

THE RECONSTRUCTION

At U.S. Meeting, Iraq Appears Open for Business

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ARLINGTON, Va., Dec. 4 — The room had the feel of a souk, a constant buzz, chatter in lots of languages, display tables showing off wares.

In fact, it was a marketplace of sorts, just off the lobby of a Sheraton hotel here, but one with a specific purpose: more than 400 people from 30 countries had gathered Wednesday and Thursday for a conference focusing on how to rebuild Iraq and get a piece of the \$18.3 billion Congress has authorized for the effort.

There were bankers, architects, lawyers, engineers, real estate developers, insurance agents, construction specialists, transportation experts, communication company owners, investment counselors and more than 40 Iraqi officials working with the Coalition Provisional Authority, who were eager to meet as many suitors as possible.

If the participants conveyed a common message it was this: despite suicide bombers, snipers and attacks from Saddam Hussein loyalists, Iraq is open for business.

There were sobering reminders of the daily dangers that confront both military personnel and civilians, including one company selling vehicle armor protection and another selling walls so strong that they could withstand .50-caliber bullets. "We're working on one now that will be able to sustain a shoulder-fired rocket attack," said Prentice Perry, vice president of the wall company, Therma Steel. The company motto, he said, is, "We stand behind our walls."

But for the most part, the networking was upbeat, as business and government leaders sought each other out as potential partners in the enormous task of reconstructing the country.

"Our purpose is to help United States companies connect with Middle Eastern countries and with individual Iraqis with lots of emphasis on the alliances already on



Doug Mills/The New York Times
John Simmons, center, attended a two-day conference in Arlington, Va., with others interested in pursuing business projects in Iraq.

the ground," said Samir Farajallah, president of New Fields, the United Arab Emirates company that organized this meeting and another one last month. "You hear a lot of negative stories out of Iraq, but the truth of the matter is, there are a lot of very successful stories."

Then there was Hisham Ashkouri, an Iraqi-born architect now living in Boston, who wore a bright red bow tie and carried a case filled with brochures and CD's that show off his latest design — a soaring 31-story hotel and theater complex called Cinema Sinbad that he wants to build in downtown Baghdad.

He said he was "80 to 90 percent there" with financial backing, government support and a commercial sponsor, the Starwood Hotel and Resorts Company.

"There's always room for problems," he said. "But with my emotional side speaking, if something like this can become a big part of reconstructing Baghdad that can show the local population alternatives to violence and disruption, to me, that's why we're going ahead. That's why I'm working on it."