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U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

New center provides venue for electricity training

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BAGHDAD, Iraq – Keeping a phenomenon like electricity balanced across a national grid takes skill and expertise, but it takes extraordinarily coordinated teamwork to react correctly when emergencies happen. And in Iraq, where insurgents have sought to hinder the new government by bringing down power line towers, power emergencies have arisen with too great a frequency.

Helping power system operators in the Iraqi Ministry of Electricity learn how to better handle emergency operations is the goal of a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers sponsored training program.

Only one of the many types of capacity development training in Iraq, the emergency operations course was the first taking place in a new training facility just completed at a Baghdad-area power plant. The training brought experienced system operators together for 4 days of training to work through a variety of emergency scenarios on a newly acquired network simulator.

It takes clear decision making, established command and control, and timely communication to prevent cascading outages, eliminate further damage and restore electrical systems after sudden interruptions.

Working initially with a notional electrical grid mirroring Iraq's electrical system, Ministry of Electricity personnel practiced what to do in the event of a blackout to restore power quickly and safely.

"Certain power plants can re-start without external power, then you bring the others on line," said Robin Podmore, a contractor from Seattle providing the train-the-trainer sessions in Iraq.

A part of capacity development assisting the Government of Iraq with the ability to sustain and maintain infrastructure improvements, the training was facilitated in a new dedicated training center.

Program Coordinator Wendy Smith said the \$246,000 facility was paid for with Economic Support Funds. It provides two rooms: a classroom for up to 30 people and a larger training room that easily accommodates multiple desks and computer-based training work stations and seating for up to 50 lecture participants. A further feature of the training center is overnight accommodation for up to 28 trainees.

Another advantage of the new training facility is that Ministry of Electricity employees who have never met from across the country have the opportunity to come together and share their experiences. The aim is that the best practices within the Ministry will spread.

The exercises gave students an opportunity to see impacts of actions across the entire system – generation, transmission and distribution – and honed their skills to keep power flowing.

While Podmore has provided Department of Energy mandated training to stateside power companies, he said coming to Iraq was a highlight. “Here we have a unique environment of infrastructure decay and the attacks by insurgents,” he said. “And all these first class people are putting their lives on the line to provide the service. I am very honored by their commitment.”

Note: Grant Sattler is a public affairs specialist with the Gulf Region Division, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Iraq. Email requests to CEGRD.PAO@usace.army.mil. For more information on the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Iraq, visit www.grd.usace.army.mil.