

Anger Over Food Ration Hitches

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Shortages of flour, sugar and other basic goods are blamed on poor security.

The monthly food ration programme that has continued since the 1991 Gulf War is now beset by delays and shortages, with some Iraqis insisting it was better run under Saddam Hussein.

About 28.5 million Iraqis depend on monthly food allotments, distributed by agents who are supervised by a state-run body under the ministry of trade. Each receive a food coupon that can be exchanged for a monthly allocation of nine kilogrammes of flour, three kg of rice and 200 grammes of tea, as well as beans, sugar, detergents and milk.

Taxi driver Mohammed Hussein Kadhim, 45, relies on the coupons to help feed his family of nine, but hasn't received any flour or rice for the past three months.

"It's strange, because the government has the money and resources to afford these items. We don't know the reason for the delay," he said.

Badriya Hasan, a food ration agent in Baghdad's al-Jadida neighbourhood, said the shortages have left people with no choice but to buy the goods themselves.

"For the past three months we haven't received any sugar, so people are buying it from the market; the same goes for beans," she said.

Officials blame the security situation for hampering the distribution of food, saying trucks have being attacked and looted by militants.

They also say a recent rumour that a flour delivery had been contaminated with iron filings was responsible for the flour shortages.

"The flour was seized for tests, so we purchased other quantities of flour," said a trade ministry official who asked to remain anonymous.

However, many Iraqis reject these explanations.

"That's unrealistic," said Mansoor Salah, a 50-year-old pensioner. "How can I believe the state will restore stability when it's incapable of supplying flour?"

In addition to shortages, Iraqis have also accused the ministry's distribution agents of mistreating customers and handing out inferior goods.

"The agent always sells the high-quality stuff and replaces it with low quality," said taxi driver Sayf Khalil.

Trade ministry officials admit they have shut down some agents' stores because of such improprieties. Their contract is cancelled if they violate the terms of the programme.

Though most of the food distribution agents were chosen by the former regime, the recent problems have led some to feel nostalgic for the old days.

"Under Saddam there was no waiting," said Sarmad Yousif, 33, an oil ministry worker.

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