In a war-torn country where Americans are either loved or despised, Aggies are risking their lives to make a positive difference.

Since Norman Borlaug's Nobel Peace Prize-winning research, Texas A&M University has been sending volunteers to foreign nations to lend a hand in boosting their core source of survival — food production.

In 2008, the U.S. Department of Defense teamed up with the Norman Borlaug Institute for International Agriculture at Texas A&M with a mission to help Iraq in its post-conflict development through agriculture.

Background

In 2007, shortly after Iraq was transforming from a war zone to post-conflict peace-building, the Department of Defense contracted with the Borlaug Institute to form a 14-member team to conduct agriculture needs assessment work in eight Iraqi provinces over a six-month period. The members were selected for their particular technical expertise in different aspects of agriculture.

"From the beginning, there was no set goal for the Borlaug Institute project in Iraq," said Keith Cole, assistant director of administration and finance for the Borlaug Institute. "It was to be more grassroots driven; we are simply there to help the Iraqis with their goals."

"World peace cannot be built on an empty stomach."
— NORMAN BORLAUG

The time frame for the Iraqi post-conflict development project was five years with a budget of $5.8 million.

Process

In May 2008, after months of preparation, training and planning with the Department of Defense and the U.S. Army's Multinational Division Centers in Iraq, Team Borlaug was deployed to Iraq.

"We flew right into Baghdad," said Glen Shinn, Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communications Professor, "and right then, you knew it was different than Dallas. We flew in at night and the plane made very tight 360-degree turns all the way down."

In Baghdad, Team Borlaug traveled by Blackhawk helicopters to each of the Forward Operating Bases (FOB) in the eight provinces. While at the FOBs, they met with the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) members, who were a mixture of U.S. military and civilians. The PRT members stationed at the FOBs were responsible for establishing initial contact with locals in the provinces so when the assessment team arrived, there would already be an established relationship with the Iraqis.

Team Borlaug spent 70 percent of its time outside the military wire. This allowed them to talk with the locals while getting a firsthand look at the agricultural problems the Iraqis were facing. When they first arrived in a new province, the team would talk with the governor and the deanship of agriculture to ask them what they believed were the particular agricultural problems.

Any time Team Borlaug traveled outside the wire to do their assessments, they were provided with PSDs (Personal Security Details) by the U.S. Army. The team traveled into the countryside by convoys consisting of a humvee with five PSD members; two or three humvees for Team Borlaug; and two humvees with translators, medics and additional PSD members.

According to the Knapp Seminar report, a report that Team Borlaug compiled after returning from Iraq, the teams' convoy departures and return times varied so the team would not fall into a routine that could be detected by violent enemies.

When talking with the governor and deanship of agriculture, Team
Borlaug would look at the province’s opportunities and assess its strengths and weakness. “We never made any recommendations to them,” Shinn said. “We called it a promising practice.”

This was to convey to the Iraqis that they wanted to help them with their agricultural problems, not force them to do anything.

At the end of their meetings, Team Borlaug contacted the farmers to get their concerns and perspectives on things from the fields. The concerns expressed were economic competitiveness, cooperation and education, training, environmental stewardship, future view, governance, health and wellness, land tenure, receptivity to change, and security and sustainability.

“There was reluctance among the Iraqis to be independent,” Shinn said. He said they perceived having little control over events in their own lives.

Projects

Shinn said that one of the major achievements of Team Borlaug was helping to organize a farmers cooperative among the leaders in the provinces. This farmers cooperative formed the Farmers Council for Central Ufraties, which included both Sunnis and Shites. The program coordinator for the Middle East, Mark Smith, said, “We saw the farmers association as the key to getting the farmers started; it provided the Iraqis with a means of self-connection among each other.”

The U.S. military provided grants to the farmers cooperative to allow the Iraqis to purchase supplies including seeds, fertilizers and basic farm equipment. The Farmers Council helped create and facilitate a farmers market.

The farmers market, the first of its kind, consists of 40 acres on the main highway in Bassiera between Baghdad and Kuwait. Shinn said the market allowed for all the items in a province to be brought to one central location for purchasing. Smith said that when Team Borlaug left the Middle East, 75 percent of the stalls at the farmers market had been rented.

Smith said that before the war, Iraqis had no entrepreneurial-based system of doing business; it was a subsidy system that had been provided by the government.

Upon arrival in the provinces, Team Borlaug noticed that some villages had greenhouses that had been imported from Jordan before the war.

Smith, the team’s horticultural specialist, helped Iraqis receive grants to build greenhouses and receive drip irrigation training.

Jonathon Gueck ‘08, works with a young farmer as part of the agriculture reconstruction project in Iraq.

Outcome

With the completion of the assessment, implementation and reporting phase of the Iraq post-conflict reconstruction plan, the project is in its final stages. Within the next few months, the PRTs will begin withdrawing from the eight provinces and allow the Iraqis to become self-sufficient in agriculture.

“Change is not an event; it is a process; there is still work to be done,” Shinn said. “To put it into perspective, we chipped a 10-pound block of ice off an iceberg.”

The Borlaug Institute still communicates with the Iraqi farmers by e-mail. Shinn said that there still are setbacks, but the Iraqis believe they are better off now than they were before the war.

Cole said the Borlaug Institute participated in this project to help contribute to peace building and to help others.

When asked why agriculture was so important in the reconstruction process for Iraq, he said Norman Borlaug said it best, “World peace cannot be built on an empty stomach.”

USDA PRT Representative Patrick Moore, works with an Iraq community leader on a cucumber farm in the Wasit Providence.