

Australian withdrawal would be 'devastating'

Don't leave us alone in Iraq

By IAN McPHERAN
in Tallil, Iraq



Gen. Olson

A KEY figure in Iraq's reconstruction effort says an Australian troop withdrawal would be "devastating".

Retired US Army General Eric T. Olson said the Australian effort in Al-Muthanna and Dhi Qar provinces had been a model for co-operation between the coalition and Iraqis and appealed to Australia not to withdraw.

Speaking at Camp Ur Iraqi army training base, he said he had seen forces all over Iraq and there were none better than the Diggers. "I would love to see them all over Iraq to be honest," General Olson said.

The head of national coordination for Provincial Reconstruction Teams told *The Daily Telegraph* that Australian troops were experts at operating in multi-national forces. "The Australian Army is a natural fit for any place in Iraq."

He said if it was not for the Diggers there would be no Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) activity in the two prov-

inces now under provisional Iraqi control.

General Olson's appeal came at a crucial time for the Howard Government, with pre-election pressure building to bring the soldiers home from Iraq.

The commander of Iraqi forces in Dhi Qar province General Saad Aherbm echoed General Olson's plea and said an Australian withdrawal would leave a major security gap.

"The Australians are there to support us when the red line is crossed," General Saad said.

They are also helping to train thousands of Iraqi recruits including the 900 who were deployed to the rebel hotbed of Sadr City in Baghdad last week.

The red line might not have been crossed for some time in Dhi Qar, but the threat remains and the monthly rebel rocket attacks on the Ali air base at Tallil, where the Aussies are based, are a reminder of the danger.

The troops themselves want to

stay and, judging by the reception they receive from the locals, the feeling is mutual.

In the village of Badour al Rashid, about 50km from Tallil on the banks of the Euphrates river, combat engineer Major Jason Harley from Brisbane takes Civil Military Co-operation direct to the people most in need.

He and his team oversee joint projects with the Americans, British, Japanese, Italians and Romanians to bring vital infrastructure projects to the dirt poor people of the region.

In a place that has changed little since biblical times, young girls use donkeys to cart water from the treatment plant installed by the Diggers.

More than 1000 Shi'a families, who live in mud and straw houses and eke out a subsistence living, benefit from the clean water and they are desperate for more help.

"We are building confidence with small projects and then the PRTs come in with bigger plans," Major Harley said.

"We listen to the people so things run smoothly, the projects are their priorities not ours."



Co-operation . . . Major Jason Harley from Brisbane meets Majid Abd Zoid at the Euphrates River in the village of Badour Al Rashid. Picture: GARY RAMAGE