



Women's summit provides glimpses of challenges of life during war

By PAUL BURKHARDT

Associated Press Writer

625 words

27 March 2006

14:37

[Associated Press Newswires](#)

English

(c) 2006. The Associated Press. All Rights Reserved.

NEW YORK (AP) - One spoke of pregnant women afraid to leave hospitals in Iraq for fear of being killed. Another described how children do not invite friends to birthday parties because the streets in Iraq are so dangerous, no one would dare come.

The accounts of life in a country ravaged by violence came from Iraqi women on the first day of a two-day summit to raise awareness of the war's consequences and develop recommendations for peace.

"Merely to go out and buy bread is an adventure, a huge risk," Iraq's ambassador to the U.N., Samir Sumaidaie, said in his opening remarks. "You go out of the house and aren't sure if you're going to come back."

Organizers of the Iraqi-U.S. Women's Summit, which counts doctors, a Baghdad city council member and a female judge among the 25 visiting participants, said the challenges in a country that recently entered its fourth year of war could benefit from the perspective of women.

"Women have the ability to express the problem because, not only are we closer to the ground, we know the impact on children and families," said Dena Merriam of The **Global Peace Initiative of Women**, a leadership network that organized the summit. "It's in our blood, we're instinctive about it."

She added that organizers included more than 90 American women to discuss issues with the Iraqis because they "felt more that women would respond to their needs and take action."

A pre-summit meeting Sunday was intended to organize the range of issues brought on by the war, but focused on the impact on children.

"I'm afraid for my children and others and all the children of this country," said Dr. Rashad Zaydan, who mentioned Iraqi children being denied playgrounds and birthday parties because of the poor security.

Dr. Saieb Al-Gailani, one of a few males in the delegation, told of pregnant women sleeping in hospitals because they cannot rely on the security of the police escort that is supposed to transport them during curfew hours.

Ambassador Sumaidaie agreed with others that the United Nations needs a stronger presence in Iraq to help children and families. The world body has gradually returned about 120 staff members to Iraq since all employees were pulled out following an August 2003 bombing on U.N. headquarters in Baghdad that killed 22 people.

"Gradually they are coming out of their shell, but not fast enough for our needs," the ambassador said, adding that the U.N. needed to be closer "to liaison with the government administration that are running these programs."

Topics on the agenda of the conference at the Millennium Hotel in New York include religious division, the situation of legal and political rights for women, as well as access to education and health care.

Judge Zakia Hakki told of the plight of orphans largely left abandoned in a Baghdad orphanage after the U.S.-led invasion began in March 2003. She was concerned that those children, and others whose parents have been killed, could become criminals or recruits for the insurgency.

"They will be gangsters who graduated from Baghdad streets with hate in their hearts," Hakki said.

American participants who were scheduled to speak included Diana Taylor, superintendent of banks for New York State, and former UNICEF Executive Director Carol Bellamy.

"We're at a stage where a lot of people don't really know, do we go or do we stay," Merriam said. "They feel the Iraqis can take more control, but they need the support to do it," she said of the women.