg said as he helped hand out laptops to the eager children of Namuthaj Elementary School.

For Torborg and the PRT, the project personifies an important cross-sectoral team objective of: Engaging provincial leadership, building NGO capacity, and improving technology and education for the Province's children.

Approximately six months ago, Torborg and members of the PRT met with representatives from the Department of Education regarding the possibility of an OLPC program in the Province. While the program was a PRT-inspired idea, strong provincial leadership and buy-in has propelled the initiative forward.

“In working closely with the Ministry of Education, and our local NGO, we not only created a sustainable program, but we've created a sustainable relationship between the PRT and educators in the province,” Torborg added.

The structure of the “OLPC Team” was another important part of the project. The formal working group, which consists of members and staff from the PRT, Department of Education, and NGO community, meet regularly and are responsible for creating an English-Arabic training manual for the XO Laptop.

Additionally, the OLPC Team has conducted workshops for 30 teachers, thus far, and is planning additional training as the program expands.

The future for Muthanna’s children is brighter now that they have an opportunity, with U.S. help, to jump onto the net of knowledge and information that is connecting people of all cultures and backgrounds around the world.

In his remarks to the guests and students of the school, PRT Team Leader Brad Lynch discussed the importance of investing in education and the children of Iraq. Lynch noted, “The OLPC program is an educational program, rather than just a laptop. The training teachers have received and will receive from the Department of Education has created institutional knowledge that cannot be taken away.”

The event was well attended by Iraqi provincial leadership and the media. The Deputy Provincial Governor, Provincial Council Chair, Director General, (along with the PRT Team Leader) all gave interviews to local television and print media about the success of this project. Specifically, the Provincial Council Chairman, Abdul Hussein Dhalamy praised the PRT as “brothers” and expressed gratitude that the PRT was “helping bring the necessary technology to Iraq’s educational sector.”

Muthanna’s local media looked to get their scoop straight from the students. A few star pupils at Namuthaij, who received training on the XO Laptops before the event, were on hand to discuss this new technology with the media. One student told reporters, “It looks a little like a toy, but when we look closer, we can see it is not a toy at all.” With a sparkle in her eye that brought smiles to all around her, she noted, “I think it will be a lot of fun to use in class this year.”

The distribution of approximately 100 computers to the students of the Namuthaij Girls Elementary School will be followed by additional roll-outs at two other schools in the province. The OLPC Team plans to have a total of 300 computers in Muthanna’s schools by the end of October.