

USA - F. Relations
By Kim Gamel Iraqy

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As the US draws down in Iraq, it is leaving behind hundreds of abandoned or incomplete projects. More than \$5 billion in American taxpayer funds has been wasted - more than 10 percent of the some \$50 billion the US has spent on reconstruction in Iraq, according to audits from a US watchdog agency. That amount is likely an underestimate, based on an analysis of more than 300 reports by auditors with the special inspector general for Iraq reconstruction. And it does not take into account security costs, which

have run almost 17 percent for some projects. There are success stories. Hundreds of police stations, border forts and government buildings have been built, Iraqi security forces have improved after years of training, and a deep water port at the southern oil hub of Umm Qasr has been restored.

Even completed projects for the most part fell far short of original goals, according to an Associated Press review of hundreds of audits and investigations and visits to several sites. And the verdict is still out on whether the program reached its goal of generating Iraqi good will toward the US instead of the insurgents.

Colonel Jon Christensen, who took over as commander of the US Army Corps of Engineers Gulf Region District this summer, said the federal agency has completed more than 4,800 projects and is rushing to finish 233 more. Some 595 projects have been terminated, mostly for security reasons.

Christensen acknowledged that mistakes have been made. But he said steps have been taken to fix them, and the success of the program will depend ultimately on the

Iraqis - who have complained that they were not consulted on projects to start with. "There's only so much we could do," Christensen said. "A lot of it comes down to them taking ownership of it."

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US soldiers found themselves hiring contractors to paint schools, refurbish pools and oversee neighbourhood water distribution centres. The \$3.6 billion Commander's

nated and overlapped. Iraqis can see one of the most egregious examples of waste as they drive north from Baghdad to Khan Bani Saad. A prison rises from the desert, complete with more than two-dozen guard towers and surrounded by high concrete walls. But the only signs of life during a recent visit were a guard shack on the entry road and two farmers tending a nearby field.

In March 2004, the Corps of Engineers awarded a \$40 million contract to global construction and engineering firm Parsons Corp to design and build a prison for 3,600 inmates, along with educational and vocational facilities. Work was set to finish in

November 2005. But violence was escalating in the area, home to a volatile mix of Sunni and Shia extremists. The project started six months late and continued to fall behind schedule, according to a report by the inspector general.

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US wasted billions in rebuilding Iraq

The reconstruction programme in Iraq has been troubled since its birth shortly after the US-led invasion in 2003. The US was forced to scale back many projects even as they spiked in cost, sometimes to more than double or triple initial projections. As part of the so-called surge strategy, the military in 2007 shifted its focus to protecting Iraqis and winning their trust

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As part of the so-called surge strategy,

Emergency Response Program provided military units with ready cash for projects, and paid for Sunni fighters who agreed to turn against al Qaeda in Iraq for a monthly salary.

But sometimes civilian and military reconstruction efforts were poorly coordi-

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California-based Parsons said it did its best under difficult and violent circumstances.

Citing security concerns, the US finally abandoned the project in June 2007 and handed over the unfinished facility to Iraq's Justice Ministry. The ministry refused to 'complete, occupy or provide security' for it, according to the report. More than \$1.2 million in unused construction material also was abandoned due to fears of violence.

The inspector general recommended another use be found for the partially finished buildings inside the dusty compound. But three years later, piles of bricks and barbed wire lie around, and tumbleweed is growing in the caked sand. 'It will never hold a single Iraqi prisoner,' said inspector general Stuart Bowen, who has overseen the reconstruction effort since it started. '\$40 million wasted in the desert.'

Another problem was coordination with the Iraqis, who have complained they weren't consulted and often ended up paying to complete unfinished facilities they didn't want in the first place. 'Initially when we came in ... we didn't collaborate as much as we should have with the correct people and figure out what their needs were,' Christensen said. He stressed that Iraqis are now closely involved in all projects. AP