

## *Aid workers alarmed by attacks at food warehouses*

Many other Iraqis living in exile in the United States are postponing long-awaited visits to their homeland because of the violence that persists there.

Insurgents are staging 10 to 25 attacks a day on U.S. forces in Iraq, Gen. Tommy Franks, former head of the U.S. Central Command, told a congressional committee this week. The shootings, grenade attacks and bombings are threatening relief work, even though most of the assailants have targeted military forces.

The Minneapolis-based American Refugee Committee sent a security expert to Iraq last week to assess safety for workers who are delivering relief in the country's southern regions. The committee received a \$500,000 grant in May from the U.S. Agency for International Development to help distribute relief supplies, assess reconstruction needs and rebuild schools, clinics and other facilities. It is awaiting approval of a larger grant from the State Department for resettling Iraqis who are living in Iran, said Hugh Parmer, the committee's president.

"At this point, we have not had any incidents in which security problems have interfered with our operations," Parmer said.

### **Concern over looters**

Even so, workers at several humanitarian organizations are alarmed. The United Nations World Food Program said in a statement on Thursday that there had been at least 12 incidents since June 10 of looting and shooting in or near food warehouses. The agency withdrew its staff from one Baghdad warehouse after it was attacked by several hundred looters. A few trucks bringing food into Iraq also have been hijacked, it said.

"These incidents have not yet halted the arrival and distribution of food, but we are worried their continuation could discourage commercial transporters from sending more trucks into trouble spots," said Amer Daoudi, the program's operations manager for Iraq.

Iraq poses one of the most significant tests the United States has faced since the Civil War in trying to hold together a chaotic political entity while also launching an immense reconstruction project, said Peter Strzok, who formerly directed humanitarian and development programs in the Middle East.

Strzok now lives in Washburn, Wis. and is independently organizing a program that involves sending reconditioned tractors, tillers and other aid to northern Iraq, where conditions are more secure than in the country's middle and southern regions.

"We believe that if we could set up in the north, we could eventually move south as security is established," he said.

The violence also is giving pause to companies aspiring to get a piece of potentially lucrative action in the oil-rich country that could be a hub for Middle East commerce. Still, they are betting on calmer days ahead.

### **Air service to resume**

Northwest Airlines won preliminary approval last month to schedule service to Iraq. The authority granted by the U.S. Department of Transportation is subject to approval by the Federal Aviation Administration and other agencies. Other carriers with the authority are United Airlines, American Airlines, Delta, World Airways and Kalitta Air, transportation officials said.

Safety is a concern, and Northwest has set no timetable for launching the service it expects to provide via Amsterdam, said spokeswoman Mary Stanik. "Should we receive all of the other approvals, then we'll be ready to talk about what it might take in terms of security," she said.

At least four other Minnesota companies are negotiating contracts to do business in Iraq, said Odeh Muhawesh,

president and CEO of Minnesota Middle East Trading Company Inc. He and two partners in Minneapolis promote themselves as catalysts for companies that want to tap into the huge public works investment the U.S. government is controlling in Iraq.

Muhawesh, who is of Jordanian descent, said he opened an office in Jordan last month and is negotiating with Iraqi business leaders as well as U.S. government officials for projects in the telecommunications and food processing industries. He declined to name the companies involved until contracts are sealed.

The business could be conducted through a secure free-trade zone in Jordan, relieving companies of the need to take risks in Iraq, Muhawesh said. His company, however, plans to open an office in Baghdad.

While Muhawesh "definitely is concerned about security," he also worries that Minnesota's leaders are timid about chasing potential business in Iraq. Minnesota risks losing a share of billions of dollars the United States and other countries are investing in Iraq, he said.

Muhawesh said that in discussions with federal agencies controlling reconstruction funding, he has learned that officials from other states are aggressively lobbying for their companies. Sen. Mark Dayton, a Democrat, has helped Minnesota companies secure a toehold in the bidding process, he said, but some other Minnesota officials at the state and congressional level have declined to lobby on behalf of local companies.

"My biggest disappointment has been our politicians," he said. "They just don't seem to get it. . . . They don't seem to understand the impact this could have."

One immediate impact of the war has been to give Iraqi exiles in the United States more open contact with relatives who had been afraid to speak frankly during telephone conversations that were assumed to be monitored by Saddam Hussein's government.

### **Taking the risk**

It was a call from a cousin in Iraq that spurred Yacoub Aljaffery's decision in June to buy a plane ticket to Amman. His family in New Brighton was so worried about the danger that he didn't tell his mother where he was going, he said.

At the Iraqi border, U.S. military guards warned him to be careful passing through Fallujah, where attacks had been heavy, he said. He took their advice. In southern Iraq, Aljaffery heard gunfire at night, but he never felt threatened.

Upon arriving at a village near Nasiriyah, he traversed a narrow street between sand-colored houses and knocked on a grey door of a house he hadn't seen since he was 10 years old. The cousin who opened the door didn't know him, but an uncle just inside shrieked and fell to the ground.

Then began the crying, the hugging and the feasting. The family slaughtered a sheep and cooked it over an open fire.

Aljaffery felt a level of security his family hasn't known in Iraq during his lifetime, which has been marked by hostility between his Shiite people and Saddam, a Sunni Muslim. His father, a religious leader who was killed during the Shiites' 1991 uprising, now is openly honored as a martyr.

Electricity and water had been largely restored in the region, he said, and people were relishing simple freedoms such as the liberty to post a slogan on a wall. But the sense of well-being won't be complete, he said, until a permanent government under local control takes shape.

"When this happens, people will be a lot happier," he said. "Right now they don't know the future of their country."

*Sharon Schmickle is at  
sschmickle@startribune.com.*