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## *Army engineer sees significant progress in Iraq*

By John Connor  
Gulf Region South District



About 50 local Iraqis are on the construction crew building a 200 cubic meter per hour small water treatment plant and distribution network in Snaditch, a community of about 500 households in Babil Province. The \$1.1 million project is expected to be finished next summer. Shown at left is Lt. Col. Michael Darrow with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers which is overseeing construction work at that site. (USACE photo by Alicia Embrey)

**Thi Qar Province, Iraq** — Lt. Col. Mike Darrow, serving two tours in Iraq with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, says he's seen real progress during the past five years.

He says the biggest change is that Iraqis are now making decisions and allo-

cating their own resources to improve essential services for local residents. In 2003, Darrow had a 6-person Forward Engineer Support Team, and was responsible for making assessments and immediate renovations to get key ministry facilities back up and functioning in Iraq's four southern provinces. During that assign-

ment, he hired the first Iraqi engineers in southern Iraq - a total of 12.

"Most are still employed by Gulf Region Division's district in southern Iraq, which oversees projects in Iraq's nine southern provinces and now has a total of 140 Iraqi engineers on its staff," he noted.

A memorable moment during Darrow's second tour came on his first day, when he met one of the Iraqi engineers he hired in 2003. "I knew the first tour had made a difference and that I had an opportunity this time to build on those efforts," he said. "This has been a great tour."

Darrow, who – at home – serves as deputy commander of the Corps' Norfolk District office, has played a central role during his two tours in incorporating Iraqi engineers into USACE's Iraq reconstruction efforts and expanding their presence and the scope of their duties. Darrow set

up his district's first all-Iraqi Resident Office in North Babil, and hired more full-time Iraqi engineers in Qadisiyah and Wasit, as part of a major USACE effort to build capability and prepare Iraqis to manage and maintain all of the infrastructure after the U.S. withdraws from Iraq.

While upbeat about progress in Iraq, Darrow acknowledges that formidable challenges remain. These include assuring the operations and maintenance of completed projects. "We build it, but there are few trained individuals and limited Iraqi funds set aside to do the routine maintenance to sustain things like water treatment plants," he said.

As head of the Forat Area Office, Darrow oversees projects in Babil, Karbala, Najaf, Qadisiyah, and Wasit provinces. His staff is responsible for 58 active construction projects valued at \$175 million with an additional \$142 million worth of pro-



Lt. Col. Mike Darrow with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers gives an Iraqi youngster a new soccer ball donated by supporters stateside. (USACE photo by Alicia Embrey)



Lt. Col. Michael Darrow with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE photo by Alicia Embrey)

jects either in the pipeline or in the "concept" stage.

The planned projects include four small water treatment units, costing \$1.4 million each, in Babil Province, which are funded by the government of Iraq. That transition to the government allocating its own resources to improve essential services throughout the country is a trend that shows significant progress, Darrow said.

Among other projects underway is a \$25 million electrical substation in Qadisiyah Province and a job at Kufa University in Najaf that includes the completion of electrical and mechanical engineering buildings that were under construction at the beginning of the war.

Darrow counts the rehabilitation of the Iskandariyah Vocational-Technical School as among the most noteworthy projects with which he has been involved. The job

is renovating seven dorms, a classroom building and an auditorium at a cost of \$4.3 million. "The contractor massed efforts, had over 200 workers per day on the site, and is set to finish three-to-four months ahead of schedule - a feat unheard of with the typical Iraqi contractor," Darrow said. Most importantly, the contractor has hired more than 50 Votech graduates to help with the work, building on their new skills and shrinking the unemployed ranks from which the insurgency might draw. When the renovations began, the school was offering only a couple classes for an enrollment of 30 students -- next year Iskandariyah Votech is expected to train 4,000 students in a variety of occupational specialties including masonry, electrical, carpentry, welding, computers, and auto mechanics.

On the basis of his two tours in Iraq, Darrow has concluded that considerable benefits can be gained by USACE civilians serving in Iraq. "I would recommend that every USACE civilian do at least a six-month tour," he said. "It allows everyone to be challenged, learn new things, and professionally develop. People leaving here know they've made a difference."

Darrow, who will return to the Norfolk District when he completes his six-month tour in December, is married and the father of three children. A native of Cleveland, N.Y., he earned a Bachelor of Science degree in civil and environmental engineering from Clarkson University and a Masters Degree in environmental engineering from Cornell University.

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