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Iraqi children working to survive

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With their families struggling, many turn to hard, hazardous labor

By Vivienne Walt, Globe Correspondent, 8/12/2003

BAGHDAD -- Karar Ali has more work than he can handle this summer, despite Iraq's rampant unemployment. He starts his job most days about 6 a.m. and often works until 5 p.m. The production demands seem endless. Karar, the conscientious worker, is 9 years old.

In their first-ever summer without Saddam Hussein, Karar and other children have sat for weeks in the 125-degree heat amid a giant mound of discarded ammunition.

For more than nine hours a day, Karar and his diminutive colleagues chip away at each bullet until the copper casing comes away from the lead. A large sack of copper chips fetches 3,000 dinars, about \$1.88. "I can fill half a sack if I stay here for a long day," Karar said, one pudgy hand clutching a Kalashnikov bullet that is searing hot to the touch. "My mother says this is a good job. I give her all my earnings."

Hundreds of thousands of live bullets and spent shells have been gathered from the military camps of Iraq's crushed army and from the war litter strewn on Baghdad's sidewalks. To the outsider's eye, the sight of small boys in shorts and sandals squatting over piles of ammunition recalls the rigors of a medieval factory.

But these working conditions are not startling in Iraq these days, according to child specialists in Baghdad. The war's end has brought not only a seemingly endless supply of battlefield junk. It also has lured perhaps thousands of children into arduous, sometimes dangerous, jobs.

For years under Hussein's rule, many poor residents suffered from the results of Hussein's economic mismanagement and from international sanctions imposed on Iraq. But specialists said the war, and the government's collapse April 9, has knocked poor Iraqis flat. Hundreds of thousands lost their jobs in the mammoth civil service, stripping support for numerous relatives of each employee. Others have lost homes or been hit hard by the monthslong pause in food distribution and social services.

"Parents are saying to their children: 'Go out and earn some money -- 1,000 dinars, 2,000 dinars. We don't care where it comes from,'" said Mohammed Ghazi Saber, a social worker who runs a drop-in center for children in Baghdad's Karrada district. The center opened last month, with financing from the United Nations Children's Fund and the French aid organization Children of the World.

"A lot of the children who come in here are working day and night," Saber said. "Now we are offering them clothes and food. Maybe that will be enough to stop them from working."

International treaties, which Iraq has signed, forbid children younger than 15 from working. Children younger than 18 are banned from hazardous jobs. But in dozens of countries, such laws defy the rules of survival. Across Baghdad, children at work said they are lucky to have jobs. Without them, their families might be evicted from their tiny apartments or left without enough food.

In an earnest tone, Wisam Mohammed, 11, explained that he is the breadwinner in his family, with a daily wage of 1,500 dinars. "I have my mother and two brothers to support," said the lean boy in a red baseball cap.

Wisam's father died a decade ago. The boy made it to fourth grade two years ago. "Then I dropped out because the school started asking us for money," he said. This summer, Wisam's job is to toil over a hunk of aluminum, dismantling a piece from a defunct Iraqi military plane with a hammer and wrench.

Wisam's friend at work, Ali Faleh, 13, spends his days hauling bits of the plane to an open fire, where the first

stage of the melting process begins. Sharp-smelling fumes rise from the smoke, while Ali stands watch over the pit. With an entire plane to melt into metal bricks, the boys have been busy for weeks.

Scores of blasted Iraqi tanks, mortar shells, and armored vehicles were hauled into the scrap yards of Saba' Ksoor, a poor neighborhood on the eastern outskirts of Baghdad, by local contractors hired by the US military in Iraq. As summer has worn on, children have flocked to the yards, looking for an unexpected windfall.

The adults have mostly applauded their efforts. "I brought Wisam to work in the scrap yard so he could learn some skills," said Abbas Abed, 32, Wisam's neighbor, who added he has helped care for the boy since his father died. "It's better than him spending time on the streets. It's not really dangerous, and he can earn money."

Wisam's small hands make the work slow going, as he taps on the metal with minimal effect. Much of the plane has been transformed into bricks of molten aluminum, for sale to a metals dealer. The pouring of the metal is left to older teenagers.

Some analysts contend the children are better off spending their summer at work than on the streets.

"This is a very tough environment for kids. But it's still better than them sniffing glue," said Ban Al-Dhayi, an Iraqi spokeswoman for the UN Children's Fund in Baghdad. UNICEF contends that drug abuse among Baghdad's children has soared since the capital fell to US forces April 9, with hundreds now sleeping on the streets.

"My whole family is jobless. We really need this money," said Amar Sayed, 15, who works with Karar amid the mounds of bullets and shells. With swifter fingers than the younger children, Amar said he can fill an entire sack with copper in a long day. That brings 3,000 dinars. The boys' factory is a patch of dust on the roadside in Baghdad's sprawling Shi'ite enclave known until recently as Saddam City.

The children's summer this year has stretched on for months, drawing more of them into the workplace as time goes by. Many schools have barely operated since war erupted March 20. Hundreds of school buildings were destroyed by bombs or looters.

Officials said they intend to reopen more schools in late September, three weeks later than the usual schedule. But in numerous interviews with children at work in Baghdad, almost all said they intended to keep their jobs rather than go to school. Their income has become indispensable to their families. Amar was the only boy who declared a wish to return to the classroom.

"I know I have to learn; I know this isn't a good job," he said, holding out the seven live bullets whose copper shells he was extracting that afternoon. "It's very long hours, and there is a lot of dust and dirt. But for us, there are no other opportunities at all."

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