

WASHINGTON - After spending 17 hours Saturday touring Baghdad, two members of the Nebraska congressional delegation came away more optimistic about the country's security but pessimistic that the government's leaders will soon make political accommodations needed to unify Iraq.

"I think the security situation . . . is probably better today than it might have been in the recent past," Sen. Ben Nelson said in a telephone interview from Baghdad .

Nelson, a Democrat, noted that Iraqi citizens generally trust forces more than Iraqi military forces as they face more sophisticated attacks from insurgents tied to the al-Qaida terrorist group.

Rep. Lee Terry, a Republican, said in a separate interview that he was told the sectarian violence in has diminished and that many Iraqis are turning against al-Qaida operatives.

's Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds continue having problems working out a power-sharing arrangement needed to build a working government, Terry said after meeting with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, a Sunni; Deputy Prime Minister Barham Salih, a Kurd; and others.

"I actually see progress on the very ugly security side," said Terry. "It's the government side that seems to be slipping."

Nelson and Terry joined two other lawmakers on a congressional fact-finding trip to . It was Nelson's third visit and Terry's first.

The two also met with Army Lt. Gen. Raymond Odierno, the commanding general of the multinational force in , and U.S. Embassy officials. They were to meet with Nebraska soldiers today.

While both Terry and Nelson said it would take more time to determine whether President Bush's addition of more troops is working to stem the violence in , they

oppose setting any timetable for withdrawing forces from the country.

"I just think it's counterproductive," Terry said.

Still, he said, there must be progress this year in Iraqis establishing a working government, taking more control of security and curbing violence, "or the next (congressional) vote probably will be a hard (withdrawal) date."

Nelson said he remains convinced that the benchmarks he favors should remain in the final war spending legislation. He said they set conditions that Iraqis must meet for forces to stay in .

Even so, he said, the debate in Washington about the withdrawal timetable has been useful. Iraqi leaders understand the American people have a "short fuse on this war and that a fatigue factor is setting in."

"We've been dangerously close to creating a cycle of dependence here," Nelson said.

Seeing firsthand was eye-opening for Terry - particularly flying over Baghdad in a military helicopter. He was struck by how much it looked like any other major city.

"You saw kids riding bikes, you saw marketplaces where people were shopping," he said.

"You didn't see any violence or hear of any violence, but you know that it's just a war down there. Even though it looked like a nice Saturday in Baghdad , you know that's just a false front."

