



U.S. EMBASSY - BAGHDAD

2008 Provincial Reconstruction Team News -Iraqi Women Form Backbone of Family-

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Hawr Rajab, Iraq – With violence appreciably down since Coalition Forces began a surge in operations a year ago, civil society is beginning to sprout with the help of women who have traditionally formed the backbone of their communities especially in troubled times.

In Hawr Rajab, a town 35 miles south of Baghdad, a newly-formed Women's Committee began operations February 7 with the help of an embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team (EPRT) operating in Babil Province. The committee's focus will be on family health, education and jobs.



EPRT member Captain Trisha Mustaine attending first meeting of the Hawr Rajab Women's Committee.

EPRTs were formed in 2007 as part of President Bush's New Way Forward strategy. These civilian-led teams cooperate closely with Brigade Combat Teams (BCTs) or Regiments (U.S. Marines) to support the military surge in Anbar Province and the greater Baghdad area through reconstruction and stabilization programs.

John Smith, a Foreign Service Officer and one of the more than 800 volunteers on the 25 PRTs that operate in all 18 of Iraq's provinces said in an interview that the Hawr Rajab Women's Committee is "a wholly Iraqi-owned organization whose goal is the improvement of women's and children's lives through social empowerment.

Aside from their own concerns women in Iraq have a great impact on their communities as a whole, Smith said. "This is a very communal society. There is nothing more important than family and communal connectivity and we have to acknowledge and respect this."

Like Americans, "Iraq men are more contented when they know their women and children are healthy, happy and productive and women can be key role players in achieving that scenario," the PRT leader added.

In helping the women organize their committee Smith said, "We also have to respect the cultural sensitivities regarding women in this society and so we used the women of our EPRT to work directly with the Iraqis."

Army Capt. Trisha Mustaine, a military member of the EPRT, "took the lead" in working with the women of Hawr Rajab to put the committee together, Smith explained.

She was ably assisted by Army First Lieutenant Cynthia Peters of the 2nd Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division, the Coalition Forces parent unit of the EPRT. Lieutenant Peters was recently appointed the Women's Affairs Representative for the 6-8 Cavalry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team.

The first meeting of the Hawr Rajab Women's Committee began with a press conference and discussion of topics vital to the community's welfare. If the orators were nervous they certainly didn't show it, as one-by-one they began to speak for their causes.

One of the first of eight speakers to address the more than 200 women and young girls at the committee meeting was Manar Fahdil Salman, a lawyer who grew up in Hawr Rajab.

"This message is for the entire world," she said. "We need to show them that we have rules. We need to help side-by-side with the men to help our city be safe. This can't be done with one hand, all of us need to help."

Al Qaeda terrorism has taken a toll on Iraqi women and through them on the family structure in general. Salman said when al-Qaeda extremists moved into the region more than two years ago many of the men of the village were killed. This resulted in a number of families being left without their traditional 'head of household.' It also forced widows to rely on extended family for basic needs.

Now with the cooperation between Coalition Forces, Iraqi Security Forces, Iraqi government officials and the Women's Committee, security in Hawr Rajab has become a much welcomed reality.

In a show of support for the Woman's Committee, Rashid District Chairman Yaqoub Yousif Bekhaty, showed his willingness to assist with many of the concerns of the women's group. He said the Women's Committee was a good idea, which would encourage women to participate in the political process.

Smith said other women's projects the Babil EPRT was involved with included women's farming group and sewing cooperative to which the team donated 16 sewing machines.