

US, Iraq set stage for long US presence

Agence France-Presse - 27 November, 2007

US President George W. Bush and Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki vowed on Monday to agree next year on the terms for what could be an open-ended US military presence in the war-torn country.

During a secure videoconference, the two leaders signed a non-binding statement of principles for the negotiations, setting a July 31, 2008 target date to formalize US-Iraq economic, political, and security relations.

Maliki announced in Baghdad that the accord sets 2008 as the final year for US-led forces to operate in Iraq under a UN mandate, which the new bilateral arrangement would replace. The current one-year UN mandate expires December 31.

Under the document signed and made public Monday, the new security pact would trigger the end of UN sanctions imposed after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and return full sovereignty to the government in Baghdad.

"All the justification created by the former regime is now over," Maliki said, a reference to Saddam Hussein, the dictator ousted by the March 2003 US-led invasion and later executed.

At the White House, US "war czar" Lieutenant General Douglas Lute said that next year's talks would cover issues at the heart of the bitter US debate over the war -- including whether Washington would have permanent bases in Iraq, how many US troops would be stationed there, and for how long.

"The basic message here should be clear: Iraq is increasingly able to stand on its own; that's very good news, but it won't have to stand alone," Lute told reporters in a briefing on the tentative accord.

"The shape and size of any long-term, or longer than 2008, US presence in Iraq will be a key matter for negotiation between the two parties, Iraq and the United States," the general said.

Lute's remarks were notable in that top US officials, starting with Bush, have repeatedly denied seeking permanent bases in Iraq or that the US deployment -- currently at roughly 162,000 troops -- is open-ended.

The Bush-Maliki agreement was also expected to raise eyebrows with one provision that cited the need to promote the flow of international capital to Iraq but "especially American investments."

Monday's announcement means that the Bush administration and Iraq will work out the future of US forces in Iraq in the shadow of the November 2008 US presidential election and despite sky-high US public opposition to the war.

Any resulting agreement could limit the ability of Bush's successor to break with the current US strategy, as Democratic candidates have promised to do amid increasingly vocal calls for a US withdrawal.

While Maliki said any final deal would require the Iraqi parliament's approval, Lute said the accord would not need backing from the US Congress, which is in the hands of Bush's Democratic foes.

"It's a mutual statement of intent that will be used to frame our formal negotiations in the course of the upcoming year. It's not a treaty, but it's rather a set of principles from which to begin formal negotiations," he said.

The hoped-for accord "will be something like a 'state of forces agreement,' which would then replace the existing Security Council mandate as the authority by which we operate alongside our Iraqi partners inside Iraq," he said.

"So what US troops are doing, how many troops are required to do that, are bases required, which partners will join them -- all these things are on the negotiating table," said Lute.

A status of forces agreement is usually a key part of any agreement to base US forces in another country, and often cover difficult issues like entry and exit rights and legal jurisdiction over US military personnel.

Democratic Party Congressional leader Nancy Pelosi blasted Bush late Monday for planning to leave US forces mired in Iraq after his presidential term ends in January 2009.

"President Bush's agreement with the Iraqi government confirms his willingness to leave office with a US army

tied down in Iraq and stretched to the breaking point, with no clear exit strategy from Iraq," Pelosi, the speaker of the House of Representatives, said in a statement.

"The president should take responsibility for his Iraq policy rather than expect the American people or the next administration to bear the consequences of his mistakes."