

## **Child Labour Fears**

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Poor enforcement of labour laws leaves children vulnerable to exploitation.

In a crowded market, ten-year-old Mazin expertly navigates his way through shoppers and vendors. He wears a second-hand t-shirt and cheap sneakers and has an ice cream box slung around his neck.

Mazin, who did not give his last name, earns 3,000 to 7,000 dinars (two to three US dollars) per day doing seasonal work, which in spring means selling ice cream. He only went to school for two years and now helps support his family in Hawija.

But Mazin doesn't miss school. His true love is soccer, though he only has time to play on Fridays, which Iraq takes as a weekend holiday. Otherwise he starts his day in the morning and keeps walking until sunset. "I'm the best player on the block," he bragged.

Iraq signed the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989. However, provisions on child labour have almost never been enforced, in part because the economic sanctions imposed on Iraq in the 1990s had tough effects on poor and uneducated families, and parents frequently pulled their children out of school to work.

The US-led Coalition Provision Authority, which governed Iraq following the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime three years ago, made it illegal for Iraqi children under the age of 15 to work. But child labour remains common and may be on the rise once again, because the country's conflict is hindering economic development, experts say.

The US State Department noted in its 2005 Iraqi human rights report that children from the estimated one million Iraqi families living on less than one dollar a day were "routinely used as an additional source of labour or income".

"It's natural for us to see a large number of children under 10 years old doing jobs that they shouldn't be doing, and the law prohibits it," said attorney Abdullah Nazal.

Most of the children work as seasonal manual labourers in rural areas. In cities, they can be seen peddling products, shining shoes, begging and working in shops.

Qusay Khudhair Hussein, 12, dropped out of school a year ago to earn 5,000 Iraqi dinars a day in a sandwich shop in the industrial district of Hawija in Kirkuk province. His family moved to the town, 65 kilometres west of the northern city of Kirkuk, from Latifiya in Babil province because of security concerns.

"I am sad about missing school this year," he said as he served tea with two of his brothers, who are breadwinners for the rest of the family.

The State Department noted that the ministry of labour and social affairs did not have enough inspectors or resources for its child labour unit and only took action to combat child labour when backed by

international agencies such as the United Nations Children's Fund.

Hassan Torhan, the head of social care in Kirkuk, admits the government has not allocated a budget to fight child labour. Torhan said the worsening security situation, rising joblessness - conservative estimates put unemployment at about 30 per cent - and delays in the creation of the new government "have made child labour a large-scale phenomenon".

The government's new Social Protection Network, which is supposed to give financial aid for poor families, has also been widely criticised as ineffective. "I think [the support] is insufficient due to the complex situation," said Torhan.

Economist Mahmood al-Juburi, a professor at Tikrit university, noted that parents who cannot find jobs are relying on their children for support. Those parents often value survival over education, particularly if they grew up that way themselves. And children have little health, educational or social resources, he maintained.

Sadun al-Dulaimi, a 58-year-old pensioner and father of nine, lives in a small village near Hawija and can hardly earn enough for his family. He does farm work with his two sons Ammar and Omar, 15 and 14, who left school a couple of years ago to give their father a hand.

"We don't have enough money to cover the expenses of all of our children," said Dulaimi. "We have to sacrifice school for some of our children so that the rest can study."

But Juburi warned that if children continue dropping out to work, "they will form a new uneducated and unemployed generation at a time when the country is in need of experts. This will hinder the path of progress".

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