

Iraq: Unemployment Too Becomes an Epidemic

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BAQUBA, Feb 21 (IPS) – For a few, salaries have soared. For the rest, unemployment has

Many Iraqi workers enjoyed huge salary increases following the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003. But unemployment rose more sharply under policies introduced by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA).

CPA head L. Paul Bremer decommissioned the Iraqi military, leading to overnight unemployment for hundreds of thousands of military personnel. And that was not all. The ministries of culture and information also saw drastic layoffs, some through privatisation.

Almost a year into the occupation, defence ministry employees, many of them ex-military, started to receive monthly payments of about 100 dollars as “donation of emergency”.

“This payment does not meet 10 percent of the monthly needs of many families,” ex-soldier in the previous Iraq army Muhsin Aboud told IPS in Baquba, 40 km northeast of Baghdad. “It’s unfair to leave us without jobs.”

Still, the unemployed are lucky. Many employees of the abolished offices were accused of being terrorists, and imprisoned.

“One day, a group of American soldiers stormed into my house while I and my family were sleeping,” Abd al-Joburi, an officer in Iraq’s former military told IPS. “They tied my hands and put a plastic bag on my head and forced me to lie with my face down. It was because I’m an ex-officer, and Sunni.”

Al-Joburi was imprisoned for nine months after the raid that took place in March of last year. “Nobody asked whether my family have any salary or income. Since I was released, I have not had a job.”

Now, the sectarian practices of politicians and the government are adding to unemployment for whole sections of people, particularly Sunni Muslims.

“I applied for a job in the directorate-general of police of Diyala province four times,” a former intelligence officer told IPS. “All of my applications were rejected. All the Shia ex-officers’ applications were accepted, regardless of their experience and specialisation. Now they are officers in the police and army.”

The ex-officer added, “I am now working as a grocer.”

Violence has made unemployment even worse; it has led large numbers of people to quit

the jobs they had. Most people in Baquba are today either forced to stay at home, or to leave the city, and if they can, the country.

"I closed my restaurant," said a local businessman in Baquba. "Two militants came and killed the owner of the shop next to my restaurant. We had no choice."

"The owners of prominent shops, restaurants, car shops, rich people, heads of the offices, owners of buildings, traders, businessmen...all of them became targets of the militants," said a resident, who like many others, did not wish to give his name. "As a result, all of them quit. Just think how many people could be employed in all these fields."

Meanwhile, reconstruction and rehabilitation projects that could have employed some people have come to a standstill.

"I dismissed more than 50 employees in my company because of the stoppage of work," a manager with the Dolphin company for general contractors told IPS. "Work has stopped for more than two years."

The owner of a plastic pipes factory said threats forced him to close his factory. "I received a message asking me to pay 50,000 dollars, or I would be killed."

Unemployment in Iraq has been between 60-70 percent over the last two years, according to the government in Baghdad. This is nearly twice what it was in the period of the sanctions in the 1990s.

Most worrying is what is happening in the food business. The Diyala Food Company, the largest in the province, closed last year.

"A group of militants came to kidnap the owner's son," former employee Aziz Khamis told IPS. "The son and two of his bodyguards were killed, and the father was wounded. This big company has closed its doors, and thousands of employees are now stuck at home."

The reasons for losing jobs are endless. "I was fired for being a member of the Ba'ath party," Nasir Uwayid told IPS. "After a period of occupation, low ranking members were allowed to get their jobs again, but heads of offices who were members of the party were forced to retire or leave the city."

And sectarian displacement has brought its own unemployment. Tens of thousands of people have left their homes and jobs in Baquba because of the sectarian violence. Many have tried to start again in other cities, but few have been successful.

In 2002 Baquba had a population estimated at 280,000; in 2003, Diyala province had a population of roughly 1.2 million. Baquba is roughly 70 percent Sunni, while Diyala province is about 90 percent Sunni.

Ahmed, our correspondent in Iraq's Diyala province, works in close collaboration with Dahr Jamail, our U.S.-based specialist writer on Iraq who travels extensively in the region.

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