

WASHINGTON - Nebraska's congressional delegation continues to travel to , even as Wednesday's bombing of the Parliament's dining hall underscores the violent instability in that country.

Sen. Chuck Hagel, R-Neb., was scheduled to fly out Thursday night and spend the weekend in . It's his fifth visit to the country.

At the same time, Rep. Adrian Smith, R-Neb., was returning from his first trip there.

Sen. Ben Nelson, D-Neb., has made two trips and is planning a third that will include Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb. Rep. Jeff Fortenberry, R-Neb., went to in 2005.

The lawmakers described the trips as valuable opportunities to talk to military commanders, Iraqi political leaders and troops - a chance to get an unfiltered assessment of the war effort and overall situation in .

They generally downplayed any concerns about personal safety, expressing confidence in their security measures.

Hagel, a Republican and outspoken critic of President Bush's strategy, plans to meet with civilian Iraqi leaders, commander Gen. David Petraeus, and Nebraska soldiers.

"I'll have an opportunity to . . . get an on-the-ground assessment, ask questions, listen, learn," Hagel said Thursday. "That's the way you piece things together."

Nelson described similar objectives for his coming trip, scheduled in the next few weeks.

Nelson credits his last visit to with helping him to formulate his position on the war - that the only way to evaluate progress is to have measurable benchmarks in areas such as Iraqi troop readiness.

"I don't think I could have gotten that sitting behind my desk or talking to people over here," Nelson said.

Neither of Iowa's senators, Democrat Tom Harkin and Republican Chuck Grassley, has traveled to . Harkin questioned the value in light of the tight security that surrounds visiting lawmakers.

Hagel said congressmen are constrained somewhat by security, but he plans to travel outside Baghdad .

"I will be able to see on the ground, physically, the conditions that our troops are living in, physically talk to these guys on the ground. Not briefings, not coming from the generals, but coming from the sergeants and the privates, the people right there who are doing the fighting, who are doing the dying," he said.

Hagel cited his experience on a previous trip, when an Iraqi general expressed to him doubts about whether that country would be able to sustain a national army, a key question for the future of .

Rep. Steve King, R-Iowa, has gone to four times, most recently in November, and plans to return this year.

King said a trip to can make a member of Congress more informed and more credible.

Smith, a first-term lawmaker, felt the need to go after just three months on the job because he wanted to talk to the troops and get firsthand information, said his spokesman, Chuck Isom.

Smith took a spot vacated by Terry, who has yet to go to . Terry said he had made plans to go previously, but he was bumped once at the last minute by a more senior lawmaker, and a second trip was canceled.

Terry said he has noticed that other congressmen's rhetoric on the House floor remains the same after their trips to .

He said his goal on the trip with Nelson is to keep an open mind and assess the problems, not just reinforce his preconceived notions of what's going on. He said being in beats a briefing in Washington .

"You just have a deeper level of understanding when you have your own feet on the ground," Terry said.

Being in brings some risks. Nelson recalled a rocket attack that shook a building he was in on one trip, but he said he's counting on military personnel to keep them safe.

"I'm into adventure, not danger," Nelson said.



