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Southern PHCs Overcoming Construction, Security Challenges

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Iraqi workers continue building many of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineer Primary Healthcare Centers despite security and logistic challenges in the Gulf Region South district. (USACE Photo)

NASIRIYAH, Iraq – Designed to be the first step in diagnosing medical illnesses and conditions for people in areas where hospital facilities are unavailable, many of the 58 primary health centers (PHCs) being built by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in southern Iraq will be completed this summer and open to patient traffic.

“These PHCs will operate as first step for patients, and then doctors will transfer the more serious patients to hospitals,” said Mohmoud, an Iraqi engineer who spoke anonymously. “And that will reduce the crowd of patients on the main hospitals and only the seriously ill patients will go to the hospitals. Also, these PHCs will provide services for the people whose situation is not serious.”



An Iraqi laborer works on the air ducts in a Primary Healthcare Center in Nasiriyah, Iraq. (USACE Photo)

The PHCs are being built using one of three designs, according to Robin Parks, a Buildings, Health and Education project manager for the Corps’ southern district. Type A and B facilities are smaller and are built in and around cities with larger populations. Type C facilities house two staff physicians, emergency and maternity centers and are designed for more rural areas. All three clinics have dental facilities, x-ray departments and instructional units, with one physician in residence.

“One problem we have with the PHCs is

that there are multiple contracts involved with each project," said Parks. "For example, separate electrical contracts, medical consumables like stethoscopes and related things. The problems occur when you try to coordinate all these things."

Mohmoud agreed with Parks and added that coordinating all of the contracts presented special challenges for him, as the Corps' quality assurance representative on the ground, because "every company or side who is involved in this job wants to do his part A-S-A-P and be gone." He said that connecting PHCs to main power and water lines can take some months, but that he is seeing improvements in the speed with which these tasks are being accomplished.

Parks added that training people to work in the facilities has also been a challenge because of the specific needs of the health care industry. "With PHCs you can't just hire anyone off the streets. You need people with experience in the health care industry."

Parks anticipates that roughly 50 of the clinics will open this summer.

Currently, one clinic is open in the Wasit Province, with medical supplies and equipment being the biggest obstacle to overcome. "There are a couple PHCs that may not open because of security challenges and other problems," she said. "So we may be looking at a total of 56 clinics. But, we are still working those issues."

According to Parks, most of the contracts were awarded in July 2006. Work has been slow because of the special requirements for the clinics, but Parks is confident that things will move along quickly now.

"Mohmoud has been doing a great job for us," she said. "He has been our eyes



Iraqi laborers mix cement to be used as the foundation for building sidewalks at a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Primary Healthcare Center project in southern Iraq. (USACE Photo)

and ears on the ground, going to places we can't get to. He has been able to teach the contractors things like the requirements for x-ray room walls are different than those for regular wall. They need a glass sheet and lead between the wall and the insulation. He has been able to correct these things on the ground helping us meet the mission."

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