Mr. Speaker, I wanted to take a

moment to report on the progress of women in Iraq. I am the vice-chair

of the Congressional Women's Caucus, and it gives me great pleasure to

tell about the progress that we have made.

Iraqi women greeted the capture of Saddam Hussein on December 13 with

joyful relief. As one woman reported from an Iraqi women's conference

taking place in Jordan, Almost all broke into tears and sobs that the

man who had managed to reach into every individual's personal life and

rip it apart by killing their husbands, sons, and fathers, and raping

and maiming their daughters, their mothers, and very often themselves,

was brought to justice.

The United States is working with women in Iraq on programs that will

broaden their political and economic opportunities and increase women's

and young girls' access to education and health care.

In early 2003, the United States Government committed approximately

$2.5 billion in humanitarian and reconstruction aid to Iraq, and women

were and still are full partners in this process. However, women's

involvement in politics in Iraq actually is nothing new. Women have a

long history of being involved in their country's development.

Prior to the Baathist regime, Iraqi women were the vanguard of women

in Islam. I would note that the first woman's organization in Iraq was

actually formed in 1924. The signing of an Iraqi interim Constitution

on March 8 marks the beginning of a new role for women in the country.

The Coalition Provisional Authority, or CPA, and the Iraqi Governing

Council agreed to a process to restore Iraqis' sovereignty beginning

with a fundamental law leading to a permanent Constitution. They agreed

that a Bill of Rights would ensure equal rights for all Iraqis,

regardless of gender, sect, or ethnicity.

Let us talk about the women's role in the new government. Three Iraqi

women who are members of the new Governing Council are fully engaged in

promoting the involvement of women in Iraq's future. An esteemed former

female Iraqi judge in the Ministry of Justice is undertaking a review

of all laws, legal practices, and the legal profession in Iraq for ways

to increase equality and participation of women. The Ministry of Labor

and Social Affairs has adopted a policy of equal access to services and

benefits for all of those who are eligible. And this policy will

ultimately expand services as well for a larger quantity of Iraqi

women.

Quotas restricting the entry of women into certain university courses

have been raised or lifted altogether. Iraqi women's organizations are

being created to expand opportunity for women to improve their lives

and those of their families.

Let me talk more specifically about what kinds of activities are

taking place and what kind of progress is actually being made.

After the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Iraqi women were among the

first demonstrators and have steadfastly sought equal rights. On a very

brief trip that I took to Iraq, I spoke to many women and they are

indeed very, very happy with American action.