

## Mercy Corps Brings Emergency Aid to Southern Iraq

April 1, 2008

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*Portland, OR* – The global relief and development agency Mercy Corps is providing water, medical supplies and other forms of emergency assistance to the war-weary southern Iraqi provinces of Basra, Maysan and Wassit. While a ceasefire was declared on Sunday between the Iraqi Shia cleric Maqtada al-Sadr and Iraqi and U.S. forces, the situation remains tense and humanitarian needs persist.

The agency has secured and distributed 780,000 liters of water in the city of Basra and three month's stock of disposable first aid and medical supplies like blood bags to two hospitals in the city of Kut. Mercy Corps is also preparing to distribute water, food and hygiene kits in Maysan in the coming days. In addition, the agency will continue to assess needs in the rapidly evolving humanitarian situation.

"People are just starting to leave their homes and walk about freely, and they haven't been able to access basics like food, water and fuel for days," explained Paul Butler, Mercy Corps' Iraq country director. "We're focusing on providing these resources, and trying to anticipate what the next wave of needs will be if conflicts flare up again."

Curfews in most southern cities have been lifted in the past 48 hours and electricity grids are just coming back on after several days down. Water is in short supply and the price of essential food items has shot up, with the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reporting that the price of sugar has increased 125% and tomatoes 530%. Hospitals are also facing intense shortages of essential medical supplies like blood bags.

The humanitarian situation has rapidly deteriorated in southern Iraq since March 25, when fighting erupted between al-Sadr's Mahdi Army and Iraqi and U.S. forces. The violence paralyzed cities like Basra, Baghdad, Kut and Amarah. According to OCHA, nearly 700 people have been killed and more than 1500 injured, the majority of them civilians. Sunday's ceasefire is holding, but many of al-Sadr's followers have not turned in their weapons as the ceasefire demands.

"It's a difficult and tense situation," said Paul Butler. "We are certainly hoping that the ceasefire holds but we realize that it could be interrupted at any time."

Mercy Corps has provided humanitarian assistance to hundreds of thousands of Iraqis since 2003. The agency works in both northern and southern Iraq, and its work focuses on offering assistance and opportunities to vulnerable populations such as women, people with disabilities and people who are internally displaced. In addition, Mercy Corps leads reconstruction, economic development, and education programs throughout Iraq.

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Article URL: <http://www.mercycorps.org/aboutus/pressroom/2097>

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