



U.S. EMBASSY - BAGHDAD

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-Iraqis "Ambitious" to Upgrade Agricultural Sector-

By Jim Fisher-Thompson
Special Correspondent

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Baghdad - The Iraqi government is determined to resurrect the nation's status as the "Fertile Crescent" and breadbasket of the region while providing jobs for an agricultural workforce hard hit by a neglected and deteriorating infrastructure.

"We are ambitious" to renew "the pillar of our economy" and "achieve a state of self-sufficiency" in agricultural production, Deputy Minister of Agriculture Dr. Subhi

Al-Jumaily told a two-day U.S.-Iraq Agricultural Coordination Conference held in Baghdad March 10-11.

Al-Jumaily, who spoke on the second day of the gathering, said it was "useful, fruitful and [involved] a good exchange of ideas." He touched on the urgency for increased agricultural output noting that just 30% of Iraq's food needs were satisfied by internal production; the rest supplied by costly imports.

The meeting brought together 250 senior Iraqi government officials, including agriculture representatives from nine provinces; private sector participants; U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) advisors on Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs); and a number of other U.S. Government agency representatives all working to improve Iraq's agriculture sector.

A number of U.S. agricultural experts spoke on topics ranging from poultry industry rehabilitation; livestock and animal feed industry rehabilitation to soil and water use in irrigation.

The irrigation, storage and production infrastructures that once supported Iraq's thriving wheat, barley, rice, corn and date industries suffered after years of neglect by Saddam Hussein's regime. Instead of maintaining irrigation canals, ensuring the quality of livestock and training extension agents, the dictator built palaces while spending scarce resources on food imports. The result: Food production that once operated on a commercial basis edged toward subsistence farming.

To turn that around, Al-Jumaily said the Iraqi government devoted \$500 million of its \$48 billion 2008 budget toward agricultural rehabilitation and expansion. In addition to providing staples for Iraqi households, he said traditional and world-renowned products like amber rice and dates "need encouragement, industrialization and marketing help" to again put Iraq on the map again as a producer of top quality agricultural products.



Irrigation channel in Kirkuk region being cleared of reeds by agricultural workers.

Al-Jumaily said agricultural priorities that topped his Ministry's agenda included:

- Rehabilitation of irrigation canals choked by reeds and the construction of new lined water channels;
- Expansion of the livestock sector; mainly sheeps and goats;
- Increasing credits and other funds to farmers;
- Increasing mechanization and new farming implements;
- Date palm expansion;
- Increasing refrigeration and storage capacity;
- Providing affordable inputs like fertilizers; and
- Expanding agricultural research into disease prevention.

Noting that 99.4% of Iraqi agriculture was in the private sector, Al-Jumaily said there were potentially "great opportunities for investment...and we are ready to facilitate such investments."

With security improved since Coalition Forces began active "surge" operations last year, Deputy Chief of Mission Patricia Butenis said, "Iraq's agricultural sector, which employs over one-quarter of the national labor force, is a key target" of Coalition Forces' efforts "to improve the economic well-being of all Iraqis.

"All of the American civilian and military agricultural personnel working in the field are...the tip of the plow turning the soil to make Iraq's agriculture fertile again," she added.

Butenis commended the Iraqi Government's \$500 million commitment to agriculture calling it a "a very timely effort" that will help revitalize the "livestock sector and date palm industry" while "providing a solid basis for future growth in the private sector."

British Lieutenant General W.R. Rollo, deputy commander of Multinational Forces-Iraq (MNF-I), who represented Coalition Forces at the gathering; said coordination of assistance efforts was essential. Turning to the Iraqis he said it was important to be clear that "the tasks...and resources... that have placed on you are broadly lined up."

Success in Agriculture was absolutely essential Rollo indicated, because "nobody will believe Iraq is recovering while its fields lie fallow."

Mike Yost, USDA's Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) Administer, told the gathering "our aim is to help the Government of Iraq put in place a dynamic agricultural sector" that "realizes higher earning potential" for its farmers.

That involves technical assistance for Iraqis to maintain and manage much-needed crop, livestock and infrastructure improvements, Yost said. To that end, USDA will continue agricultural fellowship programs that have already provided short-term training in the U.S. for Iraqis, he added.

In addition, Yost said USDA had five experts working in the Iraqi Ministry of Agriculture with an additional 18 advisers working with the PRTs. "We anticipate adding 15 additional agricultural advisers or PRT liaisons this year," he said.

Referring to the PRTs whose 800 volunteers work on reconstruction and stabilization projects in all 18 of Iraq's provinces, the Al-Jumaily said, "We realize Americans are working at all...levels [provincial governments and councils] and "we appreciate this."