



Isn't fighting fires dangerous enough?

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BAGHDAD, Iraq – Actions speak louder than words - particularly in Iraq. Such is absolutely the case, every morning, when Baghdad Fire Chief, Laith Abbas, gets out of bed and heads to work.

Each day, he faces the reality that there is a significant “price on his head” by those who would destroy efforts to build a democracy in Iraq. However, for the good of the country, there are those - like this intense, wiry professional - who strive each day, one difficult step at a time, to build their part of what they hope will soon become an active, viable democracy.



A reality check example of what these people face may be seen in that, barely three months ago, near the midnight hour, insurgents broke into the home of Col. Abbas' driver. Then, they methodically killed him, his wife and five children. No sooner did another volunteer to take the killed man's job before he, as well, was brutally murdered.

A thirty-two year veteran of Baghdad firefighting tells Peter Rutherford and Martin Daniels (middle), of the Japan International Cooperation System, how much the 70 new fire trucks, contributed by Japan, will help him in better doing his job. Ten new fire stations have been built in the immediate Baghdad area. Across Iraq, 93 stations have been completed, are being built or started soon.

But a deep and fervent belief in what he's doing and long, hard work, filled days keep the Chief going, though the threatening specter of violence looms ever near. And work he does - long arduous hours.

Recently, he took a moment from his hectic schedule to view fire fighting training by the teams from seven of Baghdad's fire stations, representing slightly less than 10% of Baghdad's total firefighter force. On this sweltering 120 degree afternoon, these activities were being conducted by Staff Sgt. Michael DiDonato, of the 443rd Civil Affairs Battalion in the Government Support Team, of the 3rd Infantry Division. Chief Abbas paused briefly from his "active observation" to note that "before the war, we had only empty fire trucks that did not work and no equipment." And training in those days? "None," conveys his rueful expression.

But such is no longer the case. "Sgt. D," as the Iraqis he teaches fondly call him, cites that over the last nine months nearly 500 of Baghdad's fire fighters have undergone various aspects of training. Some of the training that he has overseen includes first aid, drivers training, engine driven water pumping, drafting from a water source, advancing a hose line into a blaze, application of fire foam and thermo imaging camera work.

Understandably proud of all that has been accomplished; the intense Army Reservist is a fire fighter with the Tinton Fall, NJ, Fire Department 36-1, and a fire instructor at the Middletown Fire Academy. A resident of nearby Manasquan, he says, "I'm impressed with the 'can do' attitude by all of these Baghdad area firefighters. They clearly come to these classes to learn."

In what he obviously believes, the Chief praises Staff Sgt. DiDonato's work and asserts, "We need to build our country and must do so by working with coalition forces." He continues by giving expansive credit to the diverse coalition elements that have been integral in building a modern, firefighting team with the necessary equipment, facilities and training.

Examples of this assistance are seen in U.S. Agency for International Development, a key partner in this effort, along with their contractor Skylink who also provided hands-on firefighting training, in addition to contributing a substantial amount of first aid supplies. Supporting this huge task also are the Project and Construction Office, along with the Gulf Region Division of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers that built 10 new stations in the immediate Baghdad area and re-built many more. Countrywide, 93 have been completed, are being built or soon will be started.

But more than these endeavors, numerous countries have been an active part of this critical effort. In addition to the U.S., new fire trucks were contributed by Germany and Japan – 70 in total from the latter. As regards these bright and shining vehicles, the Chief smiles slightly and states simply, "It's all modern and new for my guys!"

Before racing to his next pressing meeting, with one eye ever glancing over his shoulder, he looks us in the eye and affirms that the Iraqi people can do this. He expresses appreciation, one last time, for the coalition's many efforts. Then, just prior to leaving, he turns and says quietly, "We need to build a new Iraq with freedom and liberty."