

# The heat is on in Baghdad

## On the AGENDA



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**I** don't know how Paul Bremer does it. It's about 48 degrees centigrade here in Baghdad, it's incredibly hot, dusty, nothing moves, there's not a camel in sight, and the United States ambassador gives his press conference as if he has just walked out of Ralph Lauren on Madison Avenue in Manhattan. He's perfectly groomed, wearing an immaculate suit and tie without a bead of sweat on his handsome, Ivy League face.

Everyone else, foreigner and local, has melted and everyone is talking about how much hotter it is going to get in July and August when the temperatures will soar into the high 50s and 60s. In Saddam's Iraq the thermometer never officially went that high because if it reached 50 degrees no one had to do any work.

Saddam has to be given credit for having commissioned some of the worst architecture the world has ever seen. Perhaps the ugliest structure of all is the Orfali, a mosque with 88 domes commemorating the end of the Iran-Iraq war.

It is vast and still in the process of construction. It is a concrete nightmare. Domes upon domes within domes, it reeks of something profoundly disturbing, of the waste of money, lives, and of the sense of isolation this country underwent during the long decades of tyranny.

It is located in Mansur, one of Baghdad's best areas, not far from the Al Sa'ah restaurant where the Americans tried to kill Saddam, and which is now back in business.

People sit for hours in the dark each evening because the electricity is not yet in full working order. Some people have generators from before the war, but night-times for most Iraqis are boring and long, as are the days.

Many of the young men I've met want to leave eventually, but first they want to see what will happen.

The clubs, once an integral part of life,

haven't reopened yet, and with most people being unemployed, no one has much money. The 11pm curfew makes going out at night a highly co-ordinated affair.

The streets are eerily quiet at night; no lights burn in the houses, there is no one about.

It's another story during the day. The wide, flat sand-coloured boulevards teem with people, mostly men, and where one does see women, they are generally dressed in the hijab.

What is strange is the sight of young boys selling blocks of ice, because without electricity, there is no cold water.

Money sellers sit in the street selling

250 Iraqi dinar notes in blocks of 100, and people lug these bricks around. Petrol is sold on street corners by men with plastic containers and hoses.

It's hard to get though the day without any mention of Saddam. Rumour has it that he's still somewhere in Iraq, and still more rumours about that Uday is in town.

While no one mourns Saddam's dethroning, most are very concerned about the future.

At present, life is intensely difficult. There's little remission from the heat, still not much electricity, no work and no clear way forward.

Women worry about rape and kidnapping, with instances of both having reportedly sky rocketed.

As my Iraqi friend said, nothing has changed since the war, except people can say whatever they want. They walk the same streets, drive the same cars, talk to the same people.

Security concerns everyone, although gauging the situation is still difficult. Everything is fine - until it isn't.

I ran into an Iraqi road block today that was manned by a group of scary-looking men claiming they were Iraqi policemen. This time I was lucky. I wasn't hurt.

On the other hand, the Americans are everywhere, dressed in fatigues, wearing flak jackets, helmets and guns. They pulled me over to search my car for weapons. Not because I was Canadian, I asked? They laughed.

On a one-on-one basis they seem to have a pretty good rapport with the people and they are certainly making the effort.

I can't imagine the perfectly packaged Bremer, ostensibly the President of Iraq, heading out onto the streets of Baghdad, but my feeling is that underneath it all, the Americans have a pretty good handle on things.

Only time will tell.