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US drains Iraqi swamp - of sewage

In a bid to improve health and goodwill, US engineers are spending \$500 million on Baghdad's infrastructure.

By Dan Murphy Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor / August 11, 2004

BAGHDAD

On his regular rounds, Capt. Mark Distefano isn't looking for insurgents or explosive devices. Instead, he's searching for evidence that one of the biggest killers in Sadr City, the poorest of Baghdad's neighborhoods, is being tamed: raw sewage.

At the height of Baghdad's summer, with temperatures topping 120 degrees, diseases like typhoid and hepatitis rampage through the water supply. The 1st Cavalry Division's 20th Engineer Battalion is pouring money into Sadr City, a stronghold for the anti-US Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and his Mahdi Army, in an effort to improve health and win hearts and minds.

Their work has been put on hold during the recent fighting between Sadr's men and US forces. But even before the return to open hostilities, the American effort in Sadr City reaped limited goodwill as the Mahdi Army claimed much of the credit for it. Spending on projects was ramped up in June, but some say the failure to spend more money with greater speed in Sadr City has contributed to the unrest there.

"As late as May, we were coming in to do recon work and we were getting shot at, which was the most ironic thing to me," says Captain Distefano, a Louisiana native and graduate of West Point. "Here we are trying to help and we're taking fire. But we know this is work that will help the people here, whether we get credit for it or not."

The need for the work is clear. Sadr City doctors say the rate of waterborne infections is the worst in years, caused by damage to the already devastated local infrastructure in last year's invasion and an intermittent power supply that leaves sewage and water pumps idle for much of the day. Low pressure in rusted and damaged pipes, which pass through ground saturated with sewage, contaminates the water supply to such an extent that in some neighborhoods locals hold their noses to drink the tap water.

"We're overwhelmed with cases," says Kassim Abdul Khanja, who runs the Zarha Health Clinic for the poor in Sadr City. "Waterborne diseases are endemic here - it's always a summertime problem. But this year it's much, much worse."

Dr. Kassim says he treated 300 typhoid patients in July alone. "This is less a medical problem and more one of public health - with better infrastructure, these diseases would be gone."

That's where the engineers come in.

Kick around Sadr City for a few hours, and the problem seems hopeless. The public housing quarter built in the 1950s to house about 500,000 people now holds five times that many, and its services haven't been updated since.

Flocks of goats and sheep forage on rotting garbage piles in medians and gutters, as pedestrians nimbly detour the frequent pools of fetid water.

Yet on this arrow-straight stretch of road on Sadr City's outskirts, signs of progress are everywhere. The median has just been cleaned by a gang of laborers, paid \$5 a day by the US - an above-average wage - in a dual effort to deal with the area's sanitation problems and to get money pumping to the poorest families in a district that has about 50 percent unemployment.

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A promotional banner for Piperlime. On the left is a tan high-heeled sandal. In the center, the text "enjoy free shipping And free returns" is written in orange, with "And" in a smaller font. Below this text are five daisies in white, yellow, and orange. To the right of the daisies is the text "on spring's new arrivals. [Shop now](#)" in orange. Further right is a brown thong sandal. On the far right is the Piperlime logo, which consists of a green lime slice icon and the word "PIPERLIME" in green capital letters.

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