

Baghdad, 4 July 2011 - Decades of war and international sanctions have turned Iraq into one of the worst places for children in the Middle East and North Africa, with around 3.5 million living in poverty, 1.5 million under the age of five undernourished and 100 infants dying every day, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) warns.

The government can and should do more for children, said Sikander Khan, the outgoing UNICEF representative in Iraq, in a 30 June interview with the [UN Assistance Mission to Iraq](#).

"It is the responsibility of the government to support parents by investing in health and education and other basic needs for all children... Central government can also take a significant step by making additional investments in its most deprived children."

Iraq, he added, was unlikely to achieve most of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), six of which relate to children. "Unfortunately, despite all efforts, the attainment of most of these goals in Iraq by 2015 is distant," Khan said.

To achieve the MDGs, over 400,000 undernourished Iraqi children would have to receive adequate food, while nearly 700,000 would have to be enrolled in schools. Child mortality would also have to be reduced by 100,000, while about three million others need decent sanitation.

"These are not just statistics, behind every figure there is a child suffering in silence," Khan noted. "Achieving these goals is possible if Iraq manages to focus on the over four million most deprived children."

Still exploited

Iraqi children are also being exploited for purposes of war, where they are recruited by armed groups to fight, spy and scout, transport military supplies and equipment, videotape attacks for propaganda purposes, and plant explosives, according to a [report](#) covering the period from January 2008 to December 2010, by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

They are also used as suicide bombers because they arouse less suspicion and easily move through security checkpoints. The report notes that the precise number of children involved in all these activities is difficult to ascertain.

Children, it added, have also been used to lure security forces into ambushes. In August 2010, armed gunmen entered a house in Sadiyah, north of Baghdad, killed three, and sent two children, aged 10 and 12, to report the attack to the Iraqi security forces. When the Iraqi army and police arrived, explosives planted in the house killed eight soldiers and wounded four.

There are also reports that the (Shia) Mahdi Army has recruited and used children as soldiers since the beginning of the conflict. In 2008, some 376 children were killed and 1,594 wounded, while in 2009, 362 children were killed and 1,044 wounded. In 2010, at least 194 children were

killed and 232 wounded in the conflict, primarily in Baghdad, Diyala and Ninewa governorates.

Another threat to children identified by the report is explosive remnants of war, which claim lives and cause injury long after combat operations. An estimated 2.66 million cluster bomblets and 20 million landmines remain on Iraqi soil, contaminating 1,700sqkm. Many date from previous conflicts, such as the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s and the first Gulf War.