

Press Statements and News Stories

Interview with Deputy Minister of Human Rights Dr. Abdul Kareem Shallal

By Randa Jamal, UNAMI-Public Information Office, Baghdad Office.

Dr. Abdulkarim Abdullal Shalal is the current Deputy Minister of Human Rights for the Government of Iraq. Since his appointment on 21 August 2007, Dr. Shalal represented Iraq in several meetings held in Geneva, addressing various issues related to human rights. Additionally, he represented his country in meetings of the Arab Summit, sharing his expertise on human rights issues. In recent years, Dr. Shalal acted as the Chairman of the committee which drafted the report on the Optional Protocol of the Convention of the Rights of the Child on Prostitution and sex exploitation. He also supervised the committee which drafted the Iraq specific Universal Periodic Review (UPR), submitted to the Council of Human Rights last year. Recently, he has been appointed to chair the committee that follows up on the recommendations of UPR. Before joining the Ministry, he was practicing diagnostic radiology, which is his specialty.

UNAMI-PIO: It's been eight years since the establishment of the first Human Rights Ministry in Iraq on 9 March 2003. How do you see the work of the Ministry's during the past eight years? And what are the priorities of the Ministry during the years to come?

Dr. Abdul Kareem Shallal: The Ministry was established pursuant to the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) Order No. 60 (2004). The first stage was the establishment and formation phase; it lasted for more than a year during which human resources for the young Ministry were completed; this was part of the transition to the current government. During the period of 2004 – 2005, in collaboration with donor states and UN, the Ministry started capacity building and preparation of expertise in this area. This phase is still ongoing in cooperation with the competent bodies. In my view, the Ministry moved to the actual work phase in 2006, this was through the formation of monitoring and inspection teams to fulfill its mandate as enshrined in the Ministry's Law. The period 2006 -2010 witnessed the completion of infrastructure for capacity building as well as the formation of relevant institutions, including governorate offices in each Iraqi governorate except those of the Kurdistan Region. In addition to that and particularly in 2008, a significant step was made through the establishment of the National Institution of Human Rights – a specialized institute [established] for the purposes of mainstreaming a human rights culture, and capacity building of the ministry's and governmental institutions' personnel.

During that period, the Ministry succeeded in implementing projects for human rights development and advancement, with the aim to meet its commitments at the international level. The most outstanding step was publishing reports prepared by monitoring teams, particularly prisons and detention centers teams, who started publishing public reports on the Ministry's website; such reports were related to the monitoring of prisons and detentions, victims of terrorism and terrorist acts. In addition to this, there were the annual reports on human rights and the situation of women in Iraq. In 2010, the Ministry completed the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), in collaboration with UNAMI and with direct UN support. This report was considered the most prominent action taken by the Ministry at the international level.

There was also the productive cooperation with the Human Rights Council committees (such as CEDAW and Children Rights Committee). We are currently putting the final touches on the draft CEDAW Country Report, Convention on the Rights of the Child and its two protocols. The

Ministry is preparing for a national conference to issue the draft National Plan for Human Rights which was prepared by the Ministry in collaboration with UNAMI. The Ministry is concluding the arrangements for this project approximately by the end of May. We have prepared an action paper on the next stage for 2011, which is the basis of our current work, focusing on five pillars. The first is spreading the culture of human rights through holding training sessions and workshops for all state institutions and civil society organizations in collaboration with Iraqi universities, as well as openness to civil society. The second pillar is to address the legacy of human rights violations committed by the former regime through the establishment of a department that will be tasked to document all violations, which will be developed in the future to become a specialized department to document all human rights violations committed by the former regime; exhumation of mass grave sites to show atrocities committed by the former regime against Iraqi people; this year three mass graves in different Iraqi governorates will be exhumed. The third pillar is capacity building for the Ministries and government institutions personnel through conducting educational trainings and workshops. The new, yet very important pillar is media, as human rights culture can be spread through media. Moreover, activities of the Ministry may be announced and followed through the issuance of a periodical publication by the Ministry, which will also include violations committed by the former regime through documents received by the Ministry or information gathered on mass graves. It is expected that in 2011 a TV program will be broadcasted focusing on the activities of the Ministry to monitor and document all violations and to spread a culture of human rights.

The fifth pillar is to oversee performance and protect rights of all state institutions. There are also specialized teams deployed in all governorates for this purpose. These teams will conduct more than 1,300 field visits. This is a summary of activities of this stage.

UNAMI-PIO: In addition to expanding its scope of work, the MoHR established human rights offices in all governorates of Iraq as well as human rights units in all ministries, universities, colleges, institutes and education directorates. How do you describe the Ministry's capacities and resources in terms of human and material resources and staff expertise?

Dr. Abdul Kareem Shallal: Frankly, the Ministry's human resources are insufficient with the tasks assigned to us. We have a limited number of jobs and trained staff. However, we have been able during this period and with this limited number of experts to perform the tasks assigned to us by opening up to and partnering with the civil society in monitoring and documenting violations, promoting a human rights culture and benefiting from higher education and scientific research professors specialized in this field, in addition to UNAMI's support in organizing joint workshops with our Ministry.

UNAMI and the civil society have been able to an extent to make up in part for the shortage in human resources. As far as I know, for two years no jobs have been allocated for the MoHR. The budget is very limited compared to the tasks assigned to it. The budget does not meet our aspirations. Therefore, we were forced to seek funding from other sources for a number of projects. UNAMI has effectively contributed to the implementation of a number of workshops and projects, in addition to reaching out to the civil society which may help us - especially in the governorates and - in providing trainers. We look forward to cooperating with the civil society and the international community in supporting the MoHR towards advancing the human rights situation.

UNAMI-PIO: Following the establishment of the Human Rights Council by virtue of UN General

Assembly resolution No. 60/251 in 2006, a universal periodic review mechanism was set as a new process to follow up on and review the individual human rights records of the 192 Member States every four years. Last year, Iraq submitted its first UPR report. Can you tell us about the MoHR experience in preparing this report? What was the role of UNAMI's Human Rights Office and UNOPS in helping the Iraqi Government to prepare this report?

Dr. Abdul Kareem Shallal: We have greatly benefited from this experience in learning about the UPR and about reporting mechanisms involved through the direct support of UNOPS and UNAMI in the organization of a number of training sessions and workshops on UPR reporting. A working group chaired by Mr. Saad Fathallah, with the membership of representatives from the concerned ministries, was established to train the staff of MoHR and other relevant bodies. UNOPS also supported the MoHR by organizing field visits to draw up on the experiences of some countries, including Bahrain, which was the first country to submit the UPR report. The field visits highly informed the preparation of the report and left clear imprints on the report, which will be accentuated in the booklet that is underway on UPR reporting. We benefited greatly from the support of UNAMI and UNOPS. It is expected that in the coming phase the MoHR will create an enabling environment and prepare the report on its own. If the need for support emerges, I believe UNOPS and UNAMI will not hesitate to extend it as they have done on several occasions.

If it were not for UNAMI's assistance, Iraq would not have been able to submit such a high quality report. It was submitted to the Human Rights Council in February 2010 by a high-level delegation headed by the Minister of Human Rights, Eng. Wijdan Salim, and over 15 officials at the various levels and from the diverse spectra of the Iraqi society. It was well received by the international community. Iraq also made 7 or 8 voluntary commitments. 176 recommendations were presented by friendly countries during the interactive dialogue of the review process.

UNAMI-PIO: How many of the 176 recommendations were endorsed?

135 recommendations were endorsed, 27 rejected and 14 postponed. A high-level committee was established to follow up on the recommendations. We are going to present the draft of a national plan in a conference in May of this year.

UNAMI-PIO: There is continued cooperation between your Ministry and UNAMI's HRO. Can you brief us about the nature of this cooperation and its prospect? And whether there are other areas that require further support from UNAMI HRO?

Dr. Abdul Kareem Shallal : UNAMI and UNOPS extended large and significant support to our Ministry covering all areas and different issues that are deemed necessary by the Ministry in terms of capacity building and implementation of human rights projects.

We look forward to a great cooperation over the next stage because the environment has become more suited for the mainstreaming of a human rights culture, especially with the political and security stability which encourage human rights defenders to operate more freely and professionally. I expect the support of UNAMI and UNOP to develop the Ministry and prepare for more projects.

Perhaps, the next stage will witness proposing projects that can be implemented jointly by MoHR

and UNAMI-HRO. Recently we witnessed such direct cooperation, between the Ministry and UNAMI-HRO. We organized a workshop following negativities that emerged in the demonstrations of 25 February. We were of the view that a workshop should soon be held to observe and monitor demonstrations; and how monitoring could be carried out by demonstrators and police personnel.

Now there is intention to hold a large number of such workshops and this is what we discussed with the HRO Officers.

UNAMI-PIO: UNAMI-HRO recently held a number of training programs. In addition to the training on monitoring and documenting human rights violations, UNAMI-HRO, at the request of your Ministry, conducted a training on 17 March which included 25 employees of your Ministry along with four civil society organizations. The training focused on how to monitor and document human rights violations during the demonstrations. How would you describe the importance of such training programs and their role in developing the capacity of the Ministry and organizations in protecting and monitoring human rights in Iraq now?

Dr. Abdul Kareem Shallal: This issue is very important and we look forward to developing it. We also seek to hold more workshops for all concerned parties on observing freedom of expression. We hope that the workshops are specialized and involve the concerned parties, especially the security authorities, civil society organizations and the staff from the Human Rights Ministry, particularly the employees in the governorates' offices, which require more training and capacity development; our work revealed that the capabilities of those offices are weak and as such should be given priority. We planned to expand our capacity building in 2011 and not limit it to the Ministry's headquarters and the National Institute. More focus should be given to the offices in the governorates. We started actually allowing a number of them to join this program. There is future work with UNAMI-HRO in this regard.

UNAMI-PIO: In your opinion, what role can civil society organizations play in developing the democratic process in Iraq under the present circumstances?

Dr. Abdul Kareem Shallal: Frankly, the concept of civil society in Iraq is recent although it has been present in the past; however, it was not up to the required level due to the former regime's policies. Though, after 2003 and the toppling of the dictatorship regime, civil society managed to expand widely but we, as observers, noted that a number of civil society organizations (CSOs) started to disappear and dwindle, probably due to financial reasons or their inability to operate in Iraq. Some organizations started to be active and effective in Iraq. A number of organizations are registered at the MoHR and they are efficient. They execute a number of projects; provide their experiences and training either to the Ministry or a number of CSOs; or monitor violations. To be honest, civil society needs much work and more capacity development for it to be more developed and efficient in Iraq. It does not seem reasonable for the MoHR to be the only player. International standards require a proficient civil society as it should have a proper institutional structure, a system and a special law. Also, there should be no gap between CSOs and the legislative, executive and judicial bodies. Such gap started to diminish through our work with a number of CSOs. As a Ministry we started to open up to decrease the gap and enable CSOs to take part in a number of meetings and projects and to listen to different opinions so that we become more integrated