

UNLOCKING IRAQ'S OIL AND GAS INDUSTRY

Iraq is poised for significant economic growth, provided that a stable and appropriate political regime and secure environment are in place

The country boasts a vast wealth of natural resources with almost nine per cent of global oil reserves. This means that Iraq will play a vital role in supplying the future worldwide demand for oil and gas.

In order to deliver on the economic potential, particularly in relation to oil and gas, a number of key factors must be addressed, most notably around developing the indigenous workforce to ensure that the country can explore for and produce hydrocarbons efficiently and effectively.

Stirling Group, a leading provider of Health, Safety and Environmental (HSE) services to the oil and gas industry across Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Asia Pacific has been operating in Iraq for over five years and is, more than any other provider, acutely aware of the challenges involved in building a safe and competent workforce that will help Iraq to become an influential energy player.

With over 130 people on the ground, providing a full range of HSE training courses, including firefighting training, Stirling Group is well placed to drive the development of a learning infrastructure for the people of Iraq.

"With falling oil prices and security threats having a significant impact on the future of Iraq's oil and gas industry, there is an even greater need for a skilled indigenous workforce to ensure projects reach their successful completion and that the industry is fully prepared to exploit the country's potential when the market picks up," says Angus Neil managing director of Stirling Group.

"Iraq has a substantial youth population but unemployment among this group is high. Vocational training in the province has suffered from long-term neglect and consequently has not been responsive to the sector's demand for skills.

"We have an important role to play in ensuring there is a pipeline of talented Iraqi oil and gas workers who have been trained to common global safety standards and are



equipped with the necessary skills to carry out their role in the field."

Stirling Group recently secured a significant contract with Petrochina to train 100 Iraqi students to become professional firefighters. This three-year agreement will see the group provide ongoing training and support for fire crews in Iraq.

"We are currently training 20 young Iraqis, utilising the Prince Abdullah Fire Academy in Amman, Jordan. The six-week firefighting course will cover key disciplines such as breathing apparatus, hose and fire pump use, petrochemical fires and first aid," Neil adds.

"Due to the shortage of qualified workers, one of the most difficult challenges when operating in Iraq is finding and developing the right people. We often have to look at recruiting from neighbouring regions, which can mean taking people away from their families and friends. It's therefore crucial that we provide as much support to the trainees as possible to ensure they feel comfortable and get the most out of the learning experience.

"There is also a lack of understanding about the importance of safety in the workplace amongst the untrained Iraqi population and the language barrier also presents its own set of challenges. To address this, every trainee is paired up with an Arabic speaking, fully qualified mentor to help build their confidence

and guide them through the programme, step by step. This ensures that quality and discipline is maintained, but it also allows the students to learn from experienced personnel who have worked in the industry for more than 25 years."

On completion of the programme, the recruits will be deployed as professional firefighters in the Halfaya Field in Southern Iraq. Stirling Group is managing the entire project, as a turnkey solution for Petrochina. There are a further two courses planned for this year and existing firefighters will be put through a fast-track refresher course to ensure they are trained to the same high standard as the new crew members.

"The emphasis on local training and development programmes has been felt across the country and much has been done to develop a safer workforce through positive changes in behaviour.

"Our work in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region accounts for 50 per cent of our business. We've seen a steady growth, which has allowed us to increase our footprint and helped us to become the HSE training provider for many of the oil majors with operations in Iraq, further increasing our investment in the country.

"Iraq needs a world-class workforce and Iraqi ministries are budgeting accordingly, investing heavily in training strategies. However, it is imperative that the education and training provided meets rigorous international standards. We can lay the groundwork but it is the employers and the workers themselves who will ultimately drive long-term change.

"There is still a long way to go in terms of overall development of the market; however Iraq is on the road to transforming itself after decades of turmoil and the effects of war. We see nothing but growth in terms of overall activity in the industry. As this happens it will be important for all personnel to have the best health and safety training and support to ensure operations remain productive and people stay safe," Neil concludes. 