

Iraqis fighting fire with funding

Major efforts under way to improve civil defense capabilities

By [Sandra Jontz](#), Stars and Stripes
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BAGHDAD — The Iraqi government is striving to improve the nation's civil defense program, which has suffered from little or no training and poor funding.

For decades, civil defense, basically the nation's firefighting services, had inadequate government support, said Maj. Yaseen Mustafa, a liaison between the U.S.-run Civilian Police Assistance Training Team, or CPATT, and the Iraqi directorate general of the nation's civil defense.

The Ministry of Interior budgeted \$320 million for civil defense in 2007, up from \$180 million the year before.

It's a huge increase for a service struggling to meet high demands, said Chris Gale, senior adviser for the CPATT's Fire Protection and Emergency Services.

Roughly 19,000 firefighters operate out of 240 stations nationwide. The number of firefighters is expected to grow to 42,000 by mid-2008, and in the next several months, the directorate general plans to increase the number of stations to 287.

Many of the firefighters coming on board will have little or no formal training, especially in tasks such as rescuing people from collapsed buildings and confined spaces, which is a critical skill because of bombings by insurgents.

"We've got a techniques course to teach them how to operate in that environment," Gale said. "How to use borescope cameras and microphones and look for signs where someone might be buried, versus mucking through debris and hoping for the best, as they do now."

Many firefighters will be hired without training, Gale said.

"We need to increase the manpower, and eventually work on getting capabilities for training," he said. "Until then, a lot of it will be on-the-job training."

Emergency medical technicians and personnel operating ambulances fall under the Ministry of Health and are separate from civil defense operations.

About 1,000 of the nation's 19,000 firefighters received formal training in Bahrain recently from Sallyport Global Services, Gale said, and roughly 300 to 400 officers are expected to receive training either in Oman or Jordan in the near future.



Photo courtesy of the Civilian Police Assistance Training Team
Iraqi firefighters learn how to bore through concrete to rescue people from collapsed buildings.



Photo courtesy of the Civilian Police Assistance Training Team
Firefighters with Iraq's civil defense practice "rescuing" a mannequin as part of their training in Basra last December.

They are expected to train the rest of their crews, Gale said. Training also is planned for basic first aid and handling hazardous material.

CPATT plans the training and is working to develop a standard training curriculum and national response plan.

There is no federal system in place and provincial governments are hesitant to give up control within their jurisdictions. Still, CPATT and the Ministry of Interior are seeking accreditation from the International Fire Service Accreditation Congress.

Under the accreditation plan, a firefighter in Basra would meet the same standards as one working in Mosul, said Gale, who has 24 years in the fire protection and emergency management system.

CPATT and the ministry are also drafting legislation giving the directorate general, a position now held by Maj. Gen. Abad-al Rasool Jasim Mohammed, more autonomy, and making civil defense independent from the ministry, Mustafa said.

Civil defense officials had plans to build a firefighting academy in Baghdad but the project was placed on hold after a \$26 million grant was allocated to a children's hospital in Basra instead, Gale said.

"We lost that money, but we can't really argue with that," he said.

Still, future plans call for establishing a \$40 million academy in Baghdad and satellite academies in the southern and northern parts of the country.

The solutions, for now, only scratch the surface of what the program needs, Gale said.

"But we're hoping it's an effective scratch, and hope it's infectious," he said.

The British opened the first civil defense fire station in 1927. The Shekh Umar Station now serves as a fire station and the maintenance facility for the Civil Defense Directorate. After Saddam Hussein was ousted, fire stations were looted and some firefighters took home fire engines, gear, and other equipment to save them, Mustafa said.

Looters complicated the problem by setting fire to buildings. Without firefighting equipment, people were hard pressed to quell the blazes.

"Civil defense actually was one of the few functioning agencies throughout the war," Gale said. "These guys stayed behind."

The first responders are often attacked and killed in the violence in Iraq. A total of 140 have died from sniper attacks and bombings, Mustafa said.