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Inglis: Iraq needs constitution soon
Congressman makes second trip to Baghdad

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WASHINGTON BUREAU

WASHINGTON -- Rep. Bob Inglis remains optimistic about the future of Iraq after a second visit there Sunday, but it's an optimism "seasoned by an awareness of the complexity of the issues."

"I think there is a risk of civil war. That's a different situation from when I was here in February 2005," Inglis, R-Travelers Rest, said in a telephone interview from the U.S. military's fortified Green Zone in Baghdad. He planned to spend the night there in one of the palaces of one of the sons of deposed Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

Inglis and Reps. Christopher Shays, R-Conn., Al Green, D-Texas, and Brian Higgins, D-N.Y., are scheduled to spend part of today in Iraq before they move on to the Darfur region of Sudan in North Africa. The Arab-led government is accused of war crimes against the black African population there.

If the strife-torn country is to stabilize, Inglis said the Iraqi government must move quickly to write a constitution that lays out how the various religious and ethnic factions will share power as well as oil revenues.

Advertisement Inglis said the four-man congressional delegation delivered that message Sunday to Iraqi President Jalal Talabani during a meeting. Inglis said they stressed the "need to make swift progress" in stabilizing the country and fighting the sectarian violence that claimed nearly 3,000 Iraqi lives in July.

After his 2005 visit to Iraq with Sen. Jim DeMint, R-S.C., Inglis thought U.S. troops might be able to leave sooner rather than later once a democratically elected national government was in place and the Iraqi army and police took on more of the security responsibilities from the U.S. military.


Instead, violence escalated despite those moves toward self-governance. For example, a suicide bomber on Tuesday killed five people when he exploded a bomb-rigged truck outside the party offices of the Iraqi president.

Inglis said his current trip with its earlier stops in Israel and Jordan as well as talks with a key official with the Palestine Liberation Organization convinced him a functioning democracy in Iraq is more critical than ever.

Israeli, Jordanian and Palestinian officials told the four congressmen that the battle in the Middle East is between moderates and extremists for the support of Arab general public.

"We really need progress in Iraq so a stable Iraq can be an example of what can be accomplished (through democracy)," Inglis said.

But he said the Middle East definition of a moderate may bewilder many Americans. PLO chief negotiator Saeb Erekat described his group as a moderate force in comparison with Hamas, which defeated the PLO's political party in elections. The United States considers both groups to be anti-Israel terrorist organizations.

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"It was strange listening to him describe himself as moderate as he sat beneath a picture of Yasser Arafat," Inglis said.

In Iraq, Inglis said he heard some good news from U.S. embassy and military officials. Military officials say they have greatly weakened al-Qaeda in Iraq with the recent capture of more top leaders of the terrorist group, Inglis said. He also learned of a pilot program in which selected "hot spots" in Baghdad receive extra security measures and services, such as water and electricity to drive out insurgents and build people's confidence in the Iraqi government.

Before the four-man delegation moves on, Inglis said he hoped to spend more time talking to U.S. soldiers. Sunday, he met a South Carolinian, Maj. Robert Love of Columbia, who is on his second tour of duty in Iraq.

Inglis said he admires U.S. troops and their commitment to duty in a dangerous, and in the summer excruciatingly hot, environment. It was 118 degrees during the day Sunday and 98 degrees at nightfall, he said.

"The hardest thing is leaving because there's such a sense of mission among the military, the State Department people and even the contractors," Inglis said.
