

WASHINGTON (10 Sep.) -- After hearing testimony Monday from both the nation's top military commander and U.S. diplomat in Iraq, U.S. Rep. Gus M. Bilirakis (R-Fla.), member of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, continues to remain cautiously optimistic about current developments in Iraq and encouraged about the news of approaching troop withdrawals.

Testifying before a packed joint hearing of the House Armed Services and Foreign Affairs Committees, General David Petraeus, commander of Multi-National Force in Iraq, commented "that the military objectives of the surge are, in large measure, being met" while Ambassador Ryan Crocker, U.S. Ambassador to Iraq, contended that the political progress in Iraq "will require substantial U.S. resolve and commitment."

Following their testimony, Bilirakis stated that "while the situation in Iraq remains at critical mass, I was encouraged by what I heard today by General Petraeus regarding the success of the surge and his recommendation that troop withdrawals begin almost immediately. He gave a sober account of what is occurring on the ground, and does recognize that the current troop numbers are not sustainable."

On the issue of political progress of what continues to be a disappointing effort from the Maliki government, Bilirakis said, "I continue to have severe reservations about the ability of the Maliki government to shepherd political reconciliation in Iraq." He added, "While there are signs that provincial religious and political factions are making progress, and Ambassador Crocker's testimony clearly demonstrates that the benchmarks are not the only criteria for measuring success, I remain only cautiously optimistic that this trend will continue."

Finally, Congressman Bilirakis also expressed his outrage Monday at partisan attacks against General Petraeus who was branded a traitor and stooge of the Bush administration by anti-war factions and leftist groups in the run up to his testimony on Capitol Hill.

In response to a full-page advertisement depicting General David Petraeus as a traitor placed in today's New York Times by anti-war organization MoveOn.org, Bilirakis characterized the ad as "another attempt at what has been a pattern over the past week to impugn the character and career of a decorated military commander in order to fit a backwards political agenda. This action is simply outrageous and reprehensible."