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Baghdad's Meals on (Armored) Wheels

By Nathan Hodge  December 19, 2008 | 3:00:00 PM Categories: Human Terrain, Info War, Iraq Diary, Iraq's Insanity

BAGHDAD, IRAQ -- After the heavy fighting subsided in Baghdad's Sadr City neighborhood, the U.S. Army turned on a firehose of emergency funds. At last count, the U.S. government had poured around \$55 million into quick-fix reconstruction projects in the southern quadrant of Sadr City: sewage, road repair, generators, micro-grants to jump-start local business. This concentrated investment is supposed to counter Jaish al-Mahdi propaganda - and demonstrate that cooperation with the government will be rewarded.



Sadr City is often described as a "Shia slum." It actually looks more like a

Soviet-style housing project that's gone to seed. The fighting left the neglected streets littered with scrap metal, demolished cars and piles of debris and trash; the road surfaces and sidewalks were torn up by Bradley fighting vehicles and tanks. Now the streets in this quadrant are under repair, and much of the trash has been collected. The main complaint is the power grid: electricity is still spotty, and the Army has delivered generators as a stopgap measure.

Earlier this week, I tagged along on a halal food distribution outside a mosque along one of the main boulevards of Sadr City. U.S. and Iraqi troops had recently conducted a house-to-house search for illegal weapons on this block, and this food donation was a small hearts-and-minds campaign to follow the security operation.

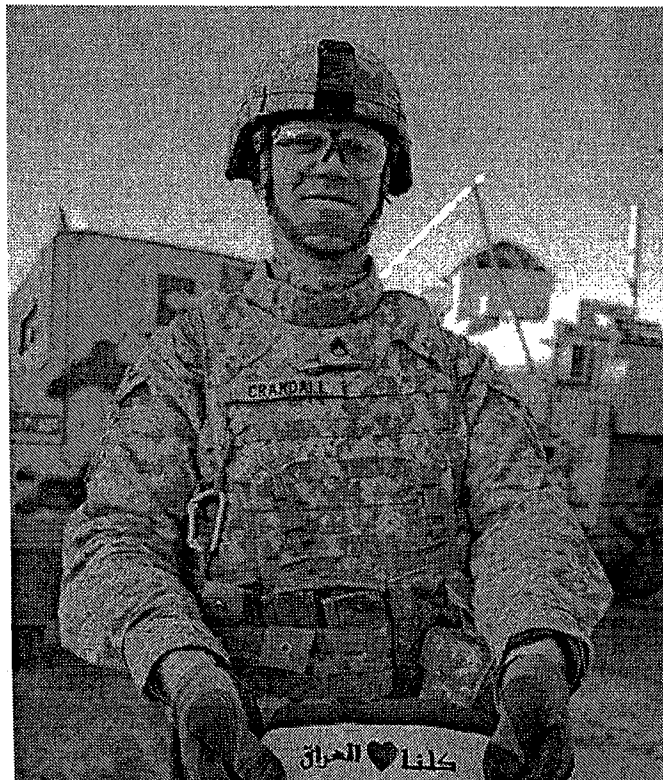
"We do this as a gesture," said Capt. Lloyd Osafo, a company executive officer with Task Force 1-6 Infantry. "We searched their houses, so this is a way of saying, 'no hard feelings.'"

To underscore the message, an Army psychological operations team was on hand, cranking Iraqi pop music through a portable loudspeaker system and passing around flags with an "Iraqi unity" slogan. Staff Sgt. Kent Crandall, a psyops specialist, even had a few beanies embroidered with the slogan.

The food distribution was meant to underscore another message: Iraqi forces are supposed to be taking the lead. The Americans supplied the meals and gifts, but an Iraqi army captain supervised the handout.

Lt. Jamen Miller, a platoon leader with Task Force 1-6 Infantry, said things are moving to a "new phase" as a new security agreement takes effect.

"These are the first steps," he said. "Before, it was us doing everything and asking them [the Iraqi army] for help. ... We still own the majority of the resources - we have all the logistics in place to give them what they need to



make things happen. And then they do it, which is better than us doing it. Now we bring them what they need and they do it. It's got a completely Iraqi army face, except for us in the background, doing small things to make sure it's efficient. And then the next step obviously will be to support them in what they are doing."

But will the Iraqi government follow through?