



International Society for Peace and Human Rights 2008 Medical Mission to Iraqi Kurdistan Building for the Future

This year's mission to Iraqi Kurdistan, ISPHR's third, saw the delegation grow from Dr. Saren Azer and Lynn Foster to include Calgarians Sheila Black, a nurse, and Jason Klink, a community development worker. The team left Canada in early May with over 500 lbs of medicines, supplies, textbooks, and clothes – they returned several weeks later with memories, stories, and plans for the future. Overall, it was an extremely worthwhile mission with an expanded focus on health care delivery in some of the region's most disadvantaged areas, a new initiative to transfer technology to build household water filtration units, and curriculum development at one of the region's leading nursing schools.

The team landed in Hewler, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, and was welcomed by various representatives of the Kurdistan Regional Government. Many faces from the Ministry of Health were familiar to the group and there were introductions to representatives from other ministries – especially those related to water infrastructure and municipalities.



Early on, Sheila was invited to the nursing school in Dohuk to deliver a week's worth of lectures and curriculum development which she described as a great experience. She was impressed by the intellectual curiosity and potential of the students and felt the system will benefit from increased investment in health care professionals and equipment. She left feeling hopeful that she can return next year and, in the meantime, is working with Canadian nursing institutions to see how our programs can be of assistance. *[Photograph: Sheila is fourth from left reviewing anatomy with several of the school's nursing students]*

Prior to leaving Canada, Jason was trained by the Centre for Affordable Water and Sanitation Technology [CAWST], a Calgary-based NGO to design a mold from which household water filtration devices can be built. The design is brilliant in its simplicity – all materials can be sourced locally – and creates a system that removes 99 per cent of water's impurities. Given the problems that the region has had with unclean water – leading to a dangerous outbreak of cholera in late 2007, ISPHR was keen to see whether CAWST's model would help to alleviate pressure on the water system one household at a time.



Initial attempts to create the mold didn't work – Jason then decided to reduce the time for baking the cement given the hot sunny weather. It paid off and a functional mold was created from which a few individual units were built. The results were dramatic and ISPHR hopes that we are able to continue the project on next year's mission or earlier if we are able to secure local technical support and community leaders. *[Photograph: Jason is second from right with some local help. Tap water in bottle at left, filtered water in bottle at right]*

Like last year, Saren and Lynn spent their time seeing patients in health clinics and refugee camps and while they spent some time in the region's hospitals, they spent more time in the field than they did in 2007. Sadly, they felt that the socio-economic conditions of the area had worsened since last year with an overall negative impact on the population's health. Part of this impression came from a five-day visit to the Germiyan region, one of the most neglected of the region. A Canadian-based company operating in the area had asked Saren and Lynn to conduct a preliminary needs assessment – information which they would then use in their community engagement and investment plans.

The region was a target of Saddam Hussein's Anfal campaign. Everyone who came to ISPHR's clinics had suffered tremendously – all had lost at least one family member in the genocide most had lost several. And even now, a generation later, rates of carcinomas, respiratory disease, infertility, and congenital birth defects are vastly higher than the rest of Kurdistan.

The mission was bittersweet – the sweet part was being able to deliver significant quantities of high quality medications [thanks to Health Partners International Canada] and to distribute modest funds to widows and orphans in the refugee camps. The bitter part was of course feeling like it was little more than a drop in the ocean. Perhaps such is the nature of international humanitarian work.



And what else is there to do but to start working to ensure next year's mission is better funded and more broadly reaching. We're hoping to build something sustainable and transformative –like a small hospital to offer volunteer opportunities to Western-trained health professionals and provide ongoing training to Kurdish doctors and nurses. The neediest patients would be put at the front of the queue and no one would be refused treatment based on lack of income or connections.

A highlight of the trip was meeting with Iraq's first lady Hero Ibrahim Ahmad – a highly regarded humanitarian and founder of Kurdistan Save the Children. We spoke with her about our plans for the future – starting in March 2009 – and were grateful to receive her full support. [Photograph: L to R is Lynn Foster, Hero Ibrahim Ahmad, Saren Azer, Agri Ismael –

Executive Assistant to Hero, Dana Qadir – Executive Director of Kurdistan Save the Children, and Jason Klink]

We send you all our deepest thanks for your support – on so many levels – for the 2008 mission. It was an honour to undertake such work and we couldn't have done it without you. Special thanks to Health Partners International Canada, Amnesty International – Rimbe Group, Xerion Foods of Calgary, and St. Andrew's United Church in Calgary. Please visit our website at www.peaceandhumanrights.org for ongoing updates on our work.

And please note that we've moved! Saren and his family and Lynn have relocated to Vancouver – email addresses remain the same [sazer@shaw.ca and fosterlf@shaw.ca]. We're eagerly recruiting members for the 2009 delegation as well as funds and supplies to support our work. We are hoping to receive our charitable tax status by the end of 2008 – either way requested tax receipts will be mailed out by December.

Peace, blessings, and many thanks!