

Postcards from Iraq

Corps concentrates on Capacity Building in Iraq

by LTC Andrew Nelson, DDE Tikrit

The USACE Gulf Region North District is supporting the First Infantry Division (1ID) mission to provide a stable and secure environment in Iraq by executing reconstruction operations for the Project and Contracting Office (PCO). As the PCO "construction division," GRD and its subordinate districts have established a network of Area, Resident, and Project offices to manage the contract construction of everything from multi-million dollar power plants to basic renovation of schools. All work is supporting the First Infantry Division's objectives of providing basic services to the Iraqi people, creating jobs and economic growth for local Iraqis, and providing "ownership" of the process by the local Iraqi government.

GRN is placing significant emphasis on the process by placing Engineer LTCs, as Deputy District Engineers (Forward), with each of the Major Subordinate Commands at Brigade Combat Team (BCT) level. As one of those DDEs, I coordinate GRN actions and support to the 1ID's 2d BCT in the province of Salah ad Din. Headquartered in Tikrit, the birthplace of the Muslim leader Salah ad Din, as well as Saddam Hussein. The 2BCT is engaged with the Iraqi provincial government to reconstruct the basic infrastructure of Salah ad Din.

In Salah ad Din alone, GRN is currently executing 110 projects in direct support of Iraqi reconstruction. These projects include renovating 83 schools, 8 fire stations, and 17 rail stations, constructing 9 new public health clinics, 26 kilometers of rural roads, and repairing a 300 MW gas turbine power plant. These projects are being funded by the Iraqi Relief and Reconstruction Fund and provide direct improvement to the quality of life of the Iraqi people.

The USACE effort supports the US Ambassador's and Division Commander's goal of capacity building in Iraq by putting responsibility in the hands of the Iraqi government, project funding flowing to Iraqi contractors and suppliers, and creating jobs for Iraqi workers. A great example is the execution of school projects in the province. Instead of contracting with a large US design/build firm, 1ID and GRN chose to utilize the Iraqi network of engineers throughout the provincial and district governments, as well as the provincial Education Director to identify and assess schools that needed renovation or major reconstruction. The Iraqi engineers completed thorough assessments and cost estimates that were then solicited through the provincial council to local contractors. A measure of success was that local contractors submitted over 800 bids for 37 schools in the province. A committee including the provincial Director General of Education, an education ministry engineer, a 2BCT representative, and a GRN representative conducted the source selection of local Iraqi companies. By using this method for 56 school projects, we are providing over \$3 million of stimulus directly to the local economies while placing responsibility in and, therefore, empowering the local government.

The process is not without challenges, as we have experienced delays due to threats against contractors and suppliers by insurgents, political wrangling by municipal and provincial leaders, and aborted attempts by unqualified contractors. However, the USACE team continues to "persist and persevere" in order to find solutions to the issues. One method to address the security situation is to hire local Iraqi engineers to execute the quality control and assurance inspections of construction projects.

Since a US presence on a local project site might bring unwanted attention to a school or health clinic, GRN has hired a number of Iraqi engineers to be our eyes on the project. The engineers provide direct reporting of quality and completeness of construction through site inspection reports and digital photos of progress. We are working through the technical requirements of the process, but are able to confirm quality, put Iraqis to work, and reduce the risk to our own staff.

As I look forward to the coming months, I predict a continued expansion of project execution through the Iraqi local government. The objective of "Capacity Building" is to ultimately put the entire process back into Iraqi hands. This would empower the local leadership, provide confidence in the government by the populace, and lead to a more secure Iraq. The sooner we accomplish that goal, the sooner we may all come home. I look forward to a better year in 2005 for the Iraqi people.

The Provincial Director General of Education (second from left) selects the contractor to renovate a local school in Salah ad Din. (Photos provided by LTC Nelson)



LTC Andrew Nelson is one of many Army Engineers helping rebuild a free Iraq.

