



U.S. EMBASSY - BAGHDAD

2008 Provincial Reconstruction Team News

-Not all Americans serving in Iraq wear military uniforms-

By Chris Joyner

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U.S. State Department employee Sarah Francia was nearing the end of her career and looking for one last adventurous assignment.

"I went to the Middle East bureau that handles Iraq in the department and told them to take me now," she said. "Of course, they did."

The 57-year-old Greenwood native actually is on her second tour working in the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad's fortified Green Zone and is one of thousands of U.S. civilians working in Iraq. As the war enters its sixth year, Francia said there are a lot of opinions among her colleagues about why the U.S. invaded and what it should do next.

"But that is history now, and we are here," she said. "The best way to get the job done and to remain hopeful is to focus on the positive while remaining prepared for the negative."

Francia is a foreign service officer who works in the embassy supporting the State Department's reconstruction teams.

Francia volunteered for the posting, which she described by e-mail recently as "an excellent option ... for the adventurous and the confident."

That's a good way to describe Brandon native and international finance expert RJ Coleman Jr. Coleman, 39, came to the U.S. Treasury Department last summer expecting to go to Iraq.

"We go all over to postconflict countries, and Iraq was on the list," he said. "I wanted to see another country, see how they did budgets, capital investment and banking."

Like most of the civilians in Iraq who spoke with The Clarion-Ledger, Coleman is cautiously optimistic about the mission.

"We've been at this five years, and maybe that just starts the diplomacy," he said.

Coleman is working with Iraq's financial leaders to modernize the country's banking system. He said progress is incremental and fraught with frustrating delays.



Foreign Service Officer Sarah Francia, Desk Officer for several northern PRTs, standing outside Embassy, Baghdad.

"Things go fast, and then everything stops," he said.

"We measure progress in baby steps in so many cases. Everything here is so difficult," said Jim Conely, who is working in Iraq for the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Conely, a Mississippi State University graduate and former agricultural Extension Service agent for Colorado State University, grew up on a farm north of Memphis and considers himself "a farm kid" at heart.

When he heard the USDA was seeking agricultural extension agents to help in Iraq, Conely said he jumped at the opportunity.

The hardest part is adjusting to the constant need for security, the language barrier and cultural differences, he said.

"I tell people, 'Whatever you think is going to take a day is probably going to take three days,' " he said.

In Baghdad since November, Conely said he already is seeing signs of progress. A poultry plant south of Baghdad shut down by insurgents to use as a base of operations has reopened.

"We want to keep young Iraqi men busy. If they are not busy doing something productive, al-Qaeda will keep them busy doing something else," he said.

Civilian service has not come without cost.

According to an incomplete list compiled by the Web site icasualties.org, which tracks casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan, more than 1,000 civilian contractors from around the globe have died in Iraq. Many more, like Billy Wayne Pace of Columbia and Thomas Hamill of Macon, have been wounded.

Pace and Hamill were truck drivers for Texas-based contractor KBR Inc. when they were injured in separate attacks. Pace lost his leg when an improvised explosive device detonated under his truck in September 2006.

Hamill was wounded when his convoy came under attack on April 9, 2004. He was taken hostage, escaping after 24 days in captivity.

Now fully recovered, Hamill remains firm America still has a job to do in Iraq. In fact, he'd like to do it himself. "I'm ready to go right now. I hate sitting on the sidelines," he said.

Hamill's story of bravery caught the nation's attention nearly four years ago. The dairy farmer was in demand as an inspirational speaker and penned a memoir about his experiences. He is back driving a truck for a living.

Civilians play an important role in Iraq by doing nonmilitary jobs and freeing up soldiers to do what they are good at, he said.

"I guess we hoped it never would have lasted this long," Hamill said of the war. But he said reducing our nation's commitment now would be wrong.

"I wish America could understand it's not about finishing the war this year or last year," he said. "It's about the next generation growing up in that country."

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