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 Menu

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NEWS

[DoD News](#)
[Advisories](#)
[Contracts](#)
[Live Briefings](#)
[Photos](#)
[Releases](#)
[Slides](#)
[Speeches](#)
[Today in DoD](#)
[Transcripts](#)

[American Forces](#)
[News](#)
[Articles](#)
[Radio](#)
[Television](#)
[Special Reports](#)

[DoD Search](#)

[About News](#)
[News Archive](#)
[News by E-mail](#)

[Other News Sources](#)

Presenter: Assistant Secretary of Defense for Legislative Affairs, Powell Moore

Thursday, October 30, 2003 9:29 a.m.
EST

Representatives in DoD Briefing Room Discuss Recent Congressional Delegation to Iraq

(Participating were Deborah Pryce (R-Ohio), Sue Kelly (R-NY), Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R. Fla.), Jennifer Dunn (R. Wash.) Darlene Hooley (D-Ore.), Carolyn McCarthy (D-NY), Marsha Blackburn (R-Tenn.), Katherine Harris (R-Fla.). Photos can be viewed at: <http://www.defenselink.mil/photos/Oct2003/031030-D-2987S-006.html>.

MR. MOORE: Good morning. The secretary hosted another breakfast this morning for a congressional delegation that returned from Iraq. They were in Iraq, I think, on the 23rd and 24th of October. Just for those of you who are keeping score, we've had 98 members of the House and 25 senators who have been to Iraq since the 1st of May. We have three members of the House who have been there twice.

The chairman of the delegation is also chairman of the Republic Conference, Representative Deborah Pryce of Ohio. She was joined by Ileana Ros-Lehtinen from Florida, Jennifer Dunn from Washington, Sue Kelly from New York, Marsha Blackburn from Tennessee, Katherine Harris from Florida, Darlene Hooley from Oregon and Carolyn McCarthy from New York. Also attending the breakfast was the deputy secretary of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Undersecretaries Zakheim, Feith, Larry DiRita and myself.

So with that, Chairman Pryce, I'll turn it over to you.

REP. PRYCE: Thank you. Thank you very much.

I'm Deborah Pryce, 15th District of Ohio -- that's Columbus, Ohio. I'm the Conference chairman for the House Republicans, and it was my honor to lead this delegation, a historic delegation of all-women members, bipartisan delegation, to take a look at what was going on in Iraq.

Our major focus was -- well, we had several things we wanted to do. We wanted to visit our troops, and check on their morale and encourage them. We wanted to see how the rebuilding and the infrastructure and the progress on the ground was going. And third of all, but which became a more major focus when we got there -- we wanted to visit with the Iraqi women, and understand how the war has affected them and their families, how we can encourage them to become integrated into their society, how we can get them involved in all levels of their government, because it's our belief that truly secular and representative government must include women Iraqis. And they have made some progress thus far, but we have a lot of work on our hands ahead. And we intend to continue relationships that we made over there with the -- some of the Iraqi women, and build on those relationships and do what we can from back here in the States to get them fully involved in their new democracy.

We made that point to the secretary this morning. We had a long discussion of how we can help from here. And it's going to be an ongoing process. And we expect to continue to see more and more Iraqi women involved in this new fledgling democracy.

We will each say a few words to you and then we'll take questions. There are eight of us, so we'll try to keep it brief. And I'll now introduce Darlene Hooley, who was the Democratic representative lead on this trip.

Darlene?

REP. HOOLEY: Thank you, Deborah, and thank you for the wonderful job you did leading this trip.

One of my goals was, in fact, to talk to the women. And this was an opportunity, as they're looking at forming new kinds of councils throughout the country, to encourage women to be involved in government. This is also a time when they're going to be writing their constitution. And again, one of my goals, and I think all of our goals, was to make sure that there is a woman on the constitutional writing committee so that, in fact, they are included. I mean, after all, there is -- 65 percent of the population are women, because they've lost so many young men. And so it is important that they be involved.

The other thing that really struck me, particularly when we were up north in Mosul, is the innovative programs that have been started up there, where with a little bit of money and with the Iraqis' help, they have made a lot of things work, whether that's a new asphalt plant, or getting a refinery up and running, or instead of putting a pipeline in, they're now going to carry the oil in tankers over rail lines. But they have -- the soldiers have been involved, the Iraqis have been involved, and some of it comes from the soldiers' ideas about what needs to be done. But I think having some money that's flexible, that can get people started and get some things up and running is incredibly important. So I was very pleased to see that piece happening.

