

Postcards from Iraq



Iraq — there's a true sense of hope

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Today marks my three-week anniversary in-country and it seems as if I've absorbed three months of information. Among other things, I've visited at least 21 project sites, attended dozens of meetings and read countless emails. Otherwise stated, I'm busier than the proverbial "one legged man in a kicking contest" and wouldn't have it any other way.

My office is currently responsible for \$250 million in construction projects. We're overseeing work on the Basra Children's' Oncology Hospital (1 in 5 Iraqi kids don't live past 5), the Iraqi Navy Seawall and Pier in the Port of Umm Qasr, new water and wastewater treatment plants, new Iraqi military facilities, running grid power to Pump Station 2 at the Sweet Water Canal (the main source of water for Basra), the Basra Central Prison, new police stations, two courthouses, and a slaughter house. There are others, but this gives you the range of work we're executing.

I'm with a great staff of exceptional people including our Iraqi engineers who visit the projects daily documenting the quality and progress of construction, and that it's being done in a safe manner. I'm very enthused to be part of USACE's historic mission here.

Regarding the country of Iraq and in particular Basra, I was saddened to see there are significant issues still to be addressed — rubbish in the streets, drainage and sewage problems, potable water not widely available, and electricity in short supply. Nevertheless, there are signs of progress -- sidewalk improvement projects using brick pavers, beautification efforts with tree plantings along roadways, new bus stops, parks, and a sizeable amount of new residential construction.

When we drive through downtown Basra, it is absolutely bustling with activity. Most importantly, there is now a true sense of hope here. Since the Charge-of-the-Knights campaign this spring which was an Iraqi military-led operation to clear out the insurgency, the general populace is finally experiencing some real security, with police checkpoints now scattered throughout the city. Threats still exist but right now things are

pretty decent. As to the weather, we are all basking and enjoying the most perfect weather days imaginable. Everyone knows the other shoe will drop in the summer. The winter here is like a perfect autumn day back home. Nights and mornings are chilly enough to turn the heaters on for a bit, but the days are sunny and mild.

When I was reunited with the team of Iraqis with whom I had previously worked, the joy was immeasurable. It was quite gratifying to learn that these courageous individuals had not missed a step and continued to perform at an extremely high level. They are the backbone of our organization in Iraq. That's a lasting legacy I'm proud to be part of.



New courthouse takes shape.



Iraqi crew is quadrupling size of Basra water treatment facility.



Robert Vanoer



Iraqi youngsters say hello.



*Basra Area Engineer Robert Vanoer
Speaks with Iraqi engineers at a Basra Project site.*