



## IRAQI INSURGENTS TARGET WATER AND ELECTRICITY, BUT SPARE THE CELL PHONE

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*Throughout Iraq, insurgents have attacked water and electricity plants to spread chaos and disrupt progress, but they have allowed the communications sector to rebuild -- primarily because they rely on mobile phones to plan their attacks.*

American and Iraqi companies are working around the clock to supply large cities with electricity and clean water, hoping that better conditions will alleviate the anger that is fueling violence. The new Iraqi government also hopes that small projects will provide jobs and keep young men from joining the fighting.

### **Turning the lights back on**

Efforts to provide Baghdad, once replete with electricity, with enough energy for even basic services face continuous setbacks.

"All the transfer lines are in hot spots and are targeted by terrorist attacks," Saadi Mehdi Ali, the Electricity Ministry's inspector general, told the New York Times.

As of December 2006, seven out of the nine transfer lines serving Baghdad were down, largely due to coordinated insurgent attacks. Electricity is available for only part of the day.

"It was better in Baghdad [before the war], because Saddam's government made a conscious decision to provide more power to Baghdad than to any other part of Iraq," said Rajiv Chandrasekaran, the Washington Post former bureau chief in Baghdad.

"The post-war change was felt most acutely in Baghdad, because it went from getting 22 hours a day to getting, at times, four to six hours a day."

As the violence destroys new power plants and electric lines, more American funding is diverted from rebuilding to security. According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office and State Department statistics, security costs in the past year represented 16 percent to 33 percent of overall infrastructure project costs.

The irony, Chandrasekaran said, is that providing and maintaining secure power sources in highly volatile regions would help mitigate violence, but the power plants are being disrupted before their value can be realized.

### **Getting water to cities and farmers**

Water infrastructure development has achieved mixed results. Although some successful water and sanitation projects have been completed, potable (drinkable) water is relatively scarce and less than 10 percent of Iraqi homes are serviced by sewage systems, according to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

"The U.S. effort has focused initially on building potable water capacity, since clean drinking water is the primary factor in reducing primary waterborne diseases like cholera and typhoid," said Lt. Col. Joseph Fraundorfer, deputy chief of water for the Corps.

Much like the other sectors, the state of water resources is much worse in the south than in the north.

Years of improper environmental management, including a massive draining of marshlands in southern Iraq by Saddam's government and the construction of dams in southern Turkey, which cut the Euphrates River water supply almost in half, have rendered water undrinkable without treatment in many parts of the south.

"The water is so dirty when it gets down to Basra [from the north] that they didn't even drink the municipally supplied water," said Jane Gleason who works with USAID's Agriculture Reconstruction and Development Program for Iraq.

That was the case until late 2004, when USAID and Bechtel Corp. finished rehabilitating Basra's 14 water treatment plants, the canal system, and the main water reservoir, providing fresh water to a city accustomed to salty, unusable water.

Gleason's team fixed irrigation systems and provide fresh water to farmers in the region by September 2006.

"We reckon [our project] affected about half a million people," she said.

Small-scale projects like Gleason's agricultural and irrigation system are likely the model for future water, transportation and electricity infrastructure development in Iraq.

"Small and medium-sized potable water rehabilitation projects executed by direct contracting to repair and rehabilitate neglected facilities using Iraqi labor have been the most successful," said Fraundorfer.

### **Mobile phones spared**

One of the success stories in infrastructure is the communications sector, with Iraqis accessing domestic mobile phone service for the first time in the country's history.

Under Saddam there were no mobile phone providers in Iraq and, according to the State Department, just 1.2 million people out of the total population of 26 million subscribed to landline phone service.

But during the looting and violence after U.S. entry into Iraq in 2003, an estimated half of the landline infrastructure was damaged, so the need for mobile technology was immediate.

Unlike the electricity and transportation sectors, the cellular tower infrastructure has been largely safe from violence, in part because the insurgents rely on mobile phones to coordinate attacks.

"Everybody needs a mobile phone, whether you are a terrorist, whether you are a government official, or whether you are a member of the public," Dr. Siyamend Othman, CEO of Iraq's National Communications and Media Commission, told the Washington Post.

-- *By Jon Brand, Online NewsHour*

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