

Palm Beach Post: Mahoney: U.S. Should Prepare for Iraq Pullout

By Larry Lipman

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WASHINGTON - Returning from a weekend trip to Iraq, Rep. Tim Mahoney today said the United States must begin planning to turn over more political and military responsibility to the Iraqi people.

But in a telephone call from Germany with Florida reporters, Mahoney, a Democrat from Palm Beach Gardens, expressed serious doubts that the current Iraqi government has the capability of resolving the competing agendas being pushed by what he described as "war lords" in key government positions and interreligious conflict between the majority Shiite and minority Sunni populations.

"It's clear that the United States does not have the capability of maintaining "the level of materiel and manpower to sustain the surge" in U.S. troop strength in Iraq, Mahoney said. "There will have to be a different strategy."

Although the surge and new efforts to work with former Sunni insurgents appears to be having a positive effect in some parts of the country, Mahoney said the larger problem is the civil war between the Sunni and Shiite populations - including Shiite leaders whose authority is supported by Iran.

The biggest problem, Mahoney said, is that Iraq lacks a "coherent federal government" in which many members of the Iraqi Parliament have their own militias.

President Bush and the American government need to make it clear to Iraqi leaders that the United States will not continue following the current course for much longer and that the Iraqi government needs to meet certain benchmarks of progress in order for continued U.S. support, he said.

In conversations with Iraq's deputy prime minister, Barham Salih, Mahoney said the Iraqi leader said Congress' insistence on benchmarks has focused Iraqi leaders on trying to resolve their differences.

But Mahoney called the current government structure "flawed" because the previous Iraqi elections did not include significant participation from the Sunni population. He said the U.S. should push for new elections and a new Iraqi constitution that more fairly shares power.

Mahoney, was one of six freshmen members of Congress - three Democrats and three Republicans - participating in the trip sponsored by the Defense Department.

The group met in Iraq with American military leaders including Gen. David Petraeus, the top commander in the field and visited the city of Ramadi, a largely Sunni area where they visited a local market and met with Iraqi military leaders.

But Mahoney said the mayor of Ramadi, told the congressmen that he did not view the Shiite-led Iraqi army as an organization that would protect him, but rather one that would attack him.

Mahoney said it appears that there is dwindling support among the Sunni population for the radical al Qaeda in Iraq, and that U.S. effort to contract with Sunnis on development projects is working.

Mahoney said the Bush administration made a mistake of trying to impose a government on Iraq without trying to resolve the political and religious division in the country.

Despite the military's successes, Mahoney said "it is really a very bad situation," and questioned America's capacity to sustain the effort.

Noting the heavy toll the desert war has had on the American military and its equipment, Mahoney said the United States should plan on a decade-long rebuilding program to restore the military after the Iraq war.