

Sadr City Success Story
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By Christian Miller
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BAGHDAD - Crammed into armored Humvees heaving with weapons, Lt. Col. S. Jamie Gayton and his soldiers were greeted by a surprising sight as they rolled into one of Baghdad's poorest neighborhoods.

Men stood and waved. Women smiled. Children flashed thumbs-up signs as the convoy rumbled across the potholed streets of Sadr City.

It was a far more welcoming scene than the urban war zone of a year ago, when U.S. troops and black-clad guerrilla fighters battled in the narrow alleys of the squalid slum.

"We're making a huge impact," Gayton said as his men pulled up to a sewer station newly repaired with U.S. funds. "It has been incredibly safe, incredibly quiet and incredibly secure."

Sadr City has become one of the rare success stories of the U.S. reconstruction effort, say local residents, Iraqi and U.S. officials. Although vast swaths remain blighted, the neighborhood of 2 million mostly impoverished Shiites is one of the calmest in Baghdad. One U.S. soldier has been killed and one car bomb detonated in the last year, the military says.

The improvements are the result of an intense effort in the wake of the street battles last August with fighters loyal to anti-American cleric Muqtada Sadr. Within a month, U.S. officials decided to make Sadr City a showcase for rebuilding, and increased spending to \$805 million in a neighborhood long neglected under Saddam Hussein.

Having covered the U.S. reconstruction effort in Iraq for the last 22 months, I decided to take a measure of progress by going back to the same people I interviewed last August, in addition to talking with U.S. and Iraqi officials involved in the program.

Their stories provide insight into why the rebuilding of Sadr City is an impressive, if imperfect, accomplishment in Iraq, where many projects remain incomplete and U.S. promises unfulfilled.

Unlike elsewhere in Iraq, where the reconstruction fell under the purview of a hodgepodge of U.S. civilian agencies, the American military provided sustained, focused leadership in a limited geographic area. That focus provided the oversight needed to coordinate the military's efforts with those of the U.S. Agency for International Development and the Pentagon's Project and Contracting Office, the primary reconstruction agencies.

The rebuilding also held more immediate significance among mid-level commanders in the field than among higher-level Pentagon officials preoccupied with fighting the war. The field officers focused on short-term, high-visibility projects such as cleaning up trash and digging wells,

instead of massive new water treatment plants or power stations that take years to build. They also hired local Iraqi contractors, who in turn employed many of the militia members who had once battled U.S. troops.

Finally, unlike the U.S. multinationals contracted to build large infrastructure projects, the military did not have to rely on expensive security contractors for protection. That enabled soldiers to more easily communicate with Iraqis, monitor progress and overcome problems.

The results can be seen in the life of Ahmed Kadhem, who spent much of August 2004 huddled with his family inside their home as the war raged outside. The family had limited electricity, no water and no sewer connection.

A year later, his family remains without those basic services. But he has seen improvements all around him. And he is ready to give the Americans a chance.

"There is some movement," he said last month. "People have taken note."

The effects of the U.S. effort were apparent on a recent visit to Sadr City.

At the newly repaired sewer station, a local family guarding it greeted Gayton like an old friend; he had visited several times before.

Haita Zamel showed Gayton how the local sewer authority was fixing a problem that had developed in one pump. She proudly showed off the small home that had been built on the site to replace a dilapidated trailer where her family of six once lived. She even asked Gayton for computer software to teach English to her children.

"When you tell me something, I know you'll do it," she said, clutching tightly at the white scarf covering her head. "To the last day of our life, we are with you. Us and all of our neighbors."

Gayton and his men clambered back into the Humvees and moved on. A few minutes later, he ordered his driver to make a random stop in front of a group of stores where water lines had been installed. He wanted to make sure the water was flowing.

As a crowd gathered, the shop owners acknowledged better water. But they complained about electricity, saying that power lines were being installed at nearby shops but not theirs.

Gayton smiled. The military had divided Sadr City into four segments, each targeted for different improvements such as new sewers or clean water. That way, each area saw the improvements going on in the others, providing proof of progress and an incentive to remain cooperative.

"Everything happens one step at a time," Gayton told the men.

"We have to cooperate with the Americans. We know," said shopkeeper Amed Ali Ibrahim.

But the continuing risks were evident a moment later. As Gayton and his men roared away, one

soldier, fearing a possible car bomb, fired into the ground to warn a vehicle that was getting too close.

Still, at each of half a dozen stops, the complaints were tempered by friendly banter and acknowledgment of improvements.

Residents and workers praised a health clinic being built at another site. But then they pointed in anger at a huge puddle of sickly green sewage blocking the entrance. Gayton promised to prod the Iraqis to make repairs.

"We are suffering," one worker, Jabbar Abed Khalef, told Gayton. Batting away flies, Khalef held up his shoes, coated in black muck. "Our children are sick. The road is blocked. It's a disaster."

But a moment later, Khalef was praising the U.S. for working more quickly than the Iraqi government.

"We know that if the Americans don't do it, the Iraqi government will take a long time," he said.

At the end of the run, Gayton appeared pleased. A tall, fit man with an easy command of figures, he appeared excited whenever the convoy passed a garbage truck at work. He said the investment made by the U.S. had paid dividends.

Last year, soldiers at Gayton's base were the target of more than 1,000 mortar strikes. This year, there have been none. There have been a handful of attacks on U.S. troops, mostly gunfire, and no clashes so far with Sadr's militiamen.

Gayton does not claim that the reconstruction alone has led to the decrease in violence. And he acknowledges that the militia members may well rise up again if commanded by Sadr.

But Gayton believes that fewer people will heed the call this time.

"Our goal is to provide them with hope so they see that tomorrow is better than today," he said.

"We want them to look to the left and the right and say, 'Hey, joining hands with the [Iraqi] government and the coalition [forces] is going to help us more so than anybody else.' "

Kadhem doesn't deny progress. But it's easy enough for him to see the problems that remain.

His home is a one-story cinderblock house just off Sadr City's main drag. The potholed boulevard slices through the 8-mile-square district, a ragged sprawl of low-slung homes and dingy shops. Street vendors hawk everything from fat, ripe watermelons to AK-47s. Cars, trucks and horse-drawn wagons choke intersections. Sheep and goats wander through the filth.

Last August, Kadhem and his family of four were trapped in their house, a long, narrow structure with a threadbare rug, bare concrete floors and a fluorescent light that flickered to life during the rare occasions when electricity flowed.

The frequent blackouts meant that the temperature inside soared to 130 degrees. The stench of a pool of sewage just outside wafted in on the occasional hot, humid breeze.

"They said they were going to fix many things, and still nothing has happened," Kadhem said at the time, with fighting in the streets outside. "If the Americans had done well, most people would be with the Americans and we would not have these problems."

A year later, the blackouts are more frequent; his water remains undrinkable. The pond of sewage is gone - but that's only because Kadhem and his neighbors took up a collection and paid a private contractor to come and clean it up.

"No government has helped us," said Kadhem, a slight man with a Van Dyke pointy beard and a quick, broad smile. "We have helped the government."

Kadhem remains suspicious of the American presence in Iraq. Still, when members of Sadr's militia came around with a petition demanding the withdrawal of the Americans, Kadhem and his wife did not sign.

"We refused to sign not because we love the occupiers or to be your friends, but I really believe that if the Americans leave Iraq now, it'll be chaos," Kadhem said. "Nobody loves the occupier. But there's no alternative."

Despite his hesitance, Kadhem acknowledged that things had gotten better.

His four children can play in streets now free from fighting. Among other evident improvements, Kadhem and his wife, both teachers, have seen their schools painted, books and supplies donated and new classrooms and bathrooms built.

But Kadhem has benefited most in two ways: First, and most important, Hussein's ouster has meant new opportunities for once-repressed Shiite Muslims. And second, his pay increased tenfold because of a state worker salary hike implemented under L. Paul Bremer III, the U.S. civilian administrator in Iraq at the time.

Kadhem took the extra money and his newfound freedom and decided to open a business.

A talented carpenter, he opened a workshop in northern Baghdad, where services are markedly better because they weren't subjected to deliberate neglect during Hussein's rule. The streets are paved, and clean water comes from the tap.

He now spends every free moment from his teaching career at the store, a narrow garage on the first floor of a home in a middle-class neighborhood of Sunnis and Shiites. In one corner sits a graceful, curved headboard made of wood imported from Malaysia. In another sits a partially completed bedroom set, built from a picture in a catalog.

On one recent morning, several customers stopped by to check on the progress of their orders.

Kadhem's son and two other employees flitted in and out, carrying wood, sodas and supplies. Sawdust flew through the air and a generator chugged to power a band saw.

Kadhem proudly showed off his venture. As a young man, he had always wanted to be an artist. Now, he was finally putting his skills to use in woodworking.

Kadhem said that for the first time, he could imagine a future for his children better than his own.

"Things are different. Before, we felt afraid. Now, there is freedom and we feel there will be a solution and it will be better," he said. "At this stage, we have to endure.

"The change from a dictatorship to a democracy is not easy."