

## SOUTHTOWN Article #3 Children In Iraq

When I travel in a convoy in a Humvee on my way to say mass in Iraq the experience is intense. We keep our body armor and helmets on and rounds are chambered in the weapons. Every single moment we are scanning the environment for danger. It takes an enormous amount of energy to maintain this state of hyper-alertness. A dead sheep on the roadside could hide a bomb. A half destroyed home could mask insurgents. The discoloration in the road ahead could mean it was recently dug up and a landmine planted. By the end of the trip I am mentally exhausted.

One of the things you notice first when traveling on a main supply route in Iraq are the small children. They are everywhere. When they see a convoy coming they rush up to the side of the road. Most wave, occasionally one will throw rocks. It absolutely makes their day if you wave back. They grin, jump up and down and seem satisfied.

I don't know how or where they live. The countryside is desolate. It almost looks like a lunar landscape. Most structures that are still standing have gaping holes in their walls or whole sides missing. There are no power lines overhead so I assume there is no electricity. I can't imagine there is running water but I hope I'm wrong.

What the children do all day is a mystery. They have nothing but the clothes they are wearing. The other day when I looked out of the blast proof window of the Humvee I noticed a child, maybe 8 or 9, jumping up and down on a bombed out tank. He then swung from the main gun barrel like it was placed there for his amusement. Given the amount of rust on the tank, it must have been a causality of the first war. That means the kid probably grew up thinking it was normal to play on a destroyed Russian made tank.

When the U.S. first invaded Iraq almost 2 years ago, soldiers used to stop and pass out food, candy and toys. But this practice is now forbidden. In fact as you enter Iraq you will see a sign spray painted on a concrete blast barrier reminding you that if you do stop to give goodies to the children you will be charged under the uniform code of military justice.

What happened was kids would get so excited when they saw a convoy that they would rush out into the street. The vehicles would stop and then insurgents would open fire or detonate bombs. Even after the practice of playing Santa Claus stopped insurgents would convince kids to play in the road and not move when a convoy came. When they convoy would stop they would be attacked. Most lethal of all is when they would wire 7 or 8 bombs together near where the kids were told to play. The IED's would then be detonated destroying numerous vehicles and wounding or killing many.

Now convoy drivers are forbidden to stop. If a child is in the road they will honk or yell and may swerve. If the child doesn't move they must continue forward. Before this policy took place soldiers were sent to towns and villages to warn the adults and children of this. Now, no one gets in the way of a convoy. It is a stark reminder that this is war and the line between living and dying is faint.