

TESTIMONY

Hearing on Assistance for Civilian Victims of War

**State and Foreign Operations Sub-Committee
United States Senate
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Submitted by:

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I. Background:

Since September of 2006, CHF International and three sister international non-profit organizations have been implementing the Marla Ruzicka Iraqi War Victims' Fund on behalf of the American people of, as directed by the United States Congress through a Cooperative Agreement administered by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The other implementing partners include:

- ACIDI-VOCA
- Mercy Corps International (MCI)
- International Relief and Development (IRD)

The four programs combined have disbursed slightly more than \$15 million via 1004 projects assisting civilians and communities who suffered loss of life, limb, property and economic livelihoods as a result of military actions taken by US and Coalition forces. The projects were implemented in nearly all provinces and cities of Iraq including such conflicted areas as Baghdad, Basra, Mosul, Babil, Najaf, Diyala and Al Anbar province.

The eligible beneficiaries are identified by the Iraqi staff of the implementing partners in conjunction with local community leaders, community Action Group members, police, medical and hospital personnel and tribal elders. The victim's status had to be documented with the assistance of the local government and witnesses where possible.

The funds were not distributed as cash payments but rather are used to assist the victims and their families to obtain needed medical care, re-build homes or businesses and in many cases develop a means of economic livelihood. Since the program was being administered in the midst of conflict and insurgent activities, the staff of each implementing partner was given considerable discretion in working with the communities to select appropriate means of supporting the war victims. Typical projects included the provision of long term medical care, prosthetic limbs and physical therapy, renovation of residences, re-stocking of businesses, transportation to specialized medical treatment (in some cases to Amman, Jordan), provision of livestock and the establishment of retail stores/kiosks to provide income generation opportunities for families that lost their normal breadwinner. A large portion of the economic projects funded were provided to women widowed by the conflict and their children.

One of the implementing partners chose to focus the majority of its War Victim resources on community reconstruction projects with substantial assurance that the community as a whole would then care for the individual families victimized by the military activities.

Over the course of Fiscal Years 2007 and 2008 the four implementing partners completed 1004 victim assistance projects at a total cost of \$ 15, 685,194 congressionally appropriated funds. The local communities contributed \$ 996,887 and local Iraqi government bodies contributed \$903,352. These projects directly assisted slightly more than 40,000 war victim family members. In late 2008 The Marla Ruzicka War Victims Fund was further funded by the Congress and presently continues to operate in Iraq under

the management of USAID which has Cooperative Agreement arrangements with the four implementing NGOs.

II. Comments and Recommendations:

The above describes the program and provides the numbers. More specifically the communities, affected families, Iraqi implementing staff and implementing partner organizations would like to bring to the attention of the Congress the following key points:

- The victims and their families have been nothing but deeply grateful for assistance received under this program. Many were traumatized into inaction by the misfortune that had befallen their family. The arrival of the Marla War Victims Fund staff and community leaders, bringing assistance resources revived the families and made it possible for them to begin the recovery process. While not explicitly advertised that the funds came from the US, this fact was known within the communities and the victims often expressed their thanks to the people of America for the assistance provided.
- Local community leaders, government officials, hospital/police/medical staff have generally been cooperative and trustworthy in helping select the neediest beneficiaries and ensuring the resources were properly provided. Corruption or greed was generally not an obstacle.
- The Iraqi implementing staff members have taken great pride in their ability to properly manage the programs, meet audit requirements and assist families in distress. It gives them great satisfaction that they can positively help their fellow citizens of Iraq amidst all the violence and destruction.
- The participation and support of community leaders, Community Action Group members, tribal elders and medical staff were key elements to the success of the program and a clear indication that communities can be trusted to use funds efficiently, effectively, contribute their own resources and in some cases reach across ethnic and political lines to achieve help for wounded people.
- In truth this effort not only helps to heal the wounds and trauma of the victims but it also “heals the community” by providing positive course of action, local cooperation and resources to begin binding up the wounds of war.
- The implementing partners are especially proud of their ability to assist 8,744 people establish new businesses and/or other income generating opportunities. The ability for war victims to be able to again support themselves in a kiosk or a service shop creates goodwill and pride beyond measure, especially for those recently widowed and needing to fend for themselves.
- The provision of medical care, prosthetics and possibly psycho-social assistance is critical and should remain a key component of victim assistance program.

All that said, this is all good news and provides a strong sense that the Members of Congress were wise in authorizing and appropriating funds for the Marla Ruzicka War Victims effort in Iraq and its related programs in Afghanistan. However, a very wise

friend of mine, Mr. Sargent Shriver, often told me; “Don’t tell me the good news—good news makes me complacent and therefore weak. Tell me the bad news so I can know what I must overcome to make the program great”

So to push us all to greatness in the future, here are the challenges and difficulties we face:

- USAID’s guidelines for the Iraq War Victims Fund definitively restricted benefits to those victimized by the actions of U.S. military and Coalition forces. In Iraq there are many people who are injured or killed by the actions of the insurgents opposing the Coalition forces. Often it is difficult after a firefight to determine which victims were injured by which forces—implementers’ staff members have no capacity to analyze shrapnel, bullets or explosive residue to determine the source of the damage. Similar restrictions are not imposed on the implementers of war victim’s funds in Afghanistan. It is wise and necessary to critically analyze this decision—one does not wish to place the entire cost burden on the American people but it would be useful to consider the resulting tangible benefit in positive public sentiment towards the Coalition Forces, the US mission and the Government of Iraq. (this topic has been raised by the USAID Inspector General in Audit report # E-267-08-002-P—dated April 2008)
- Consideration must be given to longer term mental health care particularly for children traumatized by war related death of loved ones. It is relatively easy to repair the house and even create a new retail shop—but healing the scar tissue in the minds of children is a much more daunting and time consuming task.
- The fund levels have allowed the reaching of only a modest portion of the civilian victims of the conflict in Iraq. While estimates on death levels vary from 100,000 to 300,000 plus, we do know that the 40,000 or so directly assisted by the Marla Ruzicka Iraq War Victims Fund leaves a vast number of victims to fend for themselves with little or no assistance. Perhaps it is time to turn to the Government of Iraq for additional matching funds to meet the larger need.
- In the now infamous words of Charlie Wilson, “What is the end Game?” This brings us to the larger question---where do we go from here? Current appropriated funds will be exhausted in early 2010. CHF’s efforts to gain an audience with the Ambassador of Iraq to discuss the future of this and other programs have been to no avail. Perhaps a joint effort with Senate leaders, the State Department’s Ambassador to Iraq, Representatives of USAID and the implementing partners to bring this to the attention of senior members of the Government of Iraq would be an appropriate strategy. The End Game could be an Iraqi government funded NGO staffed by many of the Iraqi people trained under the Marla Fund become a long term implementer of support for victims of violence and conflict in Iraq. This or some similar strategy needs to be discussed and implemented in the remainder of 2009 and 2010.

I thank the Chairman and the members of the Committee and their staff for this opportunity to present on behalf of the CIVIC organization, which is the godparent of the

Marla Funds, the four implementing NGOs, the Iraqi staff who have so bravely administered the program amidst grave danger to themselves and on behalf of the people of Iraq injured by the international conflict and its subsequent insurgency and insurgency suppression operations.

Mr. Chairman, it has been a privilege and an honor to testify before you and your colleagues today.

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