Iraqis take lessons in municipal democracy

Baghdad leaders in Denver for public works expertise

By Ann Imse, Rocky Mountain News
April 14, 2005

Call them the optimists of Baghdad.

They have braved assassination attempts and the kidnappings and killings of loved ones. Yet they still work toward a new Iraq, as Baghdad City Council members, public servants and managers of charities.

Eighteen of the 37 are in Denver until April 23, learning about how their jobs are done here, from running a democratic municipal government to building a sewage treatment plant. They said they hope to go home with new ideas and perhaps some e-mail pen pals with expertise in their fields.

In Baghdad, they're still waiting for the billions of dollars in promised international aid to rebuild water, sewer and electrical systems in tatters after war and decades of neglect. Some understand that ongoing sabotage is holding up progress in rebuilding; others can't fathom how electricity could remain in short supply.

But the overriding emotion among this group is relief that insurgent attacks have eased since the historic election in January.

"Millions of people went to the polls to show their voices even though they might be killed," said Sheikh Mohammed Baker Al Suhail, one of 10 Baghdad city and provincial council members on the trip. That show of support from the masses of Iraqis has made a difference, the sheikh said.

"Before, there were 10 explosions each day. Today maybe two, or one, or nothing," said Nashat Abdullah, Baghdad finance manager for the charity, Women for Women International. "If there were 10 or 20 kidnappings each week, now there are two or three."

"This is progress. It's very good," Nashat said.

Common people are turning against terrorists, even taking action into their own hands, said council member Kareem Mahdi, a Kurd. As an example, he cited an incident in March in the Doura district of Baghdad, where shopkeepers saw men with guns coming to attack and fired back, killing three.

One of his colleagues predicted the wave of terror would be finished by the end of 2005; another said a year later.

In the meantime, City Council members report, they still carry guns and travel with bodyguards.

"The threat is still there," said Nasreen Hayder Kader, a council member and chief of a medical lab. "If they want to shoot someone, it is so easy. This means we are so far from feeling at peace."

Colonel Engineer Ibrahim Hammadi, an 18-year veteran of the Iraqi police, said his wife was kidnapped and held for 19 days last June.

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"You can imagine how those 19 days were, for me and her," he said. "I was forced to pay what I collected my whole life to make her safe."

"I have to say thanks to God, they did not hit her," he said.

The family left Iraq after she was released. He is now studying information technology in another country, with the hope of returning to Baghdad someday with the skill to build a crime mapping database. In Denver, he hopes to meet with counterparts doing that work here and learn about getting further training in the U.S., he said.

For the others, fixing Baghdad remains a hands-on problem. With no government funds to provide even clean drinking water, City Council member Mohammed Jasim turned to aid agencies to buy mobile water treatment trucks. They're now hooked into the waterlines in his Karada district, the safest in Baghdad because it includes the heavily fortified Green Zone.

He's also made a list of small, doable projects, and he's e-mailing foreign and Iraqi contractors, asking them to help. A German company has promised generators to light a park so children can play at night, out of the 120-degree heat felt during the day. A company based in Dubai has offered to test water samples to figure out what treatment is needed. And a company in London has offered to train engineers in sewage treatment.

Still, former Glendale Mayor Joe Rice, who worked with the Baghdad City Council in Iraq and led the effort to bring this group to Denver, said Mohammed walks a fine line in asking businesses for help.

"Do you want government going out and shaking down businesses? Frankly, we do that, to an extent, when we ask businesses to support schools. But you can't go too far," and tell companies they must contribute or they can't operate, Rice said.

That's the kind of nuance of municipal government he hopes the visitors will see in Denver, he said.

Mohammed, who comes from a rich and famous family with 11 brothers and a computer business, is a willing student. The council member has the outgoing, friendly manner that could make him a charismatic politician, and he has ambitious plans to run for higher office, maybe for mayor, maybe someday for governor.

"I don't need to do it quickly. I'm young," he said. "I came here to learn."

Several visiting council members said they also are encouraged by another result of the January election, which chose an assembly to write a constitution. Sunnis who boycotted that vote "now find this is a mistake," council member Omar Mohammed Amin Al Rahmani said. Many are now preparing to vie for seats in the parliamentary election, expected in fall or spring, he said.

"Of course, we have to be optimistic," Omar said. "Otherwise the anger would kill us."

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