

Scipps/Treasure Coast News: Mahoney visits Iraq

By Amie Parnes

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"I was only there one day, and I was exhausted," Mahoney said in a conference call from Ramstein Air Force Base in Germany on Monday. "I lost eight pounds due to the heat, and you're operating in the most inhospitable environment that you can possibly imagine. It is dirty and it is windy and the dust is blowing everywhere."

Mahoney left Washington for Iraq with five other lawmakers Friday evening, as Congress adjourned for the weekend. The purpose of the trip was simple: "It was important for me to be prepped and understand what the status is (in Iraq) so I can make an informed decision," he said.

During his day-and-a-half long trip through the war-torn country, Mahoney, the Democrat who represents parts of Martin and St. Lucie counties, had a chance to be taken by the military into town where he toured a city hall in Ramadi before meeting with Iraqi government officials, including Deputy Prime Minister Barham Salih. Over dinner Saturday night, he got a progress report from General David Patreaus, the commander of U.S. forces in Iraq, and had a Sunday lunch with Florida soldiers, who he called "heroes."

"These people are performing at an extremely high level," he said. "When you go and meet our troops and you see the work that they're doing, what you find is a highly trained, very capable, highly motivated group of people that love their jobs and are just doing an amazing task for the United States."

At the same time, Mahoney said there are significant flaws in Iraq that place the troops in constant danger. The U.S. does not have the capability of maintaining the equipment and manpower to sustain the surge, he said, as Sunnis and Shiites engage in an ongoing civil war.

"What that tells you is that there's going to have to be a different strategy of how we move forward come the fall and going into next year," he said. "So what we have to do is we're going to have to figure out how to solve these issues and move forward with less men and less material, and that's the challenge."

The trip was an eye-opening experience, Mahoney said, one that re-enforced the idea "the Bush Administration made a mistake" when planning the war and in executing plans for the new Iraqi government.

"They did 'ready-fire-aim' as opposed to 'ready-aim-fire,'" he said. "I think we should have taken the tactics we're using today and we should have employed those before we tried to hold (Iraqi) elections. And so, therefore, we find ourselves with an unrepresentative representative government."