

by Airman 1st Class Alicia Sarkkinen

Kirkuk airmen provide relief supplies

KIRKUK AIR BASE, Iraq — The words of a Kurdish refugee woman living in a tent on the outskirts of Kirkuk keep ringing in the ears of all who heard it.

"This is no life for my children here," the mother said, pointing to the dirt her young child walked through with no shoes.

"This is no life in Iraq," she cried out as chaplains and armed escorts from the Air Force and Army stationed here made their way through a curious and gathering crowd. The six service members were there to deliver food, clothing and toys for the children living in poverty.

Chaplain (Lt. Col.) Gary Garvey, from the Air Force Chaplain Service in Washington, D.C., and Chaplain (Capt.)

Shelia Wilson, from Offutt Air Force Base, Neb., made a joint effort to help their new community in Iraq. The chaplains, deployed to the 506th Air Expeditionary Group, went to downtown Kirkuk with the Army to deliver several loads of donated boxed goods sent from the United States.

"It was all I could do to keep from crying," Chaplain Wilson said. "Did



A child clutches a toy given to him during a chapel-sponsored visit to a Kirkuk village. Airmen and soldiers delivered several loads of donated boxed goods sent from the United States to the Iraqi village.

anyone know these people were living here and in such need except the people themselves?"

Within the encampment, there were a few smiles for the visitors. In another area, the women made a type of tortilla bread and gave it to the airmen and soldiers to eat.

The Kurdish children watched the six Americans closely, their eyes becoming wider as stuffed animals were pulled from bags and handed to them. At times the crowd surged, making it difficult to maintain order. Their needs were obvious.

Desperate measures were tried by some. One Kurdish woman was ready to give up her child to a young airman to take back to the United States. Several women blocked the truck door open in an attempt to keep the vehicle from leaving the camp.

Later, the airmen visited an elementary school in the city of Kirkuk.

The children only attend half the day because of space and supply limitations.

"I was so overwhelmed by the needs of the kids as well as the enthusiasm," Chaplain Wilson said.

As the group made its way through the gates of the school, children came down from the second floor balcony and spilled out of the hallways. They quickly converged on the Americans in the courtyard, touching their arms and shaking their hands. Eventually the Americans were able to meet privately with teachers and pupils.

"We saw a need at the school too," Chaplain Garvey said. "The amount of poverty and desperation after the [Saddam] Hussein regime is legion. It was invigorating to see the kids so responsive. Hopefully they will grow up in this free Iraq. Kids just love to hear you talk and sing and know that you care about them. We will help them again in the future."

— Capt. Stan Paregien
506th Air Expeditionary Group
Public Affairs

"This is no life for my children here. This is no life in Iraq."

— Kurdish mother
