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USACE Oversees Complex Basrah Children's Hospital Project

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Workers at the Basrah Children's Hospital project lay down ceramic tiles. Some 800 people are employed by the project, which is scheduled to be complete construction by July 2008. (Photo courtesy of USACE)

TALLIL, Iraq – One of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' largest projects in Iraq is 76 percent complete and is on track for construction to finish this summer, according to the Gulf Region South district commander, Col. Stephen Hill.

The Basrah Children's Hospital will be a state-of-the-art acute and referral care hospital that focuses on pediatric oncology. The 19,800 square meter complex includes a 94-bed main hospital building, two utility buildings, warehouse, oxygen

plant, steam autoclave building, and a 36-bed residence hall. The two-story hospital building includes two operating rooms, two special procedure rooms, emergency room, specialty clinics, pediatric and neonatal intensive care unit, dental suite, and training classrooms.

"This project is one of the largest in Iraq," Hill said. "It's multi-national support system focusing on one goal and that is to provide this hospital for the children of Basrah and Iraq."

The international community has focused on the hospital and its importance to Iraq because of the infant mortality rate in the region, which currently stands at 13 percent, one of the highest in the world. The structure boasts a multi-national coalition behind its construction, according to Hill.

The project is funded through multiple sources, including the Iraq Relief and Reconstruction Fund; Project HOPE; and the Spanish government through the United Nations Development Program.

Overseeing a UNDP-funded contract is a first for USACE in Iraq, according to Navy Lt. Cmdr. Neil Underwood, the project engineer.

The project was chosen by the Government of Iraq in conjunction with the Department of State United Nations, Underwood said. The idea germinated from the desire to eradicate cancer from Iraq's second largest city and will bring, to U.S. medical standards, all treatments that children can receive for cases of leukemia and other childhood cancers – treatments that are available in the United States in every major city.

"The work we will be executing includes the resident buildings for the doctors, nurses and other hospital staff," Underwood said. "Some of our other work includes the primary structure of the hospital, along with roof work, air conditioning and installation of generators. We



A worker at the Basrah Children's Hospital installs cable trays near the duct work on one of the ceilings. (Photo courtesy of USACE)

presently have four generators and have identified a fifth as being necessary because most of Iraq has a power problem; we want to ensure the hospital can function no matter what."

Underwood took his first trip to the hospital after control of the Basrah Province was returned to the Iraqi Security Forces. "As we rolled through the gates in our convoy, I didn't know what to expect with the Iraqi forces," he said. "The soldiers appeared eager to meet us and prove themselves. We traveled to and from the Basrah Children's Hospital without incident. The Iraqi soldiers performed their duties with great competence." He added that this will greatly enhance the ability of USACE to maintain its construction schedule.

The hospital building construction is scheduled to be completed by July, with some of the more complex equipment - such as the linear accelerator - being installed in November. The hospital is tentatively scheduled to open January/February 2009. The construction is being done in a phased approach, according Hill. USACE is working with all its partners to ensure quality construction, delivery of

equipment and proper turnover necessary for subsequent staffing and training – critical for the overall project's success, Hill added.

USACE has assembled a quality team to deliver the hospital to the Iraqi people, Hill said. Because the project is so complex, USACE went to multiple sources to provide the services necessary. It's about the construction being performed by the contractor, about the equipment yet to be installed – about bringing the right people together to work within a team framework, he added. The economic impact for the local people reflects positively on the project's stability.

"The jobs available to people in the Basrah area number from 700 to 800 on any given day," Hill said. "Many trades and professions work together on the job site – from brickwork and stone cladding to electrical. The most significant aspect of a project focuses on the people. What's interesting here is I spent time talking to Iraq engineers – all highly educated and professional. They know the project and what is necessary, and they are the most important piece. The Corps has the benefit of working with them as brothers, partners and colleagues on this sophisticated project for the people and children of Iraq. People make this happen."

Underwood agrees with Hill, noting that some of the challenges on the job site reflect differences in construction standards, but that the prime contractor is ensuring that the work being done at the site is quality.

"The project is being operated by local Iraqis who take a lot of pride in their work," Underwood said. "It is not us – we tell them that this is for Iraqi people and they want to see this benefit for themselves."

The hospital project began in 2005 under the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Bechtel Corporation. USACE took over oversight of the work in August 2006, when the project was about 35 percent complete.