

# U.S. soldiers see poor Iraqi youths master art of begging

Poverty-stricken children are known to beg soldiers for necessities such as food, water and shoes

By Mark Washburn  
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BAGHDAD, Iraq — "Pepsi, Pepsi," the Iraqi boy implores the U.S. soldiers guarding a convoy stopped on the roadside.

No Pepsi.

"Baby," he says, making a popcorn-eating motion, meaning he was little and wanted food.

No sale.

Then a new tack. "Money for shoes!" he calls, smiling and pointing to his bare feet.

No handout.

He moves up the line to a tractor-trailer whose civilian driver is inspecting his flatbed load and repeats his appeals. The driver hands over an MRE, a military meal sealed in vinyl.

As the convoy pulls out, the boy — he looks about 4 or 5 — clutches the MRE against his small chest, tiny but experienced fingers tugging out a pack of M&Ms.

The encounter, replayed dozens of times daily along the main supply routes feeding the occupation force in Iraq, is, by turns, a poignant, comical and sometimes tragic ballet with pity and poverty in starring roles.

Today's convoy is on a 340-mile journey that started at dawn in southern Iraq and will end at dusk north of Baghdad.

It first stops for mechanical adjustments near Samawah in southern Iraq, on a forlorn swath where little vegetation obstructs the desolate panorama.

Soon, as though bidden by a genie's magical fingerplay, children

appear where no children had been before, barefoot and fearless panhandlers materializing from the desert dust.

Because of the massive tradeout of U.S. forces — 200,000 soldiers are on the move in and out of Iraq now — more than a dozen convoys can pass this spot in an hour. When one stops, it beckons like a many-wheeled pinata.

A small boy about 4 walks up wearing a soiled Dallas Cowboys T-shirt, opens a candy bar he's gotten from a trucker and throws the wrapper to the ground.

"Food, food," he bleats to the soldiers. "No shoes, no shoes."

The oldest child is perhaps 12. No adults are in sight. Convoys are pounding past at 60 mph or more.

First Lt. Eric Hedlund, 33, of Rio Rancho, N.M., admits he's conflicted about the begging children, in part because he suspects the MREs and candy they take from truckers feed those who shoot at convoys at night. "Most of the food they give out goes to support the anti-coalition cause," he says.

But he says it is Iraq's youngest generation that is easiest to win over in a struggle for hearts and minds. When he goes to a village near his base, he carries candy for the children that he pays for himself because rules of engagement prohibit giving military food or water to Iraqis.

On the convoy route, though, he shakes the children off, doesn't want them near the trucks.

"We've had kids get run over trying to get candy," Hedlund says.

"Many have been hit, I guarantee you that," confirms Lt. Col. Thomas Sisinyak of Huntersville, N.C. He is riding along on this day to inspect the main supply route from Kuwait to Baghdad and beyond, one of his command responsibilities with the Charlotte, N.C.-based 812th Transportation Battalion.

Sisinyak has a son at home who's almost 2, not much younger than some of the children who approach the convoy, wiggling festively, giving thumbs-up signs to the soldiers.

Sometimes the encounters are more painful. In some Iraqi towns, like the unruly Batha, children aren't looking for handouts but mischief. They hurl rocks at the trucks.

Hedlund's soldiers have developed a cunning counterattack: Penny-size lemon drops fired from slingshots. The hard outer coatings shatter on impact, inflicting a memorable sting.

"That's a lot better than a bullet," Hedlund says.

At day's end, the convoy reaches its destination, a seized Iraqi air base occupied by U.S. forces near Balad. It is a farm area and as the trucks wait in line to get through the checkpoint, children emerge from the fields.

One boy, no more than 3, breaks away from his older brother and wanders alone among the idling rigs, stepping into the travel lanes as Hedlund charges forward in his Humvee to run off adult vendors approaching the trucks to offer phony Rolex watches for \$20 and other trinkets.

The child turns around, sees the Humvee bearing down and darts back into the thicket of trucks.

Hedlund has worked security for truckers on the supply route since it was established in the wake of the fall of Baghdad. In that year, he has noticed a change in the children.

At first, they were gleeful at the handouts from Americans. Now they see it as a form of tribute, a toll to be extracted.

"They used to say 'thank you,'" he says. "Now they don't care. It's more, 'gimme, gimme.'"

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"Best Meal for a Deal," 2nd Place, "Best Omelette," 2nd Place, "Best Breakfast," 2nd Place, "Best Vegetarian Fare," 2nd Place, Register-Guard, 1987. • "Best Breakfast," In Town Magazine, 1995. • "Best Breakfast," In Town Magazine, 1996. • "Best Breakfast," Oregon Daily Emerald, 1997. • "Best Breakfast," Eugene Weekly, 1998. • "Best Breakfast," Eugene Weekly, 1999. • "Best Breakfast," Eugene Weekly, 2000. • "Best Breakfast," Eugene Weekly, 2001. • "Best Breakfast," Eugene Weekly, 2002. • "Best Breakfast," Eugene Weekly, 2003.

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