

Comment: Vic High grad still has hope for Iraq's future

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NOVEMBER 9, 2013 02:50 PM

“Give up your hope.” This is what I was told a mere two days after touching down in Iraq. Not that I should stop trying, but if I wished to save myself a lot of frustration, I should realize the ultimate futility of any effort sooner rather than later.

It was an early caution to hold my development aspirations in check.

It was not as if my idealism was in overdrive. On the flight over from Jordan, I finished reading the 80-page investigative report on my former UN supervisor, who had just been indicted for corruption, caught red-handed in a kickback scheme. I hope he goes to jail.

In history class, I learned Iraq is the cradle of ancient civilization: Babylon, Mesopotamia, the Tigris and Euphrates; the country is an archeologist's dream. My first encounter with Iraq was in 2003 when I marched on Parliament Hill in Ottawa to protest against a war I did not believe in.

I was going into Iraq now not as a soldier of war, but as a soldier of development.

I am on a European Union-funded assignment to help rebuild Iraqi government institutions since the fall of Saddam Hussein, specifically linking Iraqi returnees and internally displaced people to donor-funded training programs and employment in the private sector.

I like to think I've worked in some challenging regions of the world, but nothing prepared me for Iraq. On the first day of our technical training with Iraqi government officials, four suicide bombs exploded across the country, the closest about 60 kilometres from our compound.

As I fell asleep that night, I thought about my fellow British Columbian, Christopher Klein-Beekman, who was about the same age as me when he began work with UNICEF in Baghdad in 2003. He died here in one of the UN's worst incidents of terrorism.

Ten years later and on the surface, things seem worse than ever: an ongoing civil war, religious persecution, targeted assassinations and kidnappings, checkpoints and metal detectors everywhere. Even on the economic front, the news is bad: high unemployment, rampant corruption and skilled workers leaving the country in droves.

One of my Baghdad-based colleagues, working deep inside the international zone, recounts a story where she heard the scream of an alarm. Staff in Baghdad are trained to know that alarms carry different sounds depending on the category of severity. This particular alarm signalled “intruder on the premises” and so she furiously set about destroying confidential documents before retreating to the safety of her living quarters.

Fifteen minutes later, there was a loud knock on her door. Cowering under the bed, she innocently asked herself: “Would al-Qaeda knock?” When she finally opened the door, she was greeted by a large Fijian security officer who sheepishly acknowledged he pushed the wrong button on his first day.

On the last day of training in the city of Erbil, the Baghdad-based participants encouraged me to finish early so they could go shopping in the relatively peaceful Kurdish region of northern Iraq without the worry of avoiding crowded areas. I was certainly not going to deny them such a request.

Who cares about Iraq?

After one week on the ground, I discover the answer to that question lies deep inside the Iraqi men and women working to rebuild the country far from the spotlight. The reward for their efforts is about \$500 US a month and living in constant fear of whether tomorrow is a day they will get to experience.

Sadly, I cannot be sure I will see them at the next training session in a few months. But they are certainly the reason I will be returning soon.

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