

Postcards from Iraq

Progress too, exists in Iraq

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I experienced some more hot and sunny days in southern Iraq this week. The wind seems to never stop blowing. At 116 degrees, it is better to wear long sleeves than short. I see why the locals cover themselves from head to toe. Any bare skin burns.

I completed another long trip this week, as I and several others traveled to meet with the several local provincial councils. It affords me an opportunity to meet more of the locals, which I enjoy, and also see the countryside. I am also witnessing local governments taking shape to govern reconstruction. Where we have been running the meetings ourselves, we are now starting to see the local Provincial Councils take shape and chair the complete meetings. This is a wonderful to experience. They are taking ownership and this is good.

On the trip this week, I saw much of what I've seen on past trips but there are some things that just leave an imprint on your mind and heart. Like the children we passed in a small rural area, waving with all their might at our passing vehicles, with uncombed hair, and very dirty cloths. Poverty beyond comprehension but I wonder if they know it.

We passed roadside markets where they were selling oil for autos with others selling Cokes, bananas and other fruit. These markets or roadside stands, as I would call them, are made of no more than a few palm branches or mud bricks. They build them along the road shoulders in hopes that someone will stop.

I saw large expanses of cultivated fields, with hand dug irrigation ditches, but no crops in most of them. Did however see a few with some vegetables growing strong.

As we approached a city near the Euphrates River, many wait to get their small amount of gasoline or diesel. There are few stations in existence compared to seeing them on every street corner in America. There are none along the main highways going north and south in southern Iraq.

Farther down the road we passed another brick factory, billowing thick black smoke from their hand made chimneys. I understand they burn crude oil. Passed an old tractor pulling a trailer loaded with a tall stack of newly fired bricks. They looked hand loaded. The bricks have a slight yellow color to them. The clay for the brick making is dug from the large expanses of dusty desert.

It was good to see kids playing today. Two boys I guessed to be about 6 years old were running fast in their bare feet to push a rubber car tire around the dirt yard in front of their mud brick home. They were having a blast.

The signs of progress are there if you look. Most of us would just ignore them but having spent about 6 months in country now and being so involved with reconstruction I find myself searching for signs that the people of Iraq are benefiting from our efforts. That new school with that fresh coat of bright blue paint. That new police station with newly trained policemen standing guard and performing random vehicle searches. Fresh black-top, as I call it. That newly paved dirt road or in some cases new roads where there was nothing. The new 400kv power line towers next to the one that was crumpled on the ground. The new power plants being constructed for the production of badly needed electricity. The Iraqi Army bases with hundreds of soldiers marching in unison in the dust and hot sun. They wave as we pass.

While reviewing some progress reports of the jobs for which I am responsible, I see a rusty sunken shipwrecks being pulled from the bottom of a navigation channel. Many others are there to be removed to make way for the badly needed navigation of goods and commodities.

Progress is slow but it is being made. Yes, there are demonstrations of the strife and turmoil but freedom seems to be prevalent. I must believe that what we are doing here, at such a human cost, is good and just. Only God knows . . .

May we never forget the fallen Soldiers that are in harms way every day for this cause of freedom . . .



Clearing the ports of sunken wrecks is part of the Corps mission in Iraq
(Photo provided by Bennett)