



U.S. EMBASSY - BAGHDAD

## 2008 Provincial Reconstruction Team News -Hosting Iraqis the Traditional Way-

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**Al Toum, Iraq** - local officials, farmers and Coalition Force members now have a welcoming place to meet with each other and discuss development issues thanks to the efforts of a U.S. Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) operating in Iraq's southern Muthanna province.

Political Counselor Matt Tueller, who was visiting from the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, helped inaugurate the guesthouse known in Arabic as a "mudhif". PRT Leader Paul O'Friel, whose team helped fund the structure, joined the diplomat at the February 5 event.

More than 40 Iraqis, including provincial political officials, sheikhs, Imams, and tribal leaders enjoyed the ceremonial feast that followed.

Established in Iraq in 2005, PRTs are a civilian-military initiative that work with coalition partners and provincial and local governments in all of the country's 18 provinces to promote economic reconstruction and stabilization through development and governance programs.

In Al Toum Colonel Charles Flynn of the 82nd Airborne worked in close cooperation with O'Friel to build the Iraqi guest house that offers members of the military and the PRT an opportunity to meet with Iraqis in a traditional, non-threatening setting.

A local agricultural cooperative will also use the mudhif for meetings with provincial officials and local farmers. "This is a mudhif for all Iraqis in Muthanna," O'Friel said, "and all are welcome."

Before the first guests arrived for the inaugural festivities, Counselor Tueller and O'Friel traveled together to the neighboring al Toum village elementary school -- site of an upcoming medical and veterinarian community service program in the rural northeastern corner of Muthanna province funded, in part, by the U.S. Government.



Tribal sheikhs from Muthanna province sample American hospitality Iraqi-style in a PRT-sponsored traditional reed guest house. Photo by PDO Barry Greenberg.

Classes were in session when the motorcade arrived and students continued their lessons in the eight-room schoolhouse while others played soccer in the courtyard. Tueller and O’Friel thanked the principal for allowing the Iraqi Army, Coalition forces, and the PRT to use the school as the site for the veterinary assistance program. After a warm welcome the principal gave his guests a tour of the school.

Tueller, a fluent Arabic speaker, stopped to address a group of 4th and 5th grade boys in one classroom, as well a similarly-aged class of girls in another, and reminded them of the importance of studying hard and respecting their instructors. Then the room was all smiles as he distributed boxes of school supplies. New notebooks, colored pencils, and rulers filled the room as the students tried to contain themselves from diving into the tempting packages.

The U.S. diplomat also brought along a supply of reference and teaching materials for the elementary school faculty, which the principal very graciously accepted. The Coalition party then traveled on to the inaugural ceremony at the Mudhif.

Meeting inside a guest house is as traditional as the Mesopotamian culture itself. The Iraqis seemed completely at ease sitting on the floor atop carpets and pillows in shoulder-to-shoulder rows. The Coalition hosts followed suit, and conversation soon flowed along with the comforts of coffee and sweet tea.

The Iraqis relished the opportunity to discuss issues of importance to their daily lives and nation with Tueller, a senior American diplomat from Baghdad, and the conversation ranged from the pace of reconciliation in the capital to the direction of the status of forces agreement to the price of fertilizer on the local Muthanna market.

Soon lunch was served by a team of local cooks. Communal-sized plates of boiled sheep, rice, flat breads, and fruit flowed into the mudhif, and the guests dove hand-first into the robust meal. Although some of the American hosts seemed a bit timid to serve themselves with their hands, the obvious ease with which the Iraqis consumed the meal soon pushed most reservations aside.

By the end of the meal there wasn’t a non-greasy finger or frown in the room.