

Baghdad's Street Urchins

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Orphans who escaped children's homes eke out a bare existence on the capital's streets.

Safaa, 7, stands every day at central Baghdad's al-Bayaa intersection, crying and begging money from drivers stopped at the traffic lights.

Safaa runs among the crowds wearing a red shirt that has become black from grime. Her bare feet are cracked and caked in blood.

She throws herself at the windows of cars and says, "Give me 250 dinars (14 US cents)! Give me 250 dinars!"

Kadhem al-Ubeidi, a middle-aged man who reeks of alcohol, watches her from across the street. "When they see the child crying, they pay more money," said Ubeidi, who claims to be her father.

Safaa says there's no such relationship between them, but at lunchtime Safaa takes a break, and gives Ubaidi her day's takings. He buys her two falafel sandwiches, and she rests on the curb eating them. An hour later, it's back to work.

Safaa takes maybe 15,000 dinars a day. Ubeidi gives her 2,500 of that, and keeps the rest in compensation for giving her a place to sleep in his squat in a former state-owned building.

She says Ubaidi spends the rest of the money on "beer and liquor".

Safaa is one of hundreds of street children who've appeared around Baghdad since the fall of Saddam Hussein.

Formerly housed in orphanages and other institutions, the children were able to escape custody when their guards deserted.

Nur, 13, is a former resident of the al-Rahma children's shelter in the northeast slum of Sadr City.

Now six months' pregnant, Nur - which means "light" - currently spends her days on Abu Nawass street, along the Tigris River.

"I don't know who the father is," she said, having slept with dozens of men "to get money and have my freedom. When I was in the shelter there was no freedom..with beating all the time. This life is better."

Nur spends much of her time high on fumes from wood varnish, which she buys at Abu Zeinab in the district of Batawin in central Baghdad.

She sleeps in one of the small brothels and flophouses lining the back alleys of Batawin's, where, her friends say, runaways mix with former residents of Abu Ghraib prison, released by Saddam in October, 2002.

Other runaway children took a different path.

Ibrahim, 10, sits with a group of his friends in a rundown garden along Abu Nawass street, sharing a pot of varnish bought from Abu Zainab's. They take turns dipping a rag in the liquid and sniffing. Soon after, babbling away, they seem to enter another world.

Although some of his friends beg, Ibrahim chose to work for a gang led by one Ahmed al-Wawi in Bataween. He says the gang uses him to run errands, in exchange for a place to sleep and watch satellite TV.

"Ahmed al-Wawi gives me what the Rahma shelter can't give me. This life is better than the shelter and I'll never go back to the shelter, whatever happens, because I'm free," said Ibrahim.

Murad Abu Zeinab, 32, meanwhile, stands behind his counter as children wave two 250-dinar notes at him, the price of daily dose of varnish.

"This liquid is used to dye wood and other industrial uses," he said. "I don't care if the children use it as a drug. The important thing for me is to do my job."

Across town, in the garbage-strewn farmland on the edge of Sadr City, Baqir Abu Jasem, the manager of the Rahma children's shelter, sits in a small office where the ceiling paint is peeling away, and the single window is covered with nylon in place of glass.

"In Saddam's time, the children were beaten and raped by guards in the orphanage and by one of the teachers. One teacher took the pretty girls to the town of al-Awja to work in house of Udai Hussein," Abu Jasem said, referring to the son of Saddam Hussein.

Even though most of the staff have been replaced since then, the children - especially the girls - were afraid to return, Abu Jasem says. Of the 500 residents before the war, only 86 have come back, and some of those fled again after gangs raided the place.

Like many public institutions in Sadr City, the Rahma shelter is now under the protection of the local mosque, part of the grassroots movement founded by the slum's namesake, Ayatollah Mohammed Sadek al-Sadr, before his murder.

Sadrists activists - who call themselves the Hawza - raided Batawin brothels, bringing back some of the runaways, and also pay salaries of the shelter's officials. "No one gives this help except the Hawza," said Abu Jasem.

But they still limit the residents' freedom of movement..

"We would never allow any woman to leave without agreement, just for shopping or anything like that," he

said. Perhaps once every two months, the females go to market to buy clothes, accompanied by one official.

Siham Hassan, 19, who has lived in al-Rahma since she was four, defends such supervision, saying the situation is not that different from life in an ordinary traditional family.

"Iraqi woman cannot leave the house without the agreement of their father and mother," she said, adding that "the officials in this shelter are like my father".

Siham expects to live at the shelter until her marriage, which the Hawza will help arrange. "It's a good place for me, a good life," she said. "Most of my friends have been married off to different people."

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