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ENR Files from the Front

Task Force RIO Plugs Away at Plugging Leaks (5/19/2003)

By Thomas F. Armistead near Basra, Iraq

The oil pipeline was blazing when John Forslund and the Army Corps of Engineers arrived on the site 20 km north of Basra in early April. They're still not sure whether the 48-in.-dia line was damaged by combat or by sabotage. There had been combat in the area, as attested by a damaged electric transmission line nearby and quantities of unexploded ordnance in the area. Sabotage seems unlikely, given the difficulty of penetrating steel pipe with small arms, a common sabotage practice.



American-Kuwaiti team scrambles to repair major oil pipeline in southern Iraq.



KBR's Prichard, left, directs repair effort in the field.

"This is the only one of this magnitude that I'm aware of south of Baghdad," says Forslund, project manager of Task Force RIO's Southern Project Office. TF RIO (Restore Iraqi Oil) is composed of the Corps of Engineers and Kellogg Brown & Root, Houston, with the mission of putting the oil industry back on its feet.

A subcontractor team from Houston-based oilfield firefighting specialists Boots and Coats fought the fire for three days last week. Tuesday afternoon, May 13, KBR mobilized in with a crew from subcontractor

Kharafi National, Kuwait City and began excavating at night. Wednesday morning, the pipe wreckage still radiated heat while the KBR-led crew pumped the crude still spurting from the pipe into a bermed containment area outside the work area. "There's no easy way about it. This one here's one messy job," said Philip Pritchard, KBR lead pipe superintendent.

Forslund estimates that it will take 10 to 12 days of round-the-clock work to complete repairs. Crews will make a full cut in the pipe and weld flanges on the ends to be mated, he says. They then will insert pipe in the estimated 150-ft gap and install valves.

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Soldiers nearby are building guard posts on the road on either side of the worksite to protect the crew from attack or the pipe from vandalism.

"We're getting more vandalism than I had expected," says Forslund. Two weeks ago, four people died and several others were badly burned when someone lit a cigarette while tapping into a liquefied petroleum gas pipeline. "People are desperate for fuel—propane for their cooking needs," he says.

Task Force RIO also recently repaired a 28-in.-dia underground oil pipeline southwest of Az-Zubayr that had been penetrated by a spent artillery shell at a pipe seam, a weak point in the line. The damage was not discovered until a gas-oil separation plant began to pump oil, causing an oil geyser to suddenly burst through the seam. There had been no equipment available to conduct pressure tests that normally precede pumping. Maybe it was looted, maybe it never existed because the investment was never made, says Steve Wright, Task Force RIO public affairs officer.



Work is under way, but Task Force RIO is still counting the total number of sites in Iraq that need repair.

The total number of sites requiring repair is not yet known. Assessment is under way throughout the country, says a Task Force RIO spokeswoman.

(Photos by Thomas F. Armistead for ENR)



ENR Associate Editor **Thomas F. Armistead** is in Iraq reporting on the activities of Army Corps of Engineers and private contractors.

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