Austinite directing repairs says Iraq seeing real progress
Progress in Iraq more rapid than portrayed in media, Austinite says

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Lewis Lucke had heard from his wife, Joy, and their friends in Texas that the news media's view of events in Iraq was bleak.

But the 52-year-old foreign service officer, who is directing the multibillion-dollar reconstruction of Iraq, wasn't really prepared for just how bleak when he returned home to Austin this week for a five-day visit, his first since May.

"There's just an incredible amount of productive stuff going on over there, with a lot of Iraqi participation," he said. "To come here and see it portrayed as a failure in the making -- it's very superficial and inaccurate."

It's Lucke's job to get the lights on, the water clean and running, the phones working, the trash picked up, roads and bridges repaired, and schools and hospitals fully operating. He has a staff of 90 in a second-floor office in the Baghdad Convention Center, 500 independent contractors such as Save the Children spread around the country, and a preliminary budget of more than $1 billion.

He said the job certainly isn't finished after only five months of effort, but much more of it is progressing than many Americans realize.

"Seven-eighths of the country is calm," he said. "Certainly functional. I've traveled all over. We don't see chaos around us, but a tremendous amount of change, with a large number of Iraqis doing a lot of the work and the planning. We try to use Iraqi firms to create employment and put money in the economy."

For example, he said a Baghdad company is now printing new math and science school textbooks, with help from UNESCO.

Lucke, whose title is mission director of the U.S. Agency for International Development in Iraq -- he reports directly to U.S. administrator L. Paul Bremer -- had been retired for a year when he rejoined government service after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks because of his Middle East experience.

"His long record of achievement with the agency . . . earned him the honor and challenge of being named the USAID mission director in Iraq," reported the June edition of Thunderbird, the newsletter of his alma mater, the American Graduate School of International Management, in Glendale, Ariz.

He speaks Spanish and French and has a working knowledge of Arabic after 24 years with the agency, during which he won awards for management of aid programs in seven countries, including Costa Rica, Senegal and Tunisia. He wrote a memoir about one posting, "Waiting for Rain: Life & Development in Mali, West Africa," published in 1998. His wife and their three children joined him for several years when he directed the agency's mission in Jordan, but he went alone on his last assignment, to Haiti.

His wife's sister is Austinite Pam Willeford, President Bush's newly confirmed ambassador to Switzerland and Liechtenstein.

Although the Bush administration has been criticized for being unprepared for the postwar period, Lucke started preparing last October by signing contracts and making plans, while the administration was negotiating with the United Nations Security Council.

"We didn't know there'd be a conflict," Lucke said. "But we had to get ready in case there was."

These days, he travels Iraq wearing an armored vest, and usually convoys in an armored car accompanied by armed security. But he said public security has greatly improved since July, with a decreasing number of attacks by regime holdouts and their terrorist allies, mainly in a relatively small part of Iraq northwest of the capital known as the Sunni Triangle.

Most of the 90 U.S. troops who have been killed in combat since May 1, when large-unit fighting ended, have died on patrols in the triangle. Coalition forces commander Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez said this week that troops are facing 15 to 20 attacks a day and that the enemy has become more sophisticated. Total American troop deaths in Iraq since fighting began stood at 317 on Friday.

"Television concentrates on the violence, and you think that all that's happening," Lucke said. "But a traffic accident in Houston, however horrible, doesn't really affect people in Austin."
Most of his work is not to repair the minimal damage caused by American bombing or ground fighting, but to make up for the decades the deposed regime spent no money on new infrastructure, nor maintained what it had. Iraq's main port at Umm Qasr, for instance, needed deep dredging before it could take cargo ships with relief supplies.

"We're putting back together a system abused by years of neglect," he said. "It was incredibly degraded."

Power upgrades

Last summer's sabotage of power stations and transmission lines, he said, has faded with the reinstatement of 1,145 Iraqi "power police," some of the about 44,000 Iraqis employed by the American authority. Electricity production is now 4,000 megawatts, about 96 percent of the pre-war level, Lucke said.

Iraqis in the north and south have power 24 hours a day, while Baghdad gets just four hours on and two hours off. Under the old regime, Baghdad got most of what little power the country produced, while the north and south got little or none.

Lucke's staff is working to bring Baghdad up to 24 hours of daily electricity, and to produce 4,400 megawatts nationwide by May. California, whose area is often compared with Iraq's, produced more than 209 million megawatts in 2002, according to the California Energy Commission.

Iraqi phone service remains a problem, but Lucke expects 480,000 phone lines to be working by the end of November -- about half of the pre-war count of 1.1 million lines. He said Bremer is preparing to sign contracts for a new cell phone network.

Lucke's agency reports that 1.4 million children have been immunized and that hospitals and health clinics are functioning, with improvements continuing. He said 1,515 schools were rehabilitated in time for the fall semester.

'Peace and quiet' visit

A North Carolina native, Lucke has called Austin home for 28 years, since he met his wife in the late 1970s when they both attended the Arizona international management school. The eldest of the couple's children graduated from Texas Christian University in May, the middle child is a University of Texas sophomore, and the youngest plays tackle on the St. Andrews' middle school football team.

He has made the most of his brief home visit. In addition to "a little peace and quiet," he took "my only chance" to see his son play a football game. He travels to Washington on Sunday, before returning to Iraq.

He is optimistic about Iraq's future, an optimism spurred in part by his experience in developing more than 200 neighborhood advisory councils to do things like pick up trash -- 88 of them in Baghdad alone. He said they represent 51 percent of Iraqis in a country long without any civil society. He has known Iraqis since his work in Jordan and likes and respects them. He doesn't expect to see them develop a copy of American democracy, but he also doubts they will form a religious national government.

"They're special people, smart, talented and artistic," he said. "The more you deal with them the more you know we'll go home and they'll be fine."

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