



## Safe Water Shortage Threatens Iraq's Children

### *Resumption of Water Tankering Services Critical*

**AMMAN, 22 March 2007** - United Nations (UN) Agencies working in Iraq warned that a chronic shortage of safe drinking water is threatening to push up diarrhoea rates, particularly in children. Diarrhoea is already the second highest single cause of child illness and death in Iraq.

Four years after the 2003 war, millions of Iraqi children still find that safe water is no easier to access. Efforts to repair Iraq's damaged water networks have been hampered by threats and violence towards technicians including engineers, ongoing electricity shortages, attacks on infrastructure and engineering works and under-investment in the water sector.

The majority of Iraqi families rely on municipal water supplies piped directly into their homes. But many of these systems are not functioning. Pipes are often cracked, corroded and leaking, causing water wastage and allowing sewage to seep in. This situation is turning some water networks into conduits for dangerous waterborne diseases.

"Iraq's young children are particularly vulnerable to diarrhoea, which can easily kill or lead to severe malnutrition and stunted growth," said Roger Wright, UNICEF Representative for Iraq. "Latest reports suggest we are already seeing an increase in diarrhoea cases, even before the usual onset of the "diarrhoea season" in June. It is particularly concerning that water tankering services have had to be halted in Baghdad this month due to lack of funds."

Dr. Tekeste Tekie, Officer in Charge of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Programme in Iraq, said that protecting water supplies is one of the most critical issues in Iraq today. FAO is the UN Agency coordinating global recognition of today's World Water Day 2007, which this year focuses on coping with water scarcity. "Every drop of safe drinking water reaching Iraqi families is a precious resource," he said.

Under the circumstances, Iraq has done extremely well to keep outbreaks of waterborne diseases, particularly cholera, largely at bay so far. But the UN stressed that this laudable achievement is at risk unless more reliable sources of safe water reach families as soon as possible, including a resumption of water tankering services in the capital.

Water tankering is a costly but often essential short-term solution to overcome safe water shortages in communities. It is a particularly important lifeline for the many displaced families and the communities hosting them. Capacity to deliver UNICEF-supported water tankering services to tens of thousands of people per day in Baghdad has come to a halt due to funding shortages. The Government of Iraq has acknowledged that local infrastructure would not be able to meet equivalent needs for at least another 18 months.

Iraq is also still relying on UN support to provide essential water treatment chemicals: UNICEF provided 1650 tonnes of chlorine to Iraq in 2006 and supplied nearly all Iraq's water treatment chemicals between 2003 and 2005 to support efforts of the Ministry of Municipalities and Public Works. Administrative bottlenecks are apparently preventing Iraq from channeling its own largely unspent resources to inputs such as these.

"Iraq's government must increase its great efforts to provide sustainable water and environmental sanitation services for its population," said Dr. Naeema Al Gasser, World Health Organization (WHO) Representative in Iraq. "While it does so, the support of UN

partners and the global community will continue to be an essential interim solution.” She added that the government’s establishment of a well-equipped water quality control laboratory network in Iraq, with support from WHO and UNICEF, had reduced the risk of waterborne diseases. No cholera cases were reported last year and the incidence of typhoid also decreased.

The UN family is providing ongoing water and sanitation support to communities in need – helping to rebuild infrastructure and ensure water quality, providing water and hygiene kits for families in crisis, tankering water to vulnerable groups, supplying water treatment chemicals and building national capacity to manage and monitor water and sanitation networks. UNICEF is also pre-positioning millions of sachets of Oral Rehydration Salts to prepare for possible diarrhoea outbreaks, while WHO is helping the government to step up disease surveillance in the country.

Other UN Agencies supporting critical water and sanitation projects in Iraq include the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which is supporting the development of a national vision for water management and the setting up of a National Water Council, and the United Nations Office of Project Services (UNOPS), which helped over 2.5 million people to access safe drinking water between 2005-2007 through rehabilitation of water treatment plants as well as 11 water distribution networks countrywide. Efforts are also underway to help Iraq co-operate with its neighbours to manage water consumption from the Tigris and Euphrates more effectively, in a project led by UNESCO.

The need for this assistance is expected to rise this year in proportion to Iraq’s growing humanitarian crisis, with over 712,000 people displaced within the country since the bombing of the Samarra Al-Askari Shrine in February 2006. The UN estimates that children and women account for approximately 70% of Iraq’s displaced people.

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