Commentary: Letter from Baghdad

By Ken Joseph Jr.
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BAGHDAD, Iraq, Sept. 2 (UPI) -- I have been shocked at the difference between the Baghdad I found on my return and all the bad news from the city.

Despite the recent bombings, Baghdad looks dramatically different. The stores are full of supplies. The streets are crowded with people and cars. The buses are working and police are on the streets, directing traffic.

At night the streets are full of pedestrians, many families with children. I am at a loss to reconcile what we see on the ground with what is being reported.

The "regular people" are much better off than they were. Security has improved with Iraqi police everywhere, telephones are starting to work, electricity, while off and on, is relatively stable, the stores are full of food, and, little by little, people are getting jobs back.

Pensions have been paid on time. The schools are working and people for the first time have hope and a future.

When I was here before the war what was most awful for people was that they had no future -- nothing to look forward to. For us who have never experienced that situation, it is difficult to understand, but it is akin to being in prison without the possibility of parole.

They would look at me and say, "Sure we have food, a place to live, a job. But can you understand what it is to live with no tomorrow? It is like living in prison."

Now -- for the first time in 35 years -- they have a hope and a future. What most impressed me was to see Iraqis really hustling. They are thinking of starting companies and importing goods.

People, especially young people, say that for the first time in their lives they can travel overseas, surf the Internet, make international calls, and watch satellite TV. It is a wonderful time for the average Baghdadi.

What is really happening is the movement of Iraq from a "police state" to a "normal" country. During Saddam's time, life in many ways was stable, crime was low, prices were low.

But we are in a time of dramatic change. People have to learn to adjust to the "fringe benefits" of a free society. These changes include higher prices, the need to work, room for creativity, having choices, basic street crime, locking doors -- and a range of TV channels.

It is shocking for some -- especially the older people -- but the very old and the young are excited. The very old because they remember the good old days; the very young because they're excited about all the new things, such as MTV and the Internet.

Those who naysay everything are very interesting. The people are very clear on who they are -- they all were connected to Saddam. For the first time in their lives, they are going to have to work; no more handouts. The easy life is over. But the numbers are staggering. People estimate nearly 20 percent or more of the population was in some form on Saddam's gravy train, some by choice, others by force. And nearly all of the population had been getting free food, tea and sugar.

As for the crime, they emptied the prisons so nearly 50,000 hard-nosed criminals are on the streets.
Another problem is just as it was before the war -- the outsiders. I cannot understand why the United States has not done two basic things: sealing the borders and setting up a TV station.

There is no border check so Iraq is becoming the magnet for every one that wants to get a chance to fight with Americans. This is a great puzzle to me.

What is happening, including the bombings, as far as people who I talked to are concerned, is the work of foreign nuts -- the same people who were the only ones to fight for Saddam at the later part of the war.

They are coming from all over the world like they did in Afghanistan to get a chance to fight Americans. I always remember how in Jordan everybody loved Saddam, whereas in Iraq everybody hated him.

The Iraqi people, in spite of all that is said, love the Americans. They are deeply grateful and are giving the United States the benefit of the doubt.

What has happened as far as the general population is concerned is what I term "the great letdown." People tend to make the United States Superman. They think the United States is all-powerful, the bastion of freedom, democracy, strength.

They thought that the United States would come in and with superhuman power overnight transform Baghdad into New York and Mosul into San Francisco.

It is traumatic to realize that America is not God and is very, very human. There is this gap between godlike perceptions of Americans and the realization that they have limits and cannot do everything overnight.

That is why it is critical to get basic services up -- electricity, water, and transportation.

With all due respect, people in Iraq in general hate radical Islam. They are secular. They do not want to see an Islamic state. They do not want to become like Iran.

At the same time, money and people from Iran, Saudi Arabia and other places are flooding the country using intimidation to accomplish what they cannot do by any other means. And average Iraqi is concerned at what seems to be a U.S. position, that is soft on Islam.

The problem for Christians is very different. The Americans do not appear to be requiring a secular constitution as they did in Japan or a limited regional autonomy.

This is a serious problem for us. They are already giving their blessing to the dual system so common in Muslim countries: the recent citizenship changes allow for a 2-year wait for Arabs (read Muslims) and a 9-year wait for non-Arabs.

We are beginning to feel that if the United States will not demand that the constitution be secular with a strong prohibition against religious involvement by the government and limited autonomy, then we will have to pull Assyrian Christians out of the country.

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Rev. Ken Joseph Jr., an Assyrian, who initially was against the war, was so shocked at his experiences while in Iraq before the war as one of the few allowed in without government "minders," he changed his mind.
Following the war, Rev. Joseph brought in the first post-war refugee truck with 20 tons of water, food, medicine and satellite telephones, and continues to assist on the ground in Iraq.