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Legislators view two different Iraqs

Kennedy sees positives; McCollum, a 'long road'

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WASHINGTON — Two Minnesota lawmakers went to Iraq last week, witnessed the same things and talked to the same people. Yet Monday they didn't agree on much — apart from praising U.S. troops there.

In the eyes of U.S. Rep. Mark Kennedy, a Republican who supported the war, Iraq continues to make progress on many fronts. Kennedy described an Iraq today that's cleaner and busier than it was a year ago. He cited the reconstruction under way, the "great progress" in training an Iraqi security force, the "supportive" reception of the interim government by most Iraqis, and an improving infrastructure.

"I am more convinced than ever that it's a very positive thing that we are doing in the Middle East," said Kennedy, of Watertown.

Yet in the eyes of U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum, a Democrat who opposed the war, Iraq continues to battle insecurity, a growing insurgency, general lawlessness, widespread unemployment and a distrustful citizenry — all of which are overwhelming the more hopeful signs.

"We have to be realistic," said McCollum, of St. Paul. "We have to be straight with the American people about what's going on there, the amount of American lives being lost, the amount of taxpayer dollars being spent."

Both Minnesota lawmakers were part of a five-person congressional delegation that last week visited Baghdad and Fallujah in Iraq as well as Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Israel, where they met with Israeli and Palestinian leaders.

The delegation initially hoped to spend at least one night in Iraq, but U.S. officials nixed that idea for security reasons.

Both Kennedy and McCollum also visited Iraq last year. Kennedy was in Baghdad and northern Iraq in August 2003; now he sees many improvements, including to the accommodations for U.S. troops.

"Whereas last year I saw them mostly in tents ... now I see rows and rows of trailers that have air conditioning, that have Internet access, that have cable TV."

For the average Iraqi citizen, Kennedy said, the positive signs are many.

There's more street life, even billboards. Schools have been refurbished, irrigation ditches cleared; electrical service is slowly improving, and a new security force is being trained. Lawmakers saw new Iraqi forces being trained for hostage rescue.

"The state of preparedness and training for the Iraqi forces was far greater than it was last time," Kennedy said,

citing a greater "level of staffing and professionalism and training."

Said McCollum, "Yes, we are training Iraqis to provide their own security, but we have a long ways to go."

She cited ongoing insecurity that plagues Iraq — not just insurgencies in Najaf and Fallujah, which McCollum said had grown worse since her visit last October, but also the lack of a police force, as well as instability caused by widespread unemployment. She asked why so few Iraqis were employed in reconstruction projects, with so much U.S. aid available.

Said McCollum, "Iraqis are now controlling the interim government, they're coming to make some decisions, but this government is not considered legitimate by the Iraqi people."

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