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Fallujah Reconstruction Effort to Begin Soon

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 19, 2004 – The successful military operation in Fallujah, Iraq, needs to be followed by an equally successful reconstruction operation, and the United States and Iraq are poised to begin that effort perhaps within the next week or two, officials told Pentagon reporters today.

U.S. Marines are already cleaning up the city to prepare for the reconstruction effort, likely to cost as much as \$100 million, said Ambassador Bill Taylor, director of the Iraq Reconstruction Management Office, during a videoconference from Baghdad.

He said he expects the first construction contracts to be awarded to local Iraqi companies within the next two weeks, depending on how quickly the last pockets of resistance are removed from the city. "The first thing that has to happen is the final military action needs to be completed," Taylor said.

The initial focus of the reconstruction effort will be on humanitarian assistance for Fallujah's residents when they return to their homes, Taylor said. Most residents left the city during the long buildup before the offensive there.

U.S. and Iraqi troops will tap into pre-positioned supplies to help meet residents' immediate needs. These include a 14-day supply of food and water, 2,000 health and comfort packages, a 90-day supply of first aid, medicine and water-treatment tablets, and 13,000 packages of toiletries.

The next priority will be restoring essential services electricity, water and sewer services "so people can move back in, begin to repair and resume their lives hopefully better lives without the extremists there," Taylor said.

So far, \$8 million has been earmarked for water-supply improvements, \$4 million to build four new schools and more funding for garbage trucks and other projects, according to Charles Hess, director of the Iraq Project and Contracting Office.

More money is likely to be required after civil-military teams finish surveying damage in the city, he said.

The U.S. government has identified "tens of millions of dollars" for the effort, and the interim Iraqi government has identified an equal sum, Taylor said. "We are still working together with them to figure out which projects we should do and which they should do," he said.

Hess said many of these projects were already started or about to begin when they were sidelined

because of insurgent activity in the city. "Now it's a matter of just getting those contract entities back into position and getting them started up again," he said.

Taylor said it's important to move forward with these projects as quickly as possible, not only to ensure the city is ready for the January elections, but also to help return Fallujah to normalcy and generate work. Fallujah has long been a construction center in Iraq, and that the rebuilding will bring much-needed employment to the city, he said.

"In the long term, the economy needs to grow. People need to go back to work in jobs there," he said. "This will be as important as the military operation in order to consolidate the victory."

Hess said the reconstruction effort in Iraq is proceeding well. So far, \$12.8 billion of the \$18.4 billion in the Iraq Relief and Reconstruction Fund approved by Congress has been committed, he said. Almost \$9 billion of that is obligated through contracts 4,500 of them with Iraqi-owned firms. In addition, \$1.78 billion in funding has been dispersed.

Equally encouraging, Hess said, is the number of construction starts, now at 873, and expected to reach 1,000 by the year's end.

While security remains "a serious challenge," Hess said reconstruction effort is continuing steadily.

The goal, he said, is to improve Iraq's infrastructure, boost employment by hiring Iraqi companies, and help the interim Iraqi government build its ministries so they can take over the reconstruction effort in the future.

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