

Iraq's Outcasts

Author: [Amar Hasan](#)

Many orphans and other poor children are forced into begging and prostitution.

When US forces fought their way into Baghdad two months ago, they "liberated" the al-Rah'ma Orphanage - Mercy Orphanage - thinking the building was a torture centre and its inmates victims of Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath party.

The orphanage was home to more than 200 children. Most ran away when the institution's gates were blasted open and today only a few dozen remain. They are cared for by a French charity, Enfants du Monde, and Islamic activists who in many parts of Baghdad are filling the security and administrative vacuums that the US occupation forces have permitted to develop in post-Saddam Iraq.

Life in the Mercy Orphanage was hard. Children who lived there say it was "an orphanage without mercy": they were kept under very close wraps and punished if undisciplined. Today these children have joined the growing army of street children who scrape and beg for a living in a city that is flooded with weapons but has no government to impose law and order and deliver social services.

Since the old regime fell, and its ban on begging fell with it, children have flocked to Baghdad from all over Iraq - often in the mistaken belief that the Iraqi capital is a paradise. With the economy at a virtual standstill and government salaries unpaid, some children go out to beg in order to find food for their families. Flocks of children besiege the big hotels where foreign journalists and aid workers stay, often fighting amongst themselves to protect their little patch of turf.

But in a city where few have money, it is almost impossible to make a living on the street and most of the children are barefoot, ragged and often appear to be starving.

"I don't want money," said Arkan, a shy 13-year-old. "I just want food. I never eat."

Street life can also be dangerous. Fifteen-year-old Ali Fares Mohammed was orphaned when he was only 13 and "gave himself up" to the government. He was sent to the Mercy Orphanage, where he spent two years. Since Baghdad fell, he said, "I'm scared."

Children are not immune to the common crime that has afflicted Baghdad since government collapsed and weapons abandoned by the Iraqi army found their way into civilian hands all over the city. Ahmed Abdel Sada, 14, sustained an injury to his head when he was attacked on the street he had made home. A friend said he had been trying to prevent a group of drunks raping a 15-year-old street girl.

Alone and defenceless, some street children are being "befriended" by older youths who say they will protect them - but who instead exploit them, both financially and sexually.

In one area of Baghdad, street children are being controlled by a group of young men, most of them in their 20s, who were released from Baghdad's Abu Ghraib prison last October. They were let free under an amnesty Saddam Hussein offered to all common criminals as it became clear that the United States planned to topple his regime. This gang sends the children out begging and then takes their money, saying they will "keep it safe". Some children run away - only to be beaten up if, as inevitably happens, they attempt to return to their former haunts and friends.

To forget their misery, an increasing number of children are seeking relief by taking drugs or sniffing glue. Fahtin, a 13-year-old girl from Kirkuk, always carries a bottle of pills with her. She says they are for treating flu, but her story suggests they may have another use.

"I came to Baghdad with my sister," she said. "There are no jobs in Baghdad and so we worked as prostitutes. My sister took all the money and never gave me anything. So I left her and ran away again. . . . I met some guys after a while, and now I live with them in the street."

Amar Hasan Arebee is studying pharmacology at Baghdad University and contributing to The Iraqi Witness, a weekly newspaper in Baghdad produced by students.

Location: [Iraqi Kurdistan](#)
[Iraq](#)

Focus: [Iraq](#)

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/iraqs-outcasts>