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Army Engineers Bring Joy to Iraqi Orphanage

By Mohammed Aliwi
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AN NASIRIYAH, Iraq -- An Nasiriyah orphanages recently received numerous packages of stuffed animals delivered to promote goodwill between the Iraqi children and the U.S. children and help in the rebuilding effort in Iraq.

"The children were extremely happy and did not believe that the stuffed animals were especially given for them," said Edmay Mayers, a program analyst with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

An Iraqi associate told Mayers that the headmistress of the orphanage welcomed the team that delivered the toys and appreciated what the Americans were doing for the Iraqis.

On her first tour to Iraq, Mayers visited one of the elementary schools and saw a beautiful interaction between the Americans and the children.

"The children of Iraq have stolen my heart. They are precious, young and innocent, and if only a child remembers that an American, British, South African or Australian person gave them something that made them feel special as a child, then we have done our part to help these little ones," Mayers said.

For her the children need these toys as much if not more than the school supplies. They need something to hold close to them and love and these stuffed animals have a lot of them for these children.

"I wanted to tell all that we are receiving 'tons and tons' of stuffed animals, toys, school supplies, clothes, etc. All are being given to the Iraqi children in the schools, orphanages, clinics and now the Basrah Children's Hospital. I am so thrilled that so many individuals have opened their hearts to the mission in Iraq," Mayers said.



Helping to sort and repack stuffed toys for Iraqi children are (left to right): R Army Lt. Col. Gene Griffin, Edmay Mayers, Jenny Hughes, Frank Sanchez, Arr Sgt. Jessica Harvey and Air Force 1st Lt. Richard Hallon.
[ARMY PHOTO BY MOHAMMED ALIWI]

According to Robin Parks, a project manager with GRS, all children love stuffed animals. They are brightly colored, soft and huggable, and can provide cheer and comfort to children.

"Everyone involved in this exchange wins but the person who is happiest is the lucky soldier or civilian who has the honor of actually giving that toy to a child. They probably feel like Santa Claus. One day the Iraqi children may remember that a stranger gave them a favorite gift," Parks said.

Mayers said that countless Iraqis are displaced and have been unable to restore their lives, but you still see the children smile in spite of all the bad living conditions that surround them.

"We put the toys, animals and candy into plastic baggies to give to the children. Sending the stuffed animals makes the people at home happy to be a part of this effort; receiving the animals makes the children here happy; and I am happy that I can help in some small way to make this exchange happen. Everyone wins," Parks said.

Mayers said that she Googled "free stuffed toys" and came up with a internet hit saying that someone was looking to give away "gently" used stuffed animals.

"I emailed Asha Dornfest (website manager) and she immediately posted it to her website and called it 'Spread the Word,'" she said.



*A young Iraqi boy holds two stuffed animals after a delivery to the Nasiriyah Orphanage in December.
[ARMY PHOTO]*



"It is now on approximately 50 or so websites. It also has been announced on a radio station in North Carolina, and an article in a newspaper in Troy, New York," Mayers said, "People have seen websites, newspapers, listened to the radio and opened their hearts to these beautiful children. I have also been in touch with a contact in the U.K (England) who has lots of toys to send us."

According to the Air Force 1st Lt. Richard L. Hallon, a pilot who serves as a companion to the children; it helps them when they are scared of the dark, and helps them to fall asleep.

"One day, I saw a four year-old Iraqi child looking up at me, smiling with wide-eyes, trying to communicate with hand gestures. His little shiny eyes were not directed to me, but away from me from thinking about war," Hallon said, "If a smile can do that, imagine what a toy can do. It is in an effort symbolizing the people helping people regardless of beliefs."

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An Iraqi toddler at the An Nasiriyah Orphanage sits with his stuffed monkey friend.
[ARMY PHOTO]

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