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Kennedy, McCollum leave Iraq with different impressions

August 9, 2004



Iraqi interim Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari (C) speaks to the press after meeting with a delegation of US congressmen. On the left Rep. Mark Kennedy R-MN, (2nd R) Rep. Rush Holt D-NJ, (R) Rep. Betty McCollum D-MN, at the US embassy on August 9, 2004 in Baghdad. (Photo by Saeed Khan/POOL/Getty Images)

Baghdad, Iraq — (AP) Finishing up a congressional trip to Iraq, Rep. Betty McCollum was struck by how fearful ordinary Iraqis were of continued violence. Rep. Mark Kennedy, on the same trip, marveled at how much things are improving.

McCollum, a Democrat, and Kennedy, a Republican, offered a microcosm of their parties' divergent attitudes on Iraq, likely to be reflected in this year's presidential election.

"We have a long way to go in stability and self-government in Iraq security," McCollum said in a telephone interview from Amman, Jordan, where the congressional delegation is staying.

"The security continues to be a real big obstacle. There's continued violence and attacks on U.S. troops, on civilian counterparts and on Iraqi people - they're very concerned for their own personal safety."

McCollum said that she spoke with Iraqi parents who are keeping their children out of school because of concerns that they would be blown up by a car bomb or kidnapped.

Kennedy, by contrast, said he was struck by how much things had improved since his last visit to Iraq a year ago, especially in terms of the Iraqi security forces.



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"The level of training and sophistication, professionalism, equipment this time was significantly above what I the saw last time," Kennedy said in a separate telephone interview from Amman. "There are also many more cars and people throughout Baghdad. And it's clean - maybe not Midwest standards - but cleaner than last time."

Kennedy and McCollum are part of a delegation led by Connecticut Republican Chris Shays, chairman of the House Government Reform subcommittee on national security, emerging threats and international relations. The group will also visit Jordan, Israel, the Palestinian territories, Lebanon and Syria.

There were some areas that Kennedy and McCollum did agree on. Both were impressed with Iraqi Prime Minister Ayad Allawi.

"People can see a sign of movement here in the fact that Allawi is a very strong, confident, competent leader, willing to take these insurgencies on," said McCollum. "But this is a very long hard journey to get the country stable enough to hold elections here in a couple of months."

Kennedy called Allawi a strong leader who is committed to democracy.

"The dominant impression I have is that we've got some great leadership," Kennedy said, referring both to Allawi and to U.S. ambassador John Negroponte.

Kennedy said that members of the delegation asked U.S. officials how long U.S. troops would have to remain in Iraq.

"We received no definite timetable," Kennedy said. "We made it clear to everybody we visited that it's our desire to get this turned over to them (Iraqis) as soon as possible." --- Fred Frommer can be reached at ffrommer(at)ap.org (Copyright 2004 by The Associated Press. All Rights Reserved.) AP-NY-08-09-04 1738EDT

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