And again, we talked -- the other thing -- the other reason I'm here this morning is to also encourage the secretary. We have a great deal of influence right now in what happens to -- as they form these governments and to making sure that everyone understands in the service that women are an important part of society, their voices need to be heard. And so I'm encouraging our own military to help make that happen.

Thank you.

REP. ROS-LEHTINEN: I'm Ileana Ros-Lehtinen from Miami, Florida. And I congratulate Chairwoman Pryce for leading such an extraordinary trip. We were very heartened by the encouragement that we were able to give to the Iraqi women and the encouragement that we got from them, because they are the future of a new Iraq; a new Iraq that we hope will be free, democratic, pluralistic, free of this despotic regime.

And we met with women from all walks of life: some very educated, we had a series of meetings in Baghdad; some not as educated, in Mosul. But all of them, no matter what their backgrounds were, had the same aspirations: that they want to be part of the future of Iraq and they're happy that their daughters are attending school now. The last few years of Saddam's brutal dictatorship did not allow them to be educated. And they want their daughters to have a brighter future, to become the doctors and the engineers and the scientists.

And all of them know that the United States is trying its best to help them reach that goal, and that it will ultimately be up to them. And they want a greater voice. We were there to help them gain that greater voice and teach them some tools about how to go about doing that, electing one of their own in the city council and then in the governing council and writing the constitution.

There's a lot that all of the countries of a free world can help the Iraqi women once again regain control of their own destiny. So we see a brighter future. We know that there's a lot of problems that appear every day on our television sets, but when you're there, what we see is progress and great strides being made day in and day out, and women can be an important part of that.

Thank you, Debbie.

REP. DUNN: I'm Jennifer Dunn from the state of Washington. My district is the Eighth Congressional District, sort of the suburbs of Seattle and Tacoma.

What struck a lot of us the most, as we became members of that larger and larger group of congresspeople who are visiting Iraq, was the difference between what we see reported here at home and what actually is going on over there. Two words come to my mind. One is "impatience," which can be a huge negative, if the comments of these women you just heard from and the ones you will hear from aren't brought to the citizens of the United States. Impatience can be a huge enemy. The 3,800 programs that the United States military troops are involved in side-b-side with Iraqi troops and citizens is fabulous once you get on the ground. And you have to be there to really absorb that perspective. But impatience of folks in the United States can cause bad things to happen. We need to stay there. We all believe it's the place for us to be. And we believe we're making a huge difference.

The other word that comes to my mind is "potential." And you've already heard about that. We visited with lots of women. We went to a police academy where some women were being trained to become security officers. This morning on the front page of one of the major newspapers here in the country, there was an article about how our military leadership is going to build up the Iraqi security forces. We're right around 100,000 Iraqis, who are doing work side by side -- "guns and shovels," they call it -- there in Iraq.

And we visited a training session for women who were being trained to be security people. They said, "We don't want to go to the moon. We want a job. We want to help." They had been sent home a few days earlier because the funding for their training had run out.

And so one of the things I'd like to advocate is the flexibility in how the dollars that we send over there in the supplemental and in the foreign ops budget -- should be flexible.

We were able to talk to the folks in charge of that program. The result was that the women have come back to the classroom, that the head of that program went to them and said, "In fact you will all be getting jobs in the next week or so." We checked: 13 of the 25 women we worked with have already been hired. And we are going to be there to encourage more and more women to be part of this training session.

The other small point I want to make because it impressed me so much -- we went to a hospital, a child's hospital, and we walked through the hospital. It was not very clean. There were very few people there. The looters had literally stolen beds underneath hospital patients in order to get things to sell right after we put our people on the ground.

But they are working with 1970s technology. That's how closed this country is. It was like a room with the doors and the windows boarded up. They need to come into the modern era. They're very excited about exchanges in the United States, about getting training that will bring them up to date. And we are focusing very strongly, as United States folks who are interested in helping them in every way possible, and bringing more dollars into the health care system, so that that will happen.

REP. KELLY: I'm Sue Kelly. I represent the northern suburbs of New York. It's New York's 19th Congressional District.

I was really pleased to be able to go over with these women to talk to the women of Iraq. The reason that is important is that the women of Iraq constitute 61 percent of the total population. There

have been so many wars; they don't have as many men.

The other thing is that of those women, 77 percent of the women in Iraq are illiterate. We need to help them. We need to teach them. We need to train them. And that is a part of what we saw when we were there.

What wasn't reported in the newspaper, when the bombings occurred in front of the Red Cross, some of the other bombings that occurred -- what was not reported was the vehicle that contained the person who had the Syrian passport was, in fact, stopped from blowing -- the man was stopped from blowing himself up by Iraqi police forces, by the Iraqi security. It was not our security, it was Iraq fighting for their own.

And I think it is important that the stories like that get told accurately, because we are doing a terrific job, we are doing a wonderful job with our troops. But you have to consider that for 70 years, these people have been told that they have no stake in their government, they have no right to be educated -- and I mean all the people. It is important that we help them accept responsibility in a way that they've never been able to for 70 years. Most of the people in the country are young. Most of them have never known anything but the oppressive rule of Saddam Hussein for 40 years. Think about that. Everybody in Iraq who is 40 years old or younger has only known a repressive regime.

What -- our job now is not only to help them fight the terrorists on the ground, but our job now is to help them learn how to accept responsibility for their lives. And they are willingly, happily stepping into that role. We met with these women, as you've heard, and they asked us to help them. We are glad to be able to offer them leadership and role models.

REP. MCCARTHY: Hi. I'm Carolyn McCarthy from Long Island, New York, 4th Congressional District. I'm going to stand by everything that my colleagues have said. And I probably would like to take a little bit different track. We are going to stand by the women, and we will stay involved with them to make sure they have a voice in their new government. But I also went over because I wanted to see how the progress -- what was going on, because, obviously, there are mixed messages going out there.

We spent an awful lot of time going from Baghdad to the northern part of Iraq and to see the improvements that are going on. You know, the electric plants are coming up. And I think people don't understand that the infrastructure of this country was in extremely bad shape. I mean, absolutely horrible shape.

And what our military have done, with the Iraqis, is start to rebuild almost the whole area. It's almost like rebuilding the whole country. The Iraqis can do it. They're very smart people. Their engineers are very smart.

I also wanted to see how our people in the armed services were doing. A lot of them certainly have some complaints, but we here in Congress, if we work late tonight, we'll have some complaints too. When you ask them if they need anything, basically they say no, we need -- there are a few things that they had mentioned that they need. That will come through with the appropriations if we vote on that sometime today, I believe, or tomorrow.

So the improvement's there, but as Jennifer Dunn said, the patience. You know, we, as Americans, want things done yesterday. And that's great, and that's how we work. But the other thing is, it's going to take time.

And as far as the terrorist attacks seem to be increasing, the generals were prepared for that. No one talks about basically the 100,000 criminals that were put out on the street right before the war started, or the two of the fractions (sic) that are coming in there that don't want to see this plan succeed.

But the bottom line is, no matter where anybody was at the beginning on the Iraqi vote or

whatever, that's there, that's in the past; now we have to make sure that we do a really good job in Iraq so that we will also make sure that it's free there. And in my opinion, that will spread to other countries. That's what we should be focusing on now. Hopefully, sometime today we will pass that money to have the flexibility in it, to get out there so we can get the job done. The sooner we do it and build up the armies, the police forces, the sooner all our young men and women can come home. And that's our paramount goal.

Thank you.

REP. HARRIS: We were just told we have a journal vote, so we'll have to be very brief.

But let me just share with you the extraordinary leadership that Deborah Pryce exercised in organizing this historic trip for women.

What I brought back from Iraq was the fact that 12 years ago, we encouraged the Iraqis to stand up against Saddam Hussein, to defeat this brutal dictator; and we left them. And whether it was because of a U.N. dictate that we couldn't go into Baghdad, or international opinion, which made sense at the time, it was tantamount to a betrayal. Consequently, it's taken the seven months of our men and women, who have done these 38 programs -- 3,800 programs that Congresswoman Dunn mentioned. Its 240 hospitals and clinics that are open again, 1,628 schools, an electrical grid system that is better than when we arrived, a central bank which is extraordinary, the fact that the monetary system didn't fail. Because of these successes, the Iraqis themselves are coming to our troops and foiling ambush attacks. They're showing more than a 35-mile -- kilometer weapons arsenal. They're telling us about these things, and tens of thousands of these Iraqi citizens are putting their lives on the line every day as security and police officers. But their biggest fear is that we're going to leave them again, and it would be far worse than if we had never, ever, ever come. Obviously, we have demonstrated the success of our plan, but it's more of a testimony that our cause is truly just and moral there.

Thanks.

REP. BLACKBURN: Hi. I'm Marsha Blackburn. I represent Tennessee's 7th Congressional District. We're home to the 101st Airborne at Fort Campbell. And for me, it was an absolutely wonderful trip. It was a -- for all of us, it was a trip filled with sobering moments, it was a trip filled with great information, and it was a trip where we had the opportunity to see hope like we have hardly ever seen before. As you have heard, there is so much being done there, that is a story that is not told. And we are really pleased to be able to come back and to begin telling that story, to continue telling that story.

We know that there is a lot of work to be done in order to make Iraq a safe and productive country. And we are committed -- we are all committed to seeing this through. We know that every single day that the terrorists and the remnant of Saddam's regime has that noose pulled a little bit tighter around them. They're like caged animals, and they're striking back. But we know that every single day, 100 tons of weapons are being destroyed, and that moves toward making Iraq a safer place.

We thank you all for your interest, and we appreciate DOD and all they did to help facilitate our trip. Thank you.

Q Well, couldn't we just ask you a few questions?

REP. : We've got to vote. We have a vote.

(Cross talk.)

Q No questions?

REP. : Go ahead.

(Cross talk.)

Q I think basically the question really is although you stress that a lot is being done, still there are continual attacks on U.S. military and civilians there. Did you get any -- and I'm sure that concerned the Iraqi women. What assurances did you get from Rumsfeld about improving the security? What concerns do you have about improving security in Iraq?

REP. KELLY: The security is being improved every single day.

Q Congresswoman -- and also, Congresswoman Dunn, as well as Congresswoman Kelly, if you could speak into the microphone.

REP. KELLY: The security is being improved every single day. We have trained 100,000 Iraqi police. It is incredibly important that people focus on the fact that the Iraqis are policing themselves.

The other thing is, you heard someone mention the fact that we have -- actually, the war in Iraq is -- essentially, the military war is over. We won. We have total command of the skies. We can move around at will in the country.

What is being fought now is a war on the ground in Iraq against terrorism. The terrorists are coming in from outside. They are being supplied, in a way, from outside, as far as I know, and what they are doing is trying to disrupt the peace which has broken out all over Iraq.

There are farmers tilling the fields. Kids are going to schools. We saw mothers with their kids walking down the street, going to shop. There's food in the stores. We were in traffic jams in Baghdad and in Mosul.

Now that isn't reported, but that -- the common, ordinary life of Iraq is going on! When you fly over Iraq, you see people tilling their fields! It looks like Nebraska in lots of places.

So this is not what is being represented, and your question implies that Secretary Rumsfeld has not done something he ought to do. He is doing -- and I'm not here to try to defend anything in particular, because I went to Iraq without having any really judgmental ideas about what we were or were not doing. I wasn't sure we were doing the job.

But we are doing the job. I've been there, on the ground. I've got Iraqi dust on my boots, and I can tell you that what I saw is a country that's back -- coming back to life. And it's a country that will belong to the Iraqi people, not to a vicious dictator who has robbed the wealth of that nation.

We think by 2005 there will be a \$5 billion surplus coming out of Iraq because the people are -- a lot of the people are educated. They're willing.

It is up to the Iraqis now to start to step in, to protect their nation. And we're trying to train them to do that, but we're fighting 70 years of history. It's going to take time! We cannot be so abrupt and think we can do this in six weeks. We haven't even been in Iraq a year. We'll get there. They will get there. I have a lot of hope for this country.

REP. PRYCE: I want to add -- emphasize what Sue said: that the military war is over, but the terror -- the war on terror continues. And that's what's being fought right now in Iraq by Iraqi and United States military people, fighting side by side.

I think it was a mistake for the Red Cross to decide to pull out. What we saw in Iraq made it clear to me that what you see on American television often about a catastrophe in some part of the country and when you go to that part of the country you don't see any sign of a catastrophe is very similar, because those are things that make the news. And it should be among the things that make the news.

And we hate it when we read about people being killed right in the Al-Rashid Hotel, where we were two days before, or at the police station where we were a day and a half before, because we know there was a reason that we wore flak jackets on this trip.

But it's as it is in any situation, and I think of Israel, for example, where you've got terrorists who don't want that peace process to take effect. And in Iraq they don't want the successes to take effect, because every time there is a success -- and you see many, many, many hundreds of them in Iraq done by our team, fighting side by side with the Iraqis -- that is going to lead toward an eventual stability in that country.

One of our main focuses that General Sanchez briefed us on when we were over there is to create stability in the country. Once you do that, you can spend a lot more time on rebuilding the infrastructure, which Saddam Hussein raped in order to build his palaces with the inlaid marble floors; and moving on to assure that the elections -- building of the constitution is done fairly, representatively, and that the elections are conducted in a fair way, because we want to turn control over to the Iraqis. But we should not be impatient, we should not do it before the time is right. And it may require a couple of years to do that. But the elections and the constitution are due for next year, and they are well on their way. Every woman's group we talked to is ready. They know how to hire lawyers, so they can get people elected, and we're going to help them in all of that.

We do have to go for a vote. I'm sorry.

Q Thank you.

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