



U.S. EMBASSY - BAGHDAD

2008 Provincial Reconstruction Team News

-PRTs Help Rekindle Iraqi Entrepreneurship -

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Taji - "The Iraqis have an entrepreneurial instinct which is at least as strong as ours," says Embedded Provincial Reconstruction (EPRT) member Bill Olds.

Olds, the USAID Representative on the team operating out of Taji, a town in Baghdad District, made his comments to Embassy Public Affairs Counselor Philip T. Reeker during a visit the Counselor made to the team's headquarters on March 14.



Counselor Reeker making a point at the EPRT briefing in Taji with left to right Major Dani Johnson, Public Affairs Liaison; Steve Gillen, Press Officer; Paul Folmsbee, PRT team leader.

Olds' team is one of 13 joint U.S. military and civilian EPRTs deployed throughout Iraq since April 2007 to assist local governments and non-government organizations to become less dependent on outside assistance to provide for the basic needs of their local populations. "Our job," Olds explained, "is merely helping them refine the talents and resources they already have."

During his visit, Counselor Reeker was briefed by several of Olds' civilian and military teammates on EPRT 3's efforts to support economic development and capacity building in Sadr City, Adhamiyah, and Istiqla'al, which account for almost 40 percent of Baghdad's population.

Leading the briefing was Team Leader Paul Folmsbee, who focuses on reconciliation among Iraqi ethnic and religious communities. "Dialogue and reconciliation," observed Folmsbee, "are crucial for capacity building. Therefore, from the very beginning our development priorities have been community engagement and buy in."

As an example of the team's efforts to garner "buy in" by Iraqis, EPRT Deputy Team Leader U.S. Army Colonel Nick Chimienti described the February 15-17 "Business to Business Expo," organized by Iraqi American Chamber of Commerce and Industry and held at the Al Rasheed Hotel in Baghdad.

The team, along with several other PRTs working in the Baghdad District, sponsored ten businesses at the conference, twice as many as were sponsored at a similar expo in Kurdistan in November 2007. Local organizers worked with the Iraqi government to overcome major security and logistical challenges as they hosted over 260 exhibitors and 2,500 visitors per day, including representatives of the Baghdad District and the Iraqi Ministry of Finance, Planning, Industries and Minerals. Foreign diplomats and Iraqi-based companies from the U.S. and elsewhere also attended.

According to Chimienti, the best indicator of success was the "relatively few uniformed personnel to be found" due to the improved security environment and that "everywhere you walked you saw Iraqis talking business with each other."

The team's Economic Development Officer, U.S. Army National Guard Colonel Jeffrey Bonner, emphasized that the expo was only part of team's ongoing support for Iraqi entrepreneurship.

A vice president of a major multi-national company in the United States, Bonner advised his Iraqi colleagues as they formed local "Market Councils" which instruct and mentor member business owners in market-based principles.

Focusing on their geographic specific markets, these grassroots organizations offer Iraqi small businesses access to training, operational, financial, and technical resources, Bonner explained. Moreover, they advocate on behalf of their constituents with local governments to link their efforts with infrastructural development. "Most importantly," according to Bonner, "they operate free from government control yet operate within Iraqi laws and regulations. Thus, they simultaneously foster entrepreneurial independence while bolstering the government sector's credibility."

Echoing Team Leader Folmsbee, Bonner praised the councils as "superb reconciliation vehicles as sectarian divides are bridged through economic interdependence."

Following his briefing with Folmsbee's team, Reeker also met with another EPRT team whose area of responsibility includes some 1.5 million residents and covers Taji, Tarmiya, Istiqlal, and Abu Ghraib.

Team Leader Thomas Burke introduced Reeker to his team members engaged in promoting agricultural entrepreneurship. Burke praised Dan Skotniki from the U.S. Department of Agriculture for helping to modernize Iraqi meat and poultry inspection and teaching quality control methods.

A member of Burke's team, Lieutenant Colonel Harvey Fitzgerald, spoke about the Adult Education and Vocational Training programs that trains Iraqi small farmers in accounting and management techniques. He said the team took special pride in "empowering the Iraqis to regain their rightful place as those who invented agriculture."

Thanking his EPRT hosts, Counselor Reeker recalled how only a year ago he often heard Iraqi market-goers ask, "Why must we rely on others to produce everything we used to produce for ourselves?" Observing that such laments have become rarer over the past year, the Counselor praised the team members as exemplars of effective civilian-military cooperation and added, "PRTs' support for economic capacity building throughout Iraq has helped to rekindle the entrepreneurial spirit in the very place where entrepreneurship was born."