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V CORPS' 1ST INFANTRY DIVISION ESTABLISHES OFFICE TO HELP COMPENSATE IRAQIS FOR PROPERTY SIEZED BY SADDAM

1st Infantry Division release

TIKRIT, Iraq – Iraqis who had their land seized under Saddam Hussein now have a legal way to get it back.

The Iraqi Property Claims Commission opened for business May 25 in an old Iraq Ministry of Justice building to compensate citizens who had property taken, either with land or cash.

If landowners still have a title or other documentation showing property ownership, their cases are simple, said Capt. Dan Stigall, legal liaison to the Coalition Provisional Authority for V Corps' 1st Infantry Division. But even if they don't have proper documentation, the commission can help them get it, Stigall added.

Anyone who had land taken by the Ba'athist regime though April 9, 2003 is eligible for compensation. "Oftentimes the land was just taken by Saddam Hussein," Stigall said. "Sometimes (people) were forced into a contract where they were given a petty sum...for the land."

The center will deal with claims of property seized by Saddam, but not property destroyed in war. Those claims are handled by normal Army claims processes, Stigall said.

Besides providing a measure of justice, the commission is intended to be an initial step toward greater Iraqi autonomy, explained the captain. "This is going to be an Iraqi commission run by Iraqis," he said. "It's a good example of what's going to happen in the rest of the country. We helped get it started, but after today it will be run by Iraqis for Iraqis. There will be very little coalition involvement. We will offer assistance, but it will be a very behind-the-scenes role."

Saddam gobbled up so much property, Stigall remarked, that estimates of how many Iraqis are due compensation invariably fall short.

"Every time we try to come up with an estimate, we find out there were more than we thought," he said.

Besides the legal benefits, Stigall thinks the commission will yield cultural dividends as well.

"When Saddam Hussein took people's land and displaced them, it created ethnic tension in society," he said. "Rather than...take a gun and have the victim turn into a criminal, this gives them a legal way to get back what was taken, and gives them a degree of healing. They deserve some measure of justice and this provides that. It helps people know when they were wronged, it didn't go unnoticed."

