

## **Hard Times for Students**

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Destruction of student residences puts women's education on hold.

Sima Hasoon, 19, lives with 10 other young women in one of the few rooms that survived the burning of her student dormitory at Baghdad's al-Rusafa Management Institute.

Nearly three-quarters of the 50 students in her dorm have quit their studies after their homes were looted in the chaos following the collapse of the old regime. The remainder must sleep on blankets on the floor, cooking with a butane stove, in order to complete their education.

The ministry of higher education estimates that 90 per cent of the country's student dormitories - formerly home to some 30,000 students - were destroyed.

So far, the majority of funds committed by the United States and other countries rebuilding postwar Iraq have gone to restoring the electricity industry and other infrastructure.

Other money has gone to pay government workers their salaries, and to get hospitals and schools running.

However, shortages of funding mean that work on restoring other services has yet to begin.

The majority of dormitory inhabitants, education officials say, were women from Iraq's less developed provinces, whose parents sent them to the capital to pursue educational opportunities that were not available at home.

Hasoon comes from Nasiriyah, in the poor and predominantly Shia south. She moved to Baghdad to study computer engineering - a degree which she says is only available at the al-Rusafa institute.

"It's my future. I don't care what I have to do [to continue studying]," she said.

Some young women have found alternative housing. Saja Hussein, 23, from the southern town of al-Kut, now lives with three other students in an apartment she rents from relatives in the suburb of New Baghdad, a 10-kilometre commute from Baghdad University.

Her male relatives take turns guarding the young women in their apartment, but New Baghdad's high crime rates mean that they don't dare leave their home after dark.

Lack of housing led the father of Jinan Ali, 29, to pull her out of her engineering studies at Anbar University in western Iraq, nearly 300 km away from her home in the southern Iraqi province of Babylon.

Her father plans to transfer her to Baghdad University, but she'll have to commute from Babylon - four hours a day, in crowded public transport. "It is a problem to me as a girl, because I cannot go on the streets alone with so many boys about," she said.

Haifaa Mohammadi's father and brothers, meanwhile, must leave the corner store they run in the town of Hilla, near Babylon, to transport her to school each day. "We suffer from the long drive, from the dangers of the trip," she said.

They frequently pass road wrecks, the victims of the winter rains which take a high toll on motorists traveling along Iraq's slippery, poorly paved highways.

Meanwhile, education officials say that they lack the resources to rebuild the student homes.

Like most public buildings in the country, Iraq's dormitories - abandoned by students who fled home in the early days of the war - were looted in the wave of chaos that followed the collapse of the old regime.

"After United States forces entered the city, I saw citizens break down the doors and take all the furniture. Then they set [the dorms] on fire," said Hussein Ali, who lives next door to Baghdad University.

If the looting were not bad enough, some useable dormitories - for example, those for students at downtown Baghdad's Petroleum Institute - have been taken over by troops of the US-led coalition.

Others have been occupied by squatters, says Abdurrahman Hamid al-Husseini, head of supervision and evaluation for the ministry of higher education. The ministry has won eviction orders, but the squatters have defied orders to vacate the premises.

Husseini says he has appealed to the Governing Council for help - either in making sure that eviction orders are obeyed, obtaining funds to restore looted dorms or converting empty youth centres and military buildings.

Husseini hopes that pledges of 33 billion US dollars pledged for rebuilding Iraq at the October donors' conference in Madrid means that money will soon be available. "The money should allow us to solve a problem of the highest priority, a problem which affects women more than men," he said.

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