**Government of Iraq, UNITAD conclude first Sinjar mass grave exhumation in Kojo village**

**Baghdad, Iraq, 21.03.19**

UNITAD (United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da’esh/ISIL) announced this morning the completion of the first exhumation of a Yazidi mass grave in the Sinjar region, in the village of Kojo. UNITAD reports that the victims’ remains and associated evidence have safely arrived at the Medico-Legal Directorate in Baghdad.

The exhumation was conducted by the Mass Graves Directorate within the Martyrs’ Foundation, the Medico-Legal Directorate under the Iraqi Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Martyrs and Anfal of the Kurdistan Regional Government, guided and supported by UNITAD’s team of forensic and legal experts.

The exhumation process was preceded by a memorial ceremony in Kojo, attended by H.E. Dr Mahdi Al-Alaq, the Secretary-General of the Council of Ministers, alongside other senior level government representatives. Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Nadia Murad, herself a survivor of the Da’esh massacre and mass abductions at Kojo, and a Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations, also spoke, calling for stability in the Sinjar region.

Following the memorial service, His Holiness Baba Sheikh Khurto Hajji Ismail and senior clergy led the several hundred attendees, many themselves survivors of Da’esh crimes and relatives of those killed or abducted, in a religious ceremony at the grave site, which concluded with the release of white doves, the universal symbol of peace.

In line with UNITAD’s mandate to support the wellbeing of those affected by these crimes, a psychosocial support unit was made available to grieving attendees.

Having first confirmed the absence of incendiary or explosive devices at the site with the support of MAG International, the investigation team excavated the site, successfully exposing the remains of up to 30 individuals. The precise number will be confirmed following forensic analysis at the Medico-Legal Directorate in Baghdad.

Concluding the five-day exhumation process, the remains were extracted from the site and stored in a specially adapted secure vehicle for transportation to Baghdad.

UNITAD Special Adviser and Head of the Investigative Team Karim A. A. Khan QC stated:

“UNITAD extends its sincere gratitude to the crime scene investigation and forensic teams of the Government of Iraq. Their work during the exhumation process, guided by UNITAD specialists, was completed in line with international best practices, and their commitment to this work, has been exemplary.”
The next phase of the investigation is the forensic analysis of all evidence collected at Kojo, with a view to advancing UNITAD investigations of Da’esh crimes. As an important part of this process, UNITAD hopes that the bodies and remains recovered may be identified and then returned to their surviving family members for burial in accordance with their wishes and their cultural or religious beliefs.

Special Adviser Khan, addressing the local community, stated:

“You have already waited a long time. And I’m sorry to say you will have to wait longer. Because the road to real justice is a long one.

“On the occasion of Newroz, Kurdish New Year, we look ahead to the coming twelve months and pledge that independent investigations required will continue, so that the demands of justice and the requirement of accountability in fair trials can be achieved. At all times, UNITAD will ensure that the views and concerns of the survivors and families of victims, will be at the centre of our work so that they, the people of Iraq and the international community, may realise accountability for the heinous crimes they have endured, which may amount to genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.”

UNITAD will return to Sinjar region to support ongoing investigations into Da’esh crimes before the commencement of Ramadan.

**Editor’s Note:**

UNITAD was established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2379 (2017) to support domestic efforts in holding ISIL members accountable for crimes against humanity, war crimes and genocide, through the collection, preservation and storage of evidence in Iraq in line with international standards. The Council further mandated the Special Adviser and Head of the Investigative Team to promote throughout the world, accountability for acts that may amount to war crimes, crimes against humanity or genocide committed by ISIL (Da’esh).