



U.S. EMBASSY - BAGHDAD

## 2008 Provincial Reconstruction Team News

### -PRTs Promote the Rights of Women in Iraq-

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**Taji** - "Although women have had certain constitutional rights [in Iraq], these often have proven insufficient to permit women to strive for and enjoy the same opportunities and quality of life as men," says U.S. Army Colonel George Phelan, the Rule of Law Adviser and Women's Rights Advocate for Embedded Provincial Reconstruction (EPRT) Team located outside Baghdad.

An attorney in civilian life, Phelan made his comments to Embassy Public Affairs Counselor Philip T. Reeker during Reeker's March 14 visit to the team's headquarters in Taji.

Phelan's team is one of 13 joint U.S. military and civilian EPRTs deployed throughout Iraq to assist local governments and civil society organizations. "Our job in terms of Rule of Law," Phelan observed, "is to improve Iraqis' – all Iraqis' – confidence in, and access to, their legal institutions. This mission includes empowering women to occupy their rightful place in a modern Iraqi society."

For Phelan and his teammates, empowering Iraqi women requires fostering a safe place in which they can share their experiences with other Iraqi women and reach out to them for practical assistance. Such a place is the Sadr City Women's Legal Clinic. With funds provided by the U.S. Department of State and coordinated by the EPRT, the clinic has offered free legal assistance to needy women since opening its doors on December 1, 2007.

With a grant personally presented by the Japanese Ambassador on March 8 (International Women's Day) and further funding from the U.S. Government, the clinic plans to expand into a Sadr City Women's Center. Women lacking financial means will have access to a variety of free services ranging from vocational training to domestic violence counseling and comprehensive medical services including, gynecology, pediatrics, and ultrasounds performed by an onsite female physician.

Flush from the resounding success of her recent first-ever Women's Continuing Legal Education Forum for 65 female Baghdad lawyers, the Sadr City clinic's founder, a prominent Iraqi lawyer and women's rights activist, now seeks to help women well beyond the walls of her clinic with an "Ask A Woman" radio show which is broadcast with portable equipment radio provided by the EPRT and with State Department "Quick Reaction Funds."



Public Affairs Counselor Philip T. Reeker (second from the right) is briefed by EPRT 3 team members, including Team Leader Paul Folmsbee (center) and Col. George Phelan (far left).

Phelan, who wished to protect the privacy of the activist for security reasons, said, "She has been in the trenches for years. She is that strong and credible advocate Iraqi women need to ensure that equality is not only talked about, but practiced and upheld in ground truth."

However, Phelan observed that the movement for women's rights is larger than any one individual and necessitates building professional networks among women leaders of Iraq and abroad.

Describing the team's plans in August 2008 to sponsor a delegation of female Iraqi jurists and human rights defenders to visit with professional women's groups in the Boston area, the colonel expressed hope that the trip would be the first in a series of "Women of Prominence" exchanges designed to empower Iraqi women to assume their rightful place in the world.

Thanking his EPRT hosts, Counselor Reeker lauded Phelan and all of his PRT comrades for "helping Iraqi women to exercise their fundamental rights in shaping the future of Iraq as a secure, free, and prosperous democratic society."