

## Charlotte Sun-Herald: Iraq visit shows need for exit plan, Mahoney says

Commanders tell lawmakers surge can't be sustained

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By Greg Martin

The United States' military surge has succeeded in putting al Qaeda fighters "on their heels" in the battle-torn Anbar province, but other political forces are still working against the reunification of Iraq, according to U.S. Rep. Tim Mahoney.

Yet, for the U.S., the question is not "whether" to stage a drawdown of U.S. forces deployed in Iraq, but "how," Mahoney said Monday after a factfinding trip to Iraq last weekend.

Mahoney, a Democrat from Palm Beach Gardens who represents District 16, spoke with reporters in a conference call from Germany Monday about his experiences in Iraq.

He said he met with senior Iraqi government officials, got progress reports from U.S. commanders, and had lunch with Florida soldiers to thank them for their service.

Now, the U.S. needs to "go back to the Iraq Study Group" for an exit strategy, Mahoney said. The strategy should provide support for Iraq's efforts to reunify its people and secure its own cities, Mahoney said.

The U.S. president should also engage diplomacy with Iran and other countries in the region to stop the flow of munitions and fighters into Iraq.

"The president of the United States has got to show leadership," Mahoney said.

The stakes are high. If Iraq fails to form a cohesive nation, civil war will rage on, and that could lead to instability throughout the Middle East, Mahoney warned.

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The trip was planned to prepare the members of Congress to make decisions regarding the war in the near future,

Mahoney said.

A week ago, Mahoney and other Democrats were invited to the White House to meet with Steven Hadley, President Bush's national security adviser. The administration, which is to report on the war's progress on Sept. 15, is working to determine if there's an opportunity for a bipartisan Iraq plan, Mahoney said.

The lawmakers were flown to Kuwait Saturday in a U.S. government 727 jetliner. They then flew to Baghdad in a 1960s-vintage C-130 plane. The temperature was 140 degrees when the lawmakers stepped onto the tarmac, Mahoney said.

The experience gave Mahoney a taste of the conditions that America's soldiers face every day.

"I lost eight pounds due to the heat," Mahoney said. "You're wearing a helmet. I mean, it's a war zone."

Saturday night, the entourage dined with Gen. David Patraeus, U.S. commander of the Multi-National Force, and a deputy U.S. ambassador.

The next morning, lawmakers were flown to Ramadi in a helicopter. Securing Ramadi, long a hot spot for insurgency attacks, has become a mission of the U.S. troop surge.

Despite dangers that range from sniper fire to roadside bombs, Mahoney said he went "outside the wire" of the U.S. base's perimeter to visit a downtown area that included a bazaar and the City Hall.

The mayor of Ramadi, which is the seat of the Anbar province, told the U.S. congressmen he does not expect Iraq's federal government based in Baghdad to protect his city's people. He sees the U.S. as his only hope, Mahoney said.

"Until you change that dynamic, we are not looking at a sound foundation," Mahoney said.

Mahoney said his group also met with U.S. Maj. Gen. Walter Gaskin and a colonel in his command. Gaskin told the lawmakers the troop surge had allowed the U.S. to force al Qaeda from Ramadi.

"That has really made a difference and really has gotten al Qaeda on their heels," Mahoney said.

Mahoney said he also learned that Sunnis, who allied with al Qaeda in opposing a strong central government in Iraq, are now changing their minds.

But Mahoney said a number of U.S. commanders, including Gen. Petraeus, believe the U.S. military cannot sustain the surge indefinitely.

"There's going to have to be a different strategy," Mahoney said.

The U.S. also believes Iran has been "a player" in Iraq by supporting the Shia group and al Qaeda operations, Mahoney said.

Yet, Iraq's parliament has been unable to bring "cohesion" to the country's factions, he added. In fact, some members of parliament even have their own militias, he said.

"This is creating gridlock," Mahoney said.

He cited the fact that the Iraq government is sitting on \$10 billion in reconstruction funds. The money hasn't been disbursed because of disagreements over who should get it, Mahoney said.

"It's clear, there is no solution unless we can get a representative government of both Sunnis and Shia," he said.

He suggested that another election might be one way to bring the factions together. Sunnis in some regions had boycotted Iraq's first election in 2005.

The Iraqi army is going to have to "step up" and the U.S. is exerting "enormous pressure" on Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki to make that happen, Mahoney said.

The problems have erupted because of the U.S.'s shortsighted invasion plan, Mahoney said. "It was: ready, fire, aim," he said.

Now, the U.S. has to refocus its military on the following tasks: protect Iraqis from al Qaeda and capture Osama bin Laden, secure the sovereignty of Iraq, and support the Iraqis in the reunification of their country, according to Mahoney.