

News that the Iraqi parliament planned to take a two-month vacation this summer seemed to touch a nerve in the United States.

Rep. Jeff Fortenberry condemned the planned break as "unconscionable." Vice President Dick Cheney urged cancellation of the vacation in a meeting with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki when Cheney visited Iraq last week. Newspaper editorials took the parliament to task for planning a "leisurely two-month vacation."

One unanticipated effect of the criticism was that it focused attention on the sad fact that the Iraqi parliament accomplishes little even when it is in session.

Rep. Lee Terry said he was surprised by how dysfunctional the Iraq government was when he visited Iraq late last month.

One reason for the lack of legislative action is the security situation in Baghdad. Travel in the city is difficult. Car bombings, checkpoints and bomb scares block traffic. A lawmaker was killed last month when a suicide bomber blew himself up in the parliament cafeteria in the Green Zone.

Baghdad is plagued by chronic power outages. When that happens, the windowless parliament meeting room is dark and microphones for the 275 members don't work.

The politics of the parliament themselves are chaotic. The major factions are Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds, and there are splits within those factions. For several months last winter, parliament was snarled when 33 members of the bloc loyal to Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr walked out.

Lawmakers themselves are often in Jordan or Syria. Iraqi critics of the

lawmakers say they are using their salaries of \$120,000 to \$180,000 -- huge by Iraqi standards -- to buy homes and start business outside of Iraq, the Christian Science Monitor has reported. The lawmakers also are paid for any trip they make outside Iraq.

Criticism may convince the Iraqi lawmakers to cut back the length of their vacation. Fortenberry said last week he had been personally assured in a meeting with Iraq Deputy Prime Minister Barham Salih that parliament would forgo the proposed extended vacation and work on the stabilization of Iraq.

Just canceling the vacation won't be enough, however. The Iraqi Parliament has to start making progress on the major issues facing the country. The major factions have shown little evidence that they are learning to work together. Major issues, such as how oil revenues should be divided, appear far from resolution.

Worry that stabilization of Iraq will stall if the Iraqi Parliament goes on vacation is misplaced. The real frustration is that the parliament doesn't accomplish much even when it is working.

<http://journalstar.com/articles/2007/05/15/opinion/editorial/doc4648e8d33072a751391377.txt>

