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`Lift sanctions on Iraq'

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PETALING JAYA, Sat. - Economic sanctions on Iraq should be lifted on humanitarian grounds due to the serious adverse effects on its people, Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali said today.

The Prime Minister's wife, who led a 11-member goodwill delegation to Iraq, said the group saw the sufferings of men, women and children whose very basic survival was threatened due to insufficient food and healthcare, unsafe water, poor sanitation and inadequate infrastructure facilities.

Dr Siti Hasmah said children were dying from diarrhoeal diseases and respiratory infections, with one in five suffering from malnutrition and contagious diseases.

Dr Siti Hasmah was speaking to reporters after arriving at the Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah Airport in Subang. Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was at the airport.

Members of her delegation for the five-day visit, which began on March 25, were from non-governmental organisations and individual social activists.

The purpose of the trip was to see first-hand the situation caused by the sanctions.

The NGOs include the National Council of Women's Organisations, Community Support Network Association and International Planned Parenthood Federation (East, South-East Asia and Oceania Region).

"Previously, we only read reports and heard about the situation from other sources, but now we have seen for ourselves and can tell others what we experienced. We met people from all walks of life and spoke to them individually.

"A significant number of children are dropping out of school which was something very uncommon before. Those in school face difficulty paying fees," said Dr Siti Hasmah, who is also chairman of Bakti, the welfare body of wives of Ministers and Deputy Ministers.

She said the delegation visited hospitals, schools, orphanages, old folks' homes and the Al-Amiriah bomb shelter besides meeting with women's organisations, Iraq Red Crescent Society, UN agencies, family planning associations and Education Ministry officials.

Dr Siti Hasmah said one-third of Iraqi children suffered from chronic vitamin deficiency, 70 per cent of pregnant women experienced anaemia and pregnancy-related deaths had increased six times.

"Doctors continue to use procedures and methods considered obsolete as well as dispense old medicine," she said, adding that babies in hospitals sometimes were put four to a bed, and shared incubators and oxygen supply.

Diseases like malaria, tuberculosis and polio that had either been eradicated or controlled are seeing a resurgence.

Dr Siti Hasmah said people sometimes had to sell property and jewellery to survive.

"Through all the suffering, the Iraqis still provide good attention to their elderly and children," she said.

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