



Speech
by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Iraq, Ad
Melkert, on the World Population Day
Baghdad, 11 July 2011

Today is a welcome occasion to highlight the new stage that Iraq has embarked upon after so many years of suffering and devastation. It is the stage of substituting the confrontation of the past for cooperation towards a joint future. It is the stage where quality of life will be the yardstick after long years when primarily survival mattered. It is the stage also of counting the people that make up Iraq: counting the numbers as much as counting the aspirations. In order to deliver services accordingly the one cannot be without the other.

On World Population Day it is important to be collectively aware that by October this year our planet's population will reach 7 billion. It could be a baby in Iraq, let's call her Soesan. However we may be faced with the conundrum that we will not know which number Soesan represents as part of the people of Iraq. For we know that there is an urgency to have the right numbers in place. It is highly doubtful whether the 29.6 million figure of 2007 is representative for the country or, in its breakdown, for the provinces. Yet the country needs to know and to act in order to know. Addressing the aspirations and needs of all Iraqi people, particularly the great majority of young people, in education, health care, housing, and employment requires basic knowledge of who is where. In order for a government to be able to effectively plan and provide for its citizens a census is a critical requirement. The information gathered enables civil authorities to understand the number of children who will have to be educated and how many schools will be needed to provide that education, how many women and men will need access to health care, or how many need housing. The entire social security portfolio relies on this information and without it governments simply are unable to adequately provide the people's needs.

UNFPA the United Nations Population Fund plays a leading role in the implementation of national census exercises world wide. UNFPA launched 2010 the Global Special Initiative on Census to ensure that no developing country fails to carry out a Population and Housing Census either due to financial constraints or lack of technical capacity. In the Arab region the focus is on strengthening the capacity of national regional institutions providing support to cooperation initiatives and networks on emerging population issues, knowledge sharing and support for policy-related research and planning.

In conjunction with UNAMI, UNFPA has been working in Iraq since the 2005. In the last 3 years UNFPA has implemented a US\$7 million budget to provide technical assistance to the Central Statistical Organization of Iraq to assist them in conducting a nationwide census. The census would provide the government with the information to help leaders and policy-makers to make informed decisions about the needs on the ground to reduce poverty and hunger, advance education, address health and gender equality issues and to effectively respond to humanitarian crises.

As a statistical operation, the census in Iraq will cover the whole population and all areas of the country. UNFPA as part of the UN Country Team is supporting this massive effort in Iraq. Unfortunately this process has stalled. And allow me here today to call on those representatives that have objected to the census that they should not consider a census an instrument of creating rights or entitlements. A census is a snapshot of reality, nothing less and nothing more. Issues of who belongs where or who should go where should be dealt with elsewhere, at the political negotiation table, and for that reason UNAMI has taken the initiative to invite all parties holding a stake in the future of the disputed territories to meet in the framework of the Standing Consultation Mechanism. Let the census take place and in parallel serious negotiations recognize the legitimate aspirations of all involved. UNAMI and UNFPA stand ready to provide assistance with this vital developmental endeavor and would urge decision makers to place this as a priority in the coming months.

As reflected in the Briefing Book presented to the Government in May, the United Nations joins the international community in its commitment to support Iraq in its efforts to address the challenges associated with population growth. Support comes through the numerous interventions in the essential social services sectors, aimed at strengthening institutions, planning capacities, and national dialogue on issues impacting the population at large. Policies, legislation and strategies to promote youth, gender, human rights and equality for all strata of Iraqi society are all means by which the Government of Iraq as well as civil society can be brought together in partnership and ownership of policies that will change not only the quality of life in Iraq, but also its recognition regionally and globally.

On the occasion of the World Population Day, I also would like to highlight the importance of reducing poverty and gender inequality, as these two issues are linked irrevocably with population growth. If properly addressed, it can result in the empowerment and participation of women and girls as agents of change, and as a consequence lead to the acceleration of human, social and economic growth as so much research shows, including in the UNDP Arab Human Development Reports. Soesan's future is Iraq's future. Youth critical importance in our programming; they constitute the largest driving force for changing our world and our future. We should ensure that every child is wanted and every child birth is safe. There are additional emerging population-related issues that have particular significance in Iraq, such as: displacement and migration, high urbanization and unbalanced geographic distribution of population, social integration of disadvantaged groups. Iraq needs the development of population policies and strategies that could explore the future trends and needs to ensure relevant planning for Iraq's future.

In closing, I wish to take this opportunity to once again commend the Government and people of Iraq for the continuing commitment to address these and other challenges on a daily basis. While the census may seem to be about data and statistics, working for the future of Iraq is about its people, about Soesan, her brothers and friends and new generations that will shape the new Iraq by their own drive and by the support that the decisions of today will provide them for the progress of tomorrow.

Thank you.

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