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U.S. Fails to Complete, or Cuts Back, Iraqi Projects

By **TIMOTHY WILLIAMS**

FALLUJA, Iraq — After two devastating battles between American forces and Sunni insurgents in 2004, this city needed almost everything — new roads, clean water, electricity, health care.

The American [reconstruction](#) authorities decided, however, that the first big rebuilding project to win hearts and minds would be a citywide sewage treatment system.

Now, after more than six years of work, \$104 million spent, and without having connected a single house, American reconstruction officials have decided to leave the troubled system only partly finished, infuriating many city residents.

The plant is just one of many projects that the United States has decided to scale back on — or in some cases abandon — as American troops who provide security for reconstruction sites prepare to leave in large numbers.

Even some of the projects that will be completed are being finished with such haste, Iraqi officials say, that engineering standards have deteriorated precipitously, putting workers in danger and leaving some of the work at risk of collapse.

The American officials give many reasons for their decisions to scale back or drop some projects before more troops leave, including that they discovered in some cases that the facilities diverged from Iraq's most pressing needs, or that the initial work — overseen by American contractors and performed by Iraqi workers — was so flawed that problems would take too long to fix.

Reconstruction officials point out that they have completed the vast majority of the \$53 billion in projects they planned throughout Iraq, from bridges to honey-bee farms.

And the officials, along with the United States Embassy in Baghdad, say they are aware of only isolated concerns about the quality of reconstruction work now under way in the country, or

about projects being left undone.

“I am not aware of the Iraqis having any sort of hard feelings that we will not finish current projects and award projects we said we would,” Col. Dionysios Anninos, head of the [Army Corps of Engineers](#) office in Iraq, wrote in an e-mail message. “We will finish strong!”

But some Iraqis have compared the current hurried reconstruction effort to the haphazard American withdrawal from Vietnam in 1975. In Diyala Province, northeast of Baghdad, Iraqi officials said they found that construction standards had slipped so drastically that they ordered an immediate halt to all American-financed projects, even though American inspectors had deemed the work to be adequate.

The Americans had told local authorities they were speeding up projects because a nearby [United States Army](#) base was scheduled to close this summer.

Shaymaa Mohammad Ameen, who works with reconstruction officials as a liaison for the Diyala Provincial Council, said American officials frequently threatened to leave when Iraqis questioned engineering standards and brought up other safety issues.

“They constantly tell us that if we do not approve, they can always move the allocated funds to projects in other provinces,” she said.

In Baghdad and Salahuddin Provinces, local officials say Americans have simply walked away from partly completed police stations, schools, government buildings and water projects during the past several months without explanation.

And in Dhi Qar and Babil Provinces, there are complaints that roads and buildings recently completed by the Americans do not meet basic construction standards.

In Hilla, the capital of Babil Province, extensive cracking has been cited in a \$7.4 million road built less than a year ago. Reconstruction officials say the cracking is not out of the ordinary and presents no safety hazard.

“Since its opening, it has reduced congestion in the capital, made the roads safer by providing an alternative for large trucks to transit and spurred economic development along the new route,” Robert Wong, an American rebuilding official in the province, wrote in an e-mail message.

Here in Falluja, in Anbar Province, the sewage treatment system has left some of the city’s busiest streets lined with open trenches for more than three years and engendered widespread resentment. The news that it will be left unfinished has provoked anger.

“I told the Americans if they want to leave a good impression on Falluja and to erase the bad feelings about the United States from the war, that they should finish this project completely and properly,” said Hamed Hashim, president of the Falluja city council. “It was supposed to be finished in two years, then five years, and it still isn’t complete. There’s been no benefit to us.”

Reconstruction officials say that the project has been hindered by myriad problems, including the area’s continuing violence, which has interrupted work for periods of time.

The project was conceived to treat waste for all of Falluja’s 200,000 residents and to build in additional capacity for the city to grow by 50 percent.

But the new, diminished system will serve only 4,300 homes, or about one-sixth of Falluja’s population, according to American and Iraqi officials.

Further, because both the project’s scope and efficiency have been reduced so dramatically, American officials acknowledge that the system may emit a foul odor if it ever does become functional.

For now, the situation that prompted American officials to give the sewage system top construction priority in 2004 continues to exist: Falluja remains dependent upon septic tanks that leak raw waste into streets and down storm drains and eventually into the Euphrates River, a main source of drinking water in Falluja and cities downstream.

The Army Corps of Engineers, which is overseeing the project, said the scaled-down version of the system would have only facilities considered essential, including the treatment plant and three pump stations.

“I think the project was too ambitious — and then to transplant it to a war zone,” Colonel Anninos said. “It took awhile, but we are on the right track now, and we will leave behind a pretty good legacy once we get commitments from the government to provide fuel and chemicals.”

But after years of negotiations with the Americans, the Iraqi government has guaranteed neither. As an alternative, American planners said the system might need to rely heavily on backup generators for power, which creates its own set of problems — including that the treatment plant and pumps will require as much as 250 gallons of fuel each hour to operate in a country where fuel shortages remain commonplace.

The project is riddled with other unresolved questions as well, including whether the \$3 million American officials had pledged for Iraq to link the system to houses was sufficient: American planners say it is; Iraqi engineers say it is not.

Four Iraqis have died during construction, including at least one person overcome by toxic fumes, according to workers at the site. Iraqi engineers also say they have complained to Americans about the poor quality of some of the work, but have been ignored.

There are also concerns about the system's sustainability once American engineers leave. American planners say training for Iraqi engineers to learn to operate and maintain the system would require at least several months, but a proposed yearlong training program has not been financed.

"This project was supposed to be a mercy," said Ali Abed al-Karim, the owner of a store where an open trench out front prevents most customers from entering. "But it has been nothing but a curse."

Duraïd Adnan contributed reporting from Baghdad, and Iraqi employees of The New York Times from Anbar, Diyala and Babil Provinces.