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SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE OF THE UNITED NATIONS SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR IRAQ

الممثل الخاص للأمين العام للأمم المتحدة في العراق

Briefing to the Security Council by Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert

12 May 2020

Mister President,

Distinguished members of the Security Council,

I think, one can hardly overstate the magnitude of the challenges facing Iraq at this moment: deep existing political, social, economic, and security crises have now been compounded by the global COVID-19 pandemic and a dramatic drop in oil prices.

As the Iraqi health system was already near breaking point before the coronavirus outbreak, priority number one was (and remains) to prevent a rapid spread of the virus.

And within this context, I wish to reaffirm our support to the Iraqi authorities, and to reiterate that no amount of government response can succeed without the active involvement of the entire population.



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Mister President,

I recently joined my voice to those of my fellow Special Representatives in the Middle East in echoing the Secretary-General's call for a global ceasefire. A ceasefire in the broadest sense: militarily but also politically. Surely at this time of acute crises, partisanship and narrow interests must yield to the greater national cause and the good of the Iraqi people.

Unfortunately, as Iraq's economic situation worsens daily, we witnessed continued political infighting and saw three Prime Ministers-designate in just 10 weeks.

But at long last: a new government was formed last week. The Council of Representatives confirmed Mustafa al-Kadhimi as the new Prime Minister, approved his government programme as well as 15 out of 22 ministers. A long-overdue but very welcome development. Swift completion of the remaining vacant positions, including the appointment of more women and minority representatives, is now necessary.



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The new Prime Minister's stated priorities include:

- addressing the COVID-19 health crisis,
- developing and reforming the security sector,
- limiting the control of arms to the State,
- strengthening the economy,
- fighting corruption,
- advancing accountability and justice,
- holding a national dialogue,
- balancing external relations,
- safeguarding Iraqi sovereignty,
- promoting the return of IDPs to their places of origin,
- and working towards the conduct of early elections.

These worthy aspirations must be turned into action urgently. And let me emphasize: Iraq does not have the luxury of time, nor can it afford destructive petty politics.

While the new government entered office just a few days ago, its first decisions are promising, I have to say. But one does not need a crystal ball to understand that the road ahead will be fraught with many complex challenges. And as I have stated



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and shared with the Council many times: Iraq's challenges did not arise overnight. Moreover, they are larger than any single government.

It is therefore most important to manage public expectations. There will be no sudden miracles. Equally important is a broad-based response. A response involving the entire political class and all communities, acting with a clear sense of unity and urgency, focussed on building domestic strength, prioritizing the national interest.

Mister President,

The COVID-19 pandemic forced the streets to calm down, but with public trust at an all-time low, the Iraqi people, calling for a more prosperous and inclusive Iraq, will not just let go.

Iraq is facing a long list of urgent unfinished domestic business, and to regain public trust, the government must prove itself able to carry out such essential functions as law and order and public service delivery.



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On the issue of early elections: although they are a top priority for many, Parliament has not yet completed its work on the electoral framework - in particular, the contentious issues of constituency delineation and seat apportionment.

I also wish to reiterate the pressing need for accountability and justice for the many, many deaths and injuries of innocent protesters.

Allow me to say that we are encouraged by the early actions taken by the new Prime Minister which demonstrate his eagerness to move these important files forward.

Mister President,

The economy, the current economic situation has, once again, laid bare Iraq's vulnerability due to the grave lack of economic diversification.



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Iraq's monthly oil revenues dropped from 6 to 1.4 billion USD between February and April. And at a time when the global financial system is being drained from all sides, it will be harder than ever to access international funds.

On top of this, necessary curfews (necessary to contain the COVID-19 pandemic), they have brought commercial activity to a near standstill, imperilling the already problematic livelihoods of many Iraqis who rely on daily earnings to feed themselves and their families.

The need to broaden Iraq's revenue base could not be more apparent. Time and again, it has been made clear that Iraq should:

- Reduce its oil dependency,
- Repair and upgrade critical infrastructure.
- Tackle its ballooning, inefficient public service,
- Build viable and responsive state institutions,
- Combat patronage and clientelism,
- Fight corruption,
- And incentivize the domestic private sector while attracting foreign investment.



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Iraq clearly and repeatedly has been encouraged to build a healthy environment that is conducive to broad-based, fairly distributed growth and employment generation, not in isolation, but with the assistance of the World Bank, the IMF, the United Nations and other partners. But without adequate follow-up, the country will sadly remain ill-prepared to manage these acute shocks.

The economy is projected to contract by 9.7 percent in 2020, with poverty rates increasing to approximately 40%. Considerable losses in labour income are foreseen, as well as a decrease in economic opportunities.

Now, it is essential to restate that corruption is perhaps the greatest source of dysfunction in Iraq. It works against the everyday Iraqi woman and man, and it also puts off donors and potential investors who are increasingly fed up with fighting “the system” for a chance to help the country.

Mister President, turning to security: domestic, regional and international security developments continue to take their toll on the country.



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Inflammatory rhetoric, and a pattern of attacks and counterattacks on Iraqi soil, are obviously unproductive and most regrettable. Although these, fortunately, appeared to have tapered off in recent weeks, they do remain a constant threat to the stability of the country.

And I can only emphasize: the way armed elements, armed entities, with differing ties to the state, choose to act in this moment, will determine how Iraqis, and indeed many others, will perceive them. Once again: Iraq cannot afford to be used as a theatre for different power competitions and/or proxy conflicts.

Also critical is the prevention of any attempted resurgence of violent extremism. ISIL must not be given room to step up its activities. And we all know that the best form of counter-terrorism is for the government to provide for its citizens, addressing the root causes that continue to allow groups like ISIL to exist.

I am now turning, Mr. President, to humanitarian concerns:

We cautiously welcome ongoing efforts to improve access authorization for humanitarian workers, especially non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Iraq who provide life-saving services.



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Humanitarian partners need access letters to pass through the multiple security checkpoints in their areas of operation. Unfortunately, so far, many access requests remain unapproved.

Currently, access is even more constrained due to COVID-19-related movement restrictions, adding another layer of complexity.

A practical, long-term solution is urgently required, with an empowered focal point to regularly engage with humanitarian partners on access matters. I sincerely hope that Iraqi authorities will now act without any further delay.

Mr. President, with regards to Baghdad-Erbil relations, we still cannot point to a final, fully agreed and implemented deal on such critical issues as the federal budget as well as oil and revenue sharing.

On the contrary, I have to say, we recently witnessed movement in the opposite direction, as the previous federal government announced it would halt payments to the Kurdistan Region, affecting civil servant salaries. Now, regardless of what one thinks of this decision, the timing was most inopportune.



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Negotiations between Baghdad and Erbil are ongoing. And I can only emphasize that a long-term sustainable approach is urgently needed. And of course, for any sustainable solution, it takes two to tango.

On Sinjar: many promises, but so far: no signatures - let alone implementation, with the Yezidis notably paying the price.

In the Kurdistan region as elsewhere in Iraq: transparency, freedom of expression, fundamental reforms, fighting corruption are of critical importance, as is political unity. Recent internal tensions do not serve the interest of the Kurdish people, far from it.

Turning to the issue of missing Kuwaiti, third-country nationals and missing Kuwaiti property, including the national archives:

Notwithstanding significant advances of late, *most recently the discovery of human remains in a third grave in Samawah site in January*, COVID-19 has also impacted



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this file. The meeting of the Technical Sub-Committee planned for 20 April - as well as other activities - had to be postponed.

Kuwaiti authorities were nevertheless able to carry out excavations on burial sites in Kuwait, as planned during the last Technical Subcommittee in February.

I would like to encourage all members of the Tripartite committee to follow this example, working together to identify other innovative ways to overcome current constraints and adapt to the new reality.

Mr. President, in closing, I would like to return to the courageous conviction expressed by countless Iraqis in recent months. Their hopes and demands remain burning issues and I very much hope they will guide the new government.

I sincerely hope that no party, person or entity will be allowed to hijack the legitimate demands of the Iraqi people.

And with this in mind, I wish to salute Grand Ayatollah Sistani, whose calm wisdom serves as an example to us all.



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I remain convinced that a more just, prosperous and resilient Iraq can emerge from the current compounded crises. But for that to happen, political will is fundamental.

As I said last time: Iraq must move away from endless crisis management towards a more productive approach, building resilience at both the state and societal level. Short-term political and private calculations do not serve Iraq's long-term interests. On the contrary.

And yes, the challenges are many, but so are the opportunities. And I would like to reaffirm the continued support of the United Nations, our support to the people of Iraq and to Iraq's new government.