

Iraq deputy PM blames corruption on UN

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Iraq's culture of corruption stems from the actions of the international community and the controversial UN oil-for-food scheme, the deputy prime minister Barham Saleh said on Thursday.

Speaking at a new anti-corruption forum in Baghdad, Saleh said that the programme, run between 1996 and 2003 while Iraq was under UN sanctions, and what he charged was the body's wasteful use of money were to blame for the rampant corruption that bedevils Iraq.

"A large responsibility for the outbreak of corruption in Iraq lies on the international community," said Saleh.

"The scandals of food-for-oil and the wasting of public riches by the UN... is evidence of the serious damage that has deepened the problem in the country."

For seven years before the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the oil-for-food programme allowed Baghdad -- which was under a punishing trade embargo since its invasion of Kuwait in 1990 -- to sell oil in return for cash to buy food and medicine.

In 2000, then president Saddam Hussein began making the right to purchase its oil under the UN programme conditional on the buyer's willingness to pay kickbacks.

The regime diverted about 1.8 billion dollars (1.2 billion euros), an independent probe found in 2005.

"The Iraqi people want a clear statement on how this money was administered in the past, to take back the stolen money, and to chase and call into account those who played with the public's money," said Saleh.

An analysis by the Berlin-based Transparency International in September found that Iraq was one of the three most corrupt countries in the world alongside Somalia and Myanmar.

The anti-corruption forum met for the first time on Thursday, to bring together ministers, members of parliament, international representatives and businessmen.

"It is necessary to coordinate with the international society." Saleh said, "But we refuse any foreign mandate on Iraqi resolutions."

Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki declared in his New Year message that 2008 would be a year of economic development and fighting corruption.

The White House said in September that Maliki was "working hard" to fight corruption but declined to say whether he had been "adequately successful."

Its comments came after a damning report by the US embassy, posted on the Internet, painted a grim picture of corruption in all Iraqi government departments and said Maliki's office had shown "open hostility" to independent investigators