

IRAQ

Braving the road to Anbar

The journey from Baghdad to Anbar, a poor, desert region in the heart of Iraq, starts at dawn. Omar, the leader of the truck convoy for this UNICEF-supported relief mission, meets the transport team at the Baghdad warehouse at first light to start loading medicines and supplies. They have worked together to develop a delivery plan that minimizes the very real risk of losing a truck to hijacking or a roadside explosion.

“First, we must collect the supplies from five main medical warehouses in Baghdad,” says Omar. “Some are located in Sunni areas and others in Shia ones. For each of these areas we send a driver who belongs to the same sect to ensure they are not attacked.”

“The warehouses are holding critical medicines as well as vaccines and blood supplies,” he says. “There is a great shortage of these things in Anbar, so our delivery is urgent.”

“Detailed planning is key to success,” says Omar. “The materials will leave Baghdad in one big trailer. But when we reach the road to Anbar we must offload the trailer and redistribute the supplies into smaller consignments. The trailer is at greater risk than lorries. This way we lose less if the transport is attacked.”

“The Baghdad-Anbar highway has become very dangerous. In February we sent our driver to Baghdad to collect medical supplies. The driver and the truck were hijacked on the road. They never made it back to Anbar.”

The journey may be risky, but Omar knows that Anbar’s sick children can no longer afford a delay. For health workers in Anbar, the situation has been becoming increasingly frustrating. Insecurity is denying them the most basic medical supplies.

“Our shelves were literally empty. We had to tell sick people seeking medical treatment to go outside the province, or leave the country,” says Ahmed Yehya, who manages the medical warehouse in Anbar.

For Ahmed and his colleagues, relief is finally on the way. But getting a truck out of Baghdad – even with medical supplies – is a difficult and nerve-wracking process.

“The transport trucks in Baghdad are stopped and searched many times before we leave the city,” says Omar. “Sometimes the checkpoints are run by the multinational forces or sometimes by militias. Our goods are offloaded completely, which causes long delays.”

“The militias want to be sure that the cargo is not going to areas opposed to their organizations. Our driver has to show the transport manifest. He reassures the gunmen that he’s carrying medicines necessary to save the lives of sick children and women in Anbar. Thankfully, we are allowed to pass.”

“The journey to Anbar used to take four hours. Now it takes up to three days. It can take a day just to reach the outskirts of Baghdad. This time we are lucky and it takes less. We are on the road to Anbar before dusk.”

“Once we are outside Baghdad, we move the goods from our main trailer into smaller lorries. Each lorry has a driver from exactly the same area as the destination of his manifest. From now on we rely on the protection of Anbar’s tribal leaders. They said they would enable us to negotiate the checkpoints and ensure that our drivers are protected once we reach the area. Most importantly, they will host our drivers who have to stay overnight in Anbar. A curfew is in force and they cannot drive back to Baghdad after dark.”

But, of course, there are things that no one can protect Omar’s drivers from.

“Criminals on the road can try to hijack us, or send us off the road with an improvised explosive device,” says Omar. “We watch out for signs of these while we are driving. You never know what will happen these days.”

“Our supplies arrive in Anbar just in time to beat the curfew. We meet the medical warehouse staff and people from Anbar’s Directorate of Health to start the offloading process. They are as relieved as I am. I guess they didn’t think we would make it,” says Omar.

“You can feel morale go up as the supplies arrive. The hospitals know that medicines are on their way. They tell us how much they appreciate this humanitarian support.”

“Tonight the job is nearly done – but not quite. We have more truckloads to deliver – 4,500 tonnes in total, in 30 trucks. Tomorrow we must return to Baghdad and start again. I hope that, next time, all goes as well as this.”