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## ***Building good projects under challenging conditions – Al-Amarah Substation***

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Al-Amarah substation outdoor switchyard, where all the circuits come together and split to different directions in the country. (USACE photo)

TALLIL, Iraq – Of the multitude of projects completed across Iraq by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (more than 3,777 on the eve of the USACE Gulf Region Division’s 4th Anniversary on Jan. 25, 2008) some are true quality stand outs.

One USACE project that gets high marks faced special challenges--a 400 kV electrical substation in Al-Amarah, the capital of Maysan province. Built at a cost of nearly \$37 million, the substation is located in an area deemed volatile and high-risk from a security perspective, with no western presence.

Emphasis was placed during the con-

tract solicitation phase on proposals from international companies having an Iraqi partner, and the contract went to such a joint venture. Extensive training in and out of country was given to Iraqi project and ministry engineers who were to be located in the field. The training stressed reporting and included the use of video and digital equipment.

These factors were recounted in an after-action report by Bill Simpson, who managed the project from Basrah and who attributed its success in part to “a good and solid scope of work, a detailed and frequently updated project schedule, good

communications with close coordination, and following sound project management principles of managing 'scope creep,' schedule and quality."

Certain themes recur when the factors yielding good projects are discussed. These include having projects grounded in real need, hiring good contractors, and communicating clearly. "Needs of the community," said Lt. Col. Gregory Raimondo, deputy commander of the Corps' Gulf Region South district. A project can be technically sound but fails to meet his definition of "good" unless it addresses real needs.

"A well-identified need/purpose supported by the local population and officials," said Robin Parks, a USACE health care project manager. Projects must be researched and clearly specified in conjunction with the end-user, agreed electricity sector managers Simpson, Stephen Pitts and Fred Levey. The Al-Amarah project, which distributes power to up to 250,000 people, was clearly needed and was closely coordinated with Iraqi authorities who provided strong support.

Hiring good contractors is cited commonly as a key to good projects. Lt. Col. Kenneth McDonald, officer-in-charge of USACE's Basrah Area Office, cited "good, competent contractors" and competent USACE personnel and Iraqi associates high on his list of "good project" requirements. Sgt. 1st Class Christopher Golden, noncommissioned officer-in-charge of the Adder Area Office, explained the need for good contractors is underscored by the fact that often project construction lasts longer than a particular USACE individual is deployed to manage it, therefore contractors provide continuity.

The Al-Amarah substation contractor was joint venture of ABB Sweden, an international company, and Shams Al Sabah, an Iraqi firm. The contract was in support of a USACE Gulf Region Division capacity building initiative and there was intensive pre-construction training.

Cecil Whitehouse, a USACE construction representative whose projects are located in Muthanna Province, listed communications with the contractor as a key factor in terms of tactics, techniques and procedures contributing to good projects. He cited a number of examples, including requiring clear and precise reporting from contractors and giving contractors words of encouragement when deserved and addressing problems head-on with contractors.

Good, solid reporting, assisted by video and teleconferences and digital photos, was a hallmark of the Al-Amarah job, according to project manager Simpson. Daily reporting was supplemented by weekly meetings, followed and complimented by monthly face-to-face project review meetings in safe locations.

Raimondo and Whitehouse saw important links between providing local jobs and getting positive "atmospherics" from a project area. Project manager Parks urged specifying a large percentage of local workers on USACE projects. About 80 percent of the labor for the Al-Amarah project came from the area, with more than 500 workers a day on site during the peak construction period that lasted over a year.

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