



On **Jan. 31, 2009**, Iraqis from all ethnic groups freely expressed their choices in the provincial elections, marking another step forward on the road to democratic development. **Photos above show Iraqi people participating in the election process.**

Dear Readers:

The Government of Iraq has made tremendous strides in furthering democracy in this country. We are delighted to have supported the Government of Iraq, its Council of Representatives and the Independent High Electoral Commission as they took the lead in preparing for and administering the elections for governorate councils.

Now we look forward to assisting the new councils and the government as they put together an ambitious new legal framework, devolving more powers to the provinces and, for the first time ever, electing local councils later this year.

Christopher D. Crowley
USAID/Iraq Mission Director

Voter Education Helps Iraqis Make Informed Choices

As polling day neared in 14 of the 18 provinces, Iraqis turned out in huge numbers to gain an understanding of how the election process works and how to make their vote count in the January 31 provincial elections.

Unlike the previous elections that saw mass boycotting, this election involved the participation of all ethnic groups. As a result, voters faced an overwhelming number of candidates (14,000) with a range of goals.

USAID through an agreement with the International Federation of Election Systems (IFES) provided assistance to the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) to help the Government of Iraq conduct credible and legitimate elections.

The long-term pact between USAID and IFES is budgeted at \$102 million. This assistance takes into account the evolving needs of an election operation that is now led and managed by Iraqis with additional support from the United Nations, international donors and others working with IHEC and civil society groups. The Government

of Iraq provided a substantial amount of funding to the IHEC.

Voter education was offered by civil society and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that were trained under USAID's Iraq Rapid Assistance Program (IRAP).

While 290,000 Iraqis attended activities led by NGOs, an estimated 4 million Iraqis received information from print and broadcast media. In sum, the media and NGOs reached out to one-third of the 14 million eligible voters.

The United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) and the U.S. Department of State (DOS) also provided grants to civil society organizations to conduct significant voter education efforts.

Voter education involved informing Iraqis about what their ballot should look like, the technical process of marking the ballot, the importance of being a part of the process, and where their polling place is located. USAID's elections program provided materials

generated by IHEC for distribution to voters.

Election workers also placed radio and television spots and distributed educational literature in mosques, shops, and restaurants. Town hall meetings and conferences were organized to encourage participation in the polls.

Special efforts were made to provide direct education and accessibility measures for women and people with disabilities. In particular, women appeared to be energized by the opportunity to exercise their right to vote, even in the conservative rural areas.

Kent Larson, USAID director for the Office of PRTs, said: "For the first time since 2003, Iraqis had a chance to vote for individuals and not just for parties. The Iraqis saw the need to educate the voters on the election process and mobilized communities to generate information on how to vote.

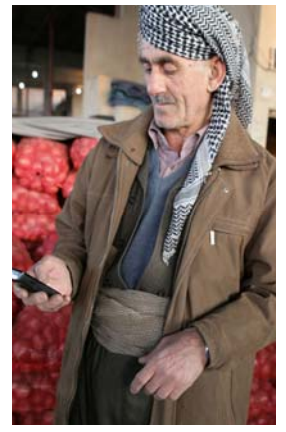
This was an excellent example of how Iraqis are leading and helping other Iraqis." ■

Ahead of the elections, Iraqis attended voter education workshops supported by USAID to gain an understanding of how the election process works and how to make their vote count.





With the support of USAID, Anka is offering a service that reports crop prices to farmers on cell phones, helping them earn more at market. Anka's Manager Amal Shekhani talks to a subscriber.



Market Data by Mobile Phone Helps Farmers Sell Crops

In mid-January, a farmer stood in his storage shed in Erbil, a town in the northern Kurdistan region, wondering at what price he should sell potatoes. So he flipped open his cell phone. The phone's software gave him the going price for potatoes in local markets, helping him decide where to take his produce to get the best price.

Specialized information services, like the one that the non-governmental organization Anka is providing to Iraqi farmers, is adding momentum to agriculture development.

USAID's *Inma* Agribusiness program provided \$836,000 grant to Anka to set up the company in October 2008. The idea was to bring the electronic marketplace to farmers in the farthest corners and boost rural incomes.

Amal Shekhani, data manager for Anka, said: "In the past, very few Iraqi farmers were able to participate in commercial markets due to a lack of market information and understanding

of how the market operates. This has hurt the farmers to effectively plan and market their produce."

Anka dispatches field workers across the 18 provincial capitals daily to collect information on the going price for animal products and vegetables. The data is then fed into an electronic distribution system that transmits text messages directly to the cell phones of subscribers—connecting them with local market intelligence.

Michael Maxey, USAID agriculture advisor, said: "Market information is critical for farmers to make timely production and marketing decisions. As this program expands it can have a significant impact on Iraqi farmers' ability to make more money on their crops and increase their incomes."

Anka has doubled the number of subscribers who have signed up for the service since its inception. Today there are about 580 subscribers—a tiny portion of Iraq's seven million

farm population, but it proves that farmers are eager for information. The subscribers include commercial farmers, traders, processors, and marketers. Each pays about \$180 a year for the text-message service, which is forwarded to small farmers for free. The service also is offered for free on Anka's Web site and radio.

Early data show that subscribers are benefiting from Anka's service, transforming the way they do business. "In Samarra, farmers receiving the text messages realized they needed to diverge from producing wheat and barley to a more profitable business of growing cucumbers and tomatoes," said Amal.

With access to market prices, the farmers are equipped with the relevant knowledge and have better bargaining power. *Inma* Chief of Party Ross Wherry said, "The Anka service is a great example of how information can be used to improve economic inefficiencies and help alleviate poverty."

Drawn to Disasters, North Dakota Native Makes a Difference



Tamra Halmrast-Sanchez

“When the call came for volunteers, I knew I had to respond,” said Tamra Halmrast-Sanchez, reflecting on her decision to sign up for a six-month tour with USAID/Iraq in May 2008.

By training and instinct, Tami is a disaster management expert. She has devoted a major part of her 22-year career to bringing order amid chaos.

While working with the U.S. Office of Foreign Disaster and Assistance (OFDA), Tami handled global crises from famines, to hurricanes, to earthquakes, to floods. She hopped from continent to continent, reaching out to displaced civilians, erecting makeshift shelters for survivors. Her working life has been a whirlwind of turbulent events.

In My Father’s Shadow

Growing up, Tami idolized her father (the late Rep. Gerald Halmrast). For all his fine work as a history teacher, his running of high school football and wrestling programs, encouragement of students and civic role as a lawmaker, it was his sense of service that most distinguished him.

“My father instilled in me the importance of service to one’s country. And I chose to come to Iraq because I know this is the right thing to do,” said Tami in a soft, unhurried voice.

She is among a handful of women operating out of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs)—comprising civilian and military members—scattered across Iraq.

Over the past several months, Tami has lived at PRTs and embedded PRTs in the forward operating base (FOB) Loyalty, in New Baghdad, and Hillah, just south of the capital. She has toiled with her colleagues from the State Department and the U.S. military to rebuild hospitals, schools, clinics, and businesses after decades of neglect under Saddam Hussein’s regime.

Through USAID support, and those of the PRT team, Tami has put in place new measures to strengthen the management skills of city and governorate administrators to improve the delivery of water, sewer, electricity, and trash collection and disposal.

She has traveled to rough neighborhoods in Karada, Rusafa and 9 Nissan Districts to meet with Iraqi community action committees to check on the progress of USAID projects. Recently, she volunteered to work in one of the toughest neighborhoods, and is now covering Sadr City and other areas of Northeast Baghdad.

“On one hand it is exhilarating to be working with dedicated people on trying to improve the living conditions in Baghdad but on the other hand it can be challenging because they are learning how to take care of the problems themselves, instead of having the central government do everything for them, as it was in the past,” said Tami.

Helping Iraqis With New Skills

Tami is most proud of the projects that focus on equipping widows with new skills and alternate livelihoods.

Vocational training for women in sewing and tailoring, computer and mobile-phone maintenance and cosmetology is the start of a solid and sustainable future, she observed. Also, small loans and grants offered through USAID’s microfinance programs help Iraqis to kick-start businesses, something they could never do before.

Since 2003, USAID has invested more than \$6 billion on programs designed to stabilize communities; foster economic and agricultural growth; and build the capacity of the national, local, and provincial governments to respond to the needs of the Iraqis. ■



The American people through USAID have actively supported the interests of Iraqi women, providing them with the necessary skills to encourage their full participation in their country’s political, social, and economic future.