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Special Forces, local tribal leaders set tracks to stimulate economic growth in agricultural district

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KARBALA, Iraq – It is a district embraced by palm groves, where mule-drawn carriages are commonplace and a historical presence is still evident in the essence of its ancient buildings.

Although it is a place that the local sheikhs claimed was once neglected by its government, it has become an agricultural oasis that is on the track toward economic security since the collapse of Saddam Hussein's reign.

Special Operations Task Force – Central Soldiers, along with local tribal leaders, supplied the farming populace in the Ain al-Tamur district here with three tractors May 23 in order to stimulate the agricultural capacity.

In addition to the three tractors, the council members received three rototillers, one ditcher, a three-furrow plow and two earth levelers.

The handful of Special Forces Soldiers were met with a communal celebration after a two-hour long convoy to deliver the farming equipment to the council members at the Al Akhaydar Castle, a historic structure built more than 10 centuries ago.

As light peered through wide-open doors and thin windows, an offering of fresh fruit and vegetables, baked fish and chicken and warm bread was traditionally displayed before the small gathering of Coalition forces, Iraqi Army Soldiers, Iraqi police officers and local leaders.

According to the head of the council Sheikh Farhan, the celebration was a “small token in comparison to what you have provided us.”

Army Capt. Steve Davies, the civil affairs officer who coordinated the purchase of the equipment, said the rural district with a population of approximately 30,000 will reap the benefits of the tractors, which were purchased at a dealership in Iskandariyah.

He stated that the project took about three weeks from request to delivery.

“This will reduce the prices of farm goods,” Farhan said through an interpreter. “The local farmers are going to benefit and, consequently, have the financial means to do more.”

Farhan and his fellow council member Sheikh Majid explained that the first tractor they received a couple of months ago is proof of the potential to increase productivity. The local leaders recalled a sizeable spike in production levels.

With the delivery of the three additional tractors, the district now owns four. The council members plan to rent out the tractors to local farmers.

“By providing these three tractors, we'll greatly enhance their ability to generate crops, reduce cost and increase overall production,” said the chief warrant officer who initiated the project after being informed of the need for additional equipment.

Due to the transition from plowing by hand to using a tractor to cultivate the land, according to Farhan, the cost has decreased from 15,000 to 6,000 Iraqi dinars per hour, which is converted to approximately 15 to six U.S. dollars. The 6,000 Iraqi dinars are broken down to three equal parts to pay the driver for the gasoline and for the continued maintenance of the tractors.

“This will allow them to do it faster, better and cheaper,” Davies claimed. “Three tractors will increase what they produce and it will cost less – that’s straight economics.”

“I feel very happy to be able to provide this to the people of my community,” Majid said with a tone of sincere servitude. “We have devoted our lives to our community. We are always on the lookout for opportunities to provide what they need.”

The chief warrant officer’s team has developed a strong relationship with the council members of what he described as “the forgotten city,” in western Karbala. They were able to build that friendship by determining the needs of the locals and fulfilling those needs whenever possible.

Farhan came to the conclusion that the Special Forces captain and his men share the same priorities. “Our goal is to work more and more to meet the needs of the average Iraqi,” the sheikh explained. “I believe this is your aim as well.”

Although the mission is coming to a close, there is still much that can be done for the people of Karbala.

For now, they celebrate the successful completion of this project.

“Keep letting us know what is going on,” said the captain who hopes to continue the sense of camaraderie shared between the local Iraqi people and his team.

As the chief who was labeled by the council an honorary sheikh walked away from the ancient castle surrounded by acres of sand, he looked back and admitted to Farhan, “We don’t have any buildings like this because America is still very young.”

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A small gathering of Special Operations Task Force – Central Soldiers, Iraqi Army Soldiers, Iraqi police officers and local leaders eat fresh fruit and vegetables, baked fish and chicken and warm bread during a visit to deliver three tractors to the council members of the agricultural district of Ain al-Tamur in Karbala, Iraq, May 23. (Photo by Army Spc. Jeffrey A. Ledesma)



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As other key leaders in the community watch, a Special Forces Soldier with Special Operations Task Force – Central talks to Sheikh Farhan, the head of the council, during a visit to deliver three tractors to the council members of the agricultural district of Ain al-Tamur in Karbala, Iraq, May 23. (Photo by Army Spc. Jeffrey A. Ledesma)



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Two local sheikhs discuss a plan on how to unload the new tractors during a Special Operations Task Force – Central visit to the agricultural district of Ain al-Tamur in Karbala, Iraq, May 23. The three tractors will bring the districts total to four. (Photo by Army Spc. Jeffrey A. Ledesma)



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As members of the Ain al-Tamur community watched, one of the three tractors is driven off of a flat-bed truck in Karbala, Iraq, May 23. Special Operations Task Force – Central Soldiers supplied the tractors to the agricultural district to help stimulate their economy. (Photo by Army Spc. Jeffrey A. Ledesma)



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A local sheikh guides a tractor off of a flat-bed truck in the Ain al-Tamur district of Karbala, Iraq, May 23. Special Operations Task Force – Central Soldiers supplied three tractors to the agricultural district to help stimulate their economy. (Photo by Army Spc. Jeffrey A. Ledesma)



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After delivering three tractors, Army Capt. Steve Davies speaks to local sheikhs through an interpreter in the Ain al-Tamur district of Karbala, Iraq, May 23. Davies and fellow Special Operations Task Force – Central Soldiers supplied the tractors to the agricultural district to help lower the costs cultivating the land and increase farming production. (Photo by Army Spc. Jeffrey A. Ledesma)