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Where there are no insurgents, troops help Iraqis

Our flight for another site visit in the south of Iraq leaves on time. As my general and the rest of the party leave the helo and approach the welcoming party, I notice that the soldiers in the area are wearing soft covers, no armor, and aren't carrying weapons. We are shepherded aboard vehicles for a short drive to the briefing rooms. I quickly scan the printed schedule and whisper to my general that a drum concert is scheduled in the afternoon and that our host will twist his arm to get him onto the stage to beat one of the drums. He gives me one of his looks that say "Colonel, you are truly insane" just before our vehicle stops.

We give up our helmets and body armor to some young soldiers who will guard them. They offer to watch our weapons as well, but, after five months in Iraq, it seems seriously unnatural not to have a loaded Beretta M9 on my hip at all times. We are welcomed with the obligatory plastic bottles of chilled water and a speech by the unit commander. His remarks are in English, possibly because the other foreign officers in the room are confident in their English skills, or maybe they have heard the presentation so many times that they have memorized the libretto. We are then briefed on this non-U.S. contingent's efforts at civil military operations (CMO). Insurgent violence in Iraq is very unevenly distributed, with 85 percent of the attacks in only four of 18 Iraqi provinces. At the other extreme, there are two large provinces where insurgent activity has been essentially zero for over a year.

In Baghdad, one of the worst areas, the primary focus is on security. Trips "outside the wire" involve heavily armed Marines or soldiers, armored vehicles with machine gun turrets and, sometimes, a helo gunship overhead. However, here in the Shi'a South, the U.S. and non-U.S. contingents are able to shop in the local stores, and sometimes, sample local restaurants. The lower security concerns means that coalition members are relatively free to devote more resources to improving the lives of the average Iraqi. And there is much to do.

The government's best guess is that in 2003 only about half of all Iraqi men and a quarter of all Iraqi women could read or write. Therefore, unlike many countries torn by war, it is not just a matter of reopening existing schools that were closed during the conflict, but rather, curricula must be developed, teachers trained, schools built, and education supplies obtained. There is usually strong support from the communities, especially from families with female children.

Medical care is another area of great need. Much of the rural population has never seen a medical professional, even for childbirth. Since medical resources are scarce compared to the huge need, the coalition forces must make a difficult choice. How much scarce resources should be spent on caring for the currently sick or injured and how much for training Iraqis to be doctors or nurses to

provide care in the future? The unit that we are visiting tries to combine the two by integrating the instruction of potential future doctors and nurses into the day to day care of the sick or injured.

We toured the camp's security arrangements. The base command post looks like something from the Kennedy Space Center. The signals from different sensors, video from a series of cameras and eye-in-the-sky are displayed on a bank of computer monitors. If something suspicious trips a sensor or intrigues one of the soldiers on duty, he can use a joystick to focus another instrument on the suspicious something or guide the eye-in-the-sky to fly over and take a closer look. This contingent uses very different methods than would be used to protect a U.S. Marine camp, but they are probably effective. It must confuse the insurgents to have different tactics, techniques and procedures used by different members of the coalition. A type of attack that is effective against an Australian unit might fail against an Azerbaijani force. Of course, the insurgent business is ruthlessly Darwinian. Make a mistake and you are dead or bound for Cuba. Survivors may be the most ruthlessly effective terrorists but, fortunately, there aren't many of them.

Finally, the tour went to its next stop -- the drum performance. A little theater was packed with soldiers from several contingents. On stage were six muscular men, stripped to the waist, facing six large drums. They started playing a loud, complex percussion piece with perfectly synchronized motions. Then the base commander invited my general to give it a try. He gave me his "Colonel, I know that you set me up and you will pay" look and then drummed with abandon until cheers drowned out the noise.

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