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HEADLINE: Despite its troubles, Iraq is gradually moving ahead

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BODY:

Today, I am in Brussels with representatives of more than 80 governments and institutions to send a loud and clear message of support for the political transition in Iraq.

A year ago, in Resolution 1546, the United Nations Security Council set out the timetable that Iraq, with the assistance of the United Nations and the international community, was expected to fulfil.

The Brussels conference is a chance to reassure the Iraqi people that the international community stands with them in their brave efforts to rebuild their country, and that we recognize how much progress has been made in the face of daunting challenges.

Elections were held in January, on schedule. Three months later, the Transitional National Assembly endorsed the transitional government. The dominant parties have begun inclusive negotiations, in which outreach to Sunni Arabs is a major theme.

A large number of Sunni groups and parties are now working to make sure that their voices are fully heard in the process of drafting a new constitution, and that they participate fully in the referendum to approve it and the elections slated for December.

Indeed, just last week an agreement was achieved to expand the committee drafting the constitution to ensure full participation by the Sunni Arab community. This agreement, which the UN helped facilitate, should encourage all Iraqis to press ahead with drafting the constitution by the Aug. 15 deadline.

As the process moves forward, there will no doubt be frustrating delays and difficult setbacks. But let us not lose sight of the fact that all over Iraq today, Iraqis are debating nearly every aspect of their political future.

The UN has been strongly urged by a wide spectrum of Iraqis to help them maintain momentum, as we did with January's elections. They have sought our support in constitution-making, in preparing for the October referendum and the December elections, and in coordinating donor assistance for the political transition as well as reconstruction and development.

Our response has been prompt and resolute. We have set up a donor co-ordination mechanism in Baghdad, deployed a constitutional support unit, and established an active and collaborative relationship with the assembly's constitutional committee. Today, more than 800 UN personnel -- both local and international, including security staff -- are serving in Iraq in the UN assistance mission.

In a media-hungry age, visibility is often regarded as proof of success. But this does not necessarily hold true in Iraq. Even when, as with last week's agreement, the results of our efforts are easily seen by all, the efforts themselves must be undertaken quietly and away

from the cameras.

Whether UN assistance proves effective will depend largely on the Iraqis. Only they can write a constitution that is inclusive and fair. The United Nations cannot and will not draft it for them. Nor do we need to, because Iraqis are more than capable of doing it themselves. They would welcome advice, but they will decide which advice is worth taking.

As important as particular constitutional provisions is the underlying accommodation between Iraq's diverse communities. My special representative, Ashraf Qazi, is encouraging and facilitating the delicate task of political outreach to all Iraqi communities to promote a truly inclusive transition.

His work, too, is necessarily carried out away from the media glare, as he seeks to build the trust and confidence among the various constituencies that will be the key to the successful transition envisaged by Security Council Resolution 1546.

There are, of course, those who wish to exacerbate communal tensions and prevent the emergence of a democratic, pluralist, stable Iraq. They seek to capitalize on the serious difficulties faced by ordinary people, and to exploit popular anger and resentment to promote hatred and violence. Their work is seen on the streets of Iraq every day.

I do not believe that security measures alone can provide a sufficient response to this situation. For such measures to be successful, they must be part of a broad-based and inclusive strategy that embraces the political transition, development, human rights and institution-building so that all of Iraq's communities see that they stand to be winners in the new Iraq.

These efforts must be underpinned by steps to deal with Iraq's tortured past -- a past that still exacts revenge and will, if not addressed, blight future generations. This is difficult for any society in transition, let alone one as dangerous as some areas of Iraq are today.

In aid of the transition, the UN is at work, both inside and outside the country, to support donor co-ordination, capacity-building of Iraqi ministries and civil society organizations, and delivery of basic services.

Reconstruction of schools, water-treatment and waste-treatment plants, power plants and transmission lines, food assistance to children, mine clearing and aid to hundreds of thousands of returning refugees and internally displaced persons -- all of these activities occur every day in Iraq under UN leadership.

The Iraqi people continue to endure a painful and difficult transition, and they still have a long and tough road ahead. The UN is privileged and determined to walk it with them. In doing so, we serve not only the people of Iraq, but the peoples of all nations.

Kofi Annan is secretary general of the United Nations.

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