



U.S. EMBASSY - BAGHDAD

## 2008 Provincial Reconstruction Team News

### -Orphanage Visit Brings Smiles to Kids and Soldiers -

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**Samawa, Iraq** - Representatives of a U.S. State Department Reconstruction Team joined the 82nd Airborne to visit an orphanage on June 3rd in downtown Samawah, the capital city of the poorest of Iraq's 18 provinces. Eyes widened and hearts quickened as the 40 elementary school-aged children gathered in a classroom to receive donated toys and books from their American visitors. One 11 year-old girl giggled with delight at her first stuffed animal—a white bear with eyes as big as those of its new owner.



*A child at Virtuous Hope Orphanage smiles over the gifts of stuffed toys and books delivered by the 82nd Airborne and PRT Muthanna.*

The Al Amal Al Khayria (“Virtuous Hope”) orphanage serves approximately 85 children in the province. Though not a residential facility, the orphanage provides education, food, medical care, and a financial stipend to relatives or members of the community who care for these children in their homes.

This visit marks the first time since 2003 that a large contingent of U.S. soldiers ventured into the heart of Muthanna Province and into its capital city. Since Muthanna falls under Provincial Iraqi Control, troops from the 82nd Airborne must first request permission from local authorities before being allowed to enter Samawa via military convoy. When the Provincial Governor learned of the nature of this visit to the orphanage, he quickly approved the mission and even provided an Iraqi Police escort to facilitate the convoy's travel through the streets of the busy city center.

The children weren't sure what to make of American soldiers carrying boxes into their classrooms in the early morning hours, but their curiosity quickly gave way to delight as there were plenty of stuffed animals, school supplies, and books to go around. Ali, an 8-year old boy at the orphanage, explained that he is very happy at Virtuous Hope. “They take care of us,” he said, “but it's nice to get presents too sometimes.”

Ali confessed that this was the first time he had ever met an American. When asked what he thought about the United States, he replied, “I think Americans are good people. They are supporting us.”

Sayiid Al Mayali, the manager of the charitable foundation that supports the orphanage and pays the salaries of its teachers and other staff, welcomed the show of support from U.S. soldiers and civilians who brought a bit of happiness to some of the most disadvantaged kids in the province. “No one else looks after this orphanage,” he mused, expressing frustration with both the local government and the private sector. “If you leave this segment of the population without attention, it will be a disaster for the community.”

The Sayiid’s goal is to provide education for these kids from the elementary to secondary levels and beyond. These kids “need to be taken care of,” he said, and the orphanage will become “an example for society.”

In addition to the books and toys, the 82nd Airborne also brought one of its own medics, Specialist Merry Rodgers from Charlie Company 307, to provide basic health services for the children. Rodgers was amazed at their excellent medical condition. “I wasn’t really sure what to expect,” she said, “but they are very healthy.” She provided cough drops to a few of the kids complaining of sore throats and Pepto Bismol tablets to treat an upset stomach.

Rodgers was effusive when explaining her joy in being able to work with these kids—if only for a short time. Her experiences at the orphanage “made this whole deployment worth it,” she said.