

The multibillion robbery the US calls reconstruction

The shameless corporate feeding frenzy in Iraq is fuelling the resistance

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GOOD news out of Baghdad: the Program Management Office, which oversees the \$18.4bn in US reconstruction funds, has finally set a goal it can meet. Sure, electricity is below pre-war levels, the streets are rivers of sewage and more Iraqis have been fired than hired. But now the PMO has contracted the British mercenary firm Aegis to protect its employees from "assassination, kidnapping, injury and" get this - "embarrassment". I don't know if Aegis will succeed in protecting PMO employees from violent attacks, but embarrassment? I'd say mission already accomplished. The people in charge of rebuilding Iraq can't be embarrassed, because, clearly, they have no shame.

In the run-up to the June 30 underhand (sorry, I can't bring myself to call it a "handover"), US occupation powers have been unabashed in their efforts to steal money that is supposed to aid a war-ravaged people. The state department has taken \$184m earmarked for drinking water projects and moved it to the budget for the lavish new US embassy in Saddam Hussein's former palace. Short of \$1bn for the embassy, Richard Armitage, the deputy secretary of state, said he might have to "rob from Peter in my fiefdom to pay Paul". In fact, he is robbing Iraq's people, who, according to a recent study by the consumer group Public Citizen, are facing "massive outbreaks of cholera, diarrhoea, nausea and kidney stones" from drinking contaminated water.

If the occupation chief Paul Bremer and his staff were capable of embarrassment, they might be a little sheepish about having spent only \$3.2bn of the \$18.4bn Congress allotted - the reason the reconstruction is so disastrously behind schedule. At first, Bremer said the money would be spent by the time Iraq was sovereign, but apparently someone had a better idea: parcel it out over five years so Ambassador John Negroponte can use it as leverage. With \$15bn outstanding, how likely are Iraq's politicians to refuse US demands for military bases and economic "reforms"?

Unwilling to let go of their own money, the shameless ones have had no qualms about dipping into funds belonging to Iraqis. After losing the fight to keep control of Iraq's oil money after the underhand, occupation authorities grabbed \$2.5bn of those revenues and are now spending the money on projects that are supposedly already covered by American tax dollars.



A US Blackhawk helicopter hovers over a smoke stack coming out of central Baghdad during an ongoing battle between US and Iraqi armed forces against insurgents.