

Shia leaders agree on peaceful resistance

AFP, Karbala

Religious leaders in this Muslim Shia holy city said Monday opposition to US occupation should be peaceful, and ruled out the establishment of an Iranian-styled Islamic republic, at least for now. The leaders of the two main Shiite religious currents in Iraq, Sayyed Ali Sistani and Sayyed Muqtada al-Sadr both back a peaceful path.

"For sure, in the beginning, our opposition to foreign occupation will be expressed by peaceful means," Sheikh Kaazem al-Nasari, Sadr's representative in Karbala, told AFP.

Sadr is the heir of a family of religious leaders, two of whom were killed by the secular regime of ousted president Saddam Hussein.

Despite his young age, 29, he has become a main leader of Iraqi Shiites after the collapse of the regime, when US troops captured Baghdad on April 9.

The poor Shiite suburb of Baghdad formerly know as Saddam City was renamed by its inhabitants Sadr City, in honour of the religious family.

"The people have only small weapons, it's nothing compared to the strength of the US forces. If at some point peaceful means do not give results, we will decide what to do

next," Nasari said in Karbala, 80 kilometres (50 miles) southwest of Baghdad.

Sistani's representative in the holy city, Sheikh Abdul Mahdi Karbalai, said non-violent struggle against the Americans should only start after the setting up of a new government that should represent all communities.

"Our vision is that there should be a government in which all communities and ethnic groups are represented, that would act peacefully in order to secure the withdrawal of foreign forces as soon as possible," he said.

Until Monday, there was no representative in Karbala of Tehran-based Iraqi Shiite opposition leader Ayatollah Mohammed Baqer al-Hakim, although the city is hosting a main pilgrimage to the shrine of Imam Hussein.

The pilgrimage, that has attracted hundreds of thousands from across Iraq, marks the 40th day after the martyrdom in 680 AD of Hussein, the son of Imam Ali and grandson of the prophet Mohamed.

Both Sistani and Sadr are based in Najaf, which hosts Imam Ali's shrine and the Shiite theological school, or "Hawza," 100 km to the south of here.

While Ayatollah Hakim advocates the establishment of an Islamic republic in Iraq, the representatives

of Sistani and Sadr said that was not an option because of Iraq's religious, political and ethnic diversity.

"Our country differs from Iran, we have to take into consideration its religious and ethnic make-up and therefore form a government representing all these groups," said Karbalai.

There are no official estimates on the country's religious breakdown, but the Arab Shiite Muslim community is considered a clear majority in Iraq, usually estimated at around 60 percent.

Arab Sunni Muslims and Kurdish Sunni Muslims also make up large segments of the population in the country that includes many smaller ethnic and religious groups, including Christians and Turkomans.

Nasari put the emphasis on the US presence and Iraq's political diversity, as many groups yearn for representation after more than 45 years of dictatorial rule, including 35 years under the Baath party.

"For the time being, an Islamic republic looks a distant prospect for two reasons. One: the colonialists will not allow Iraq to become another Iran. Two: many political parties are competing," he said.

US officials prefer quick exit from Iraq

AFP, Washington

Some US government officials are rethinking their ambitious plans for rebuilding Iraq, concerned by the high cost and lengthy time commitment required, the Washington Post reported Monday.

While President George W. Bush's administration remains committed to rebuilding Iraq's infrastructure, shattered by the US-led war to oust Saddam Hussein, some Pentagon and White House officials are arguing for a fast exit from Iraq, it said.

The officials consider that the task of developing representative democracy and a market economy should be left to an Iraqi interim authority that would begin to take significant power "within months."

"I don't think it has to be expensive, and I don't think it has to be lengthy," a senior administration official was quoted as saying about Washington's post-war commitments. "Americans do everything fairly quickly."

In a recent report, Mitch Daniels, director of the Office of Management and Budget, said that Iraq "will not require sustained aid," the Post said.

Retired US general Jay Garner, the US civil administrator for Iraq, arrived in Baghdad Monday to kick off his mission of rebuilding the battered country with scheduled visits to a hospital, water facility and power plant.



PHOTO: AFP

Iraqi Shia Muslims perform their rituals on the premises of the Shrine of Imam Hussein in Karbala, south of Baghdad on Monday. