



Election-day explosions new to Keeley

Poll monitor says Iraqis were determined to vote Sunday despite danger of terrorist bombs

By J.L. MILLER • The News Journal • March 9, 2010

Rep. Helene Keeley is no stranger to elections, but Sunday was the first time she'd ever heard explosions as voters made their way to the polls.

Keeley, one of a delegation of women selected by the National Foundation for Women Legislators to monitor Iraq's parliamentary elections, said explosions regularly shook the capital city of Baghdad on Sunday.

But despite the explosions and the fact that more than 30 Iraqis lost their lives as they went to cast their votes, the election was a success, Keeley said Monday in a telephone interview from the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad.

"In the morning, probably every 15 minutes, there was some type of an explosion that we heard," said Keeley, D-Wilmington West.

The bombs "were like soda bottles filled with nails and had some kind of explosive in it," Keeley said. "It is believed they were trying to deter people from going out to vote."

Yet she said that voters told her they weren't about to let terrorists get the upper hand.

"One older woman, probably around 75, she came into the station to vote," Keeley said. "We were asking questions. Were the earlier explosions that we heard going to deter people from voting? She said, 'Absolutely not. They tried to put terror on us but we're telling them we're not going to accept terror anymore.'"

"Person after person after person that we spoke with

both female and male, said they were not going to allow these terrorists to terrorize them anymore," Keeley said.

Keeley also met with two female candidates, Rend Al-Rahim and Hatha Al-Abousy. Iraqi law requires that 25 percent of the candidates be women, and the State Department asked the American legislators to help monitor the elections because of the unusual status of women in Iraq -- many are highly educated, and there are more than 1 million widows.

"We see a wonderful opportunity to empower and support women in public leadership in Iraq," said Robin Read, president of the National Foundation for Women Legislators.

Keeley said polling places in both the Green and Red zones in Baghdad were well-secured and that the delegation spotted no irregularities, other than one ballot box that was not completely sealed.

On Monday the group helped monitor the vote-counting, a process that is expected to take several days. Iraq uses paper ballots, and each is counted and recounted by hand.

Keeley said the Iraqis she spoke with told her they "are ready to show not just America but the world that they can run their own government."

One Iraqi likened the fledgling government to an infant. "As they mature and become a toddler and take their first step, they may fall, but they will get up and continue to progress," Keeley said.

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Keeley, who will return to the United States today, said she and the other women in the delegation paid their own way.

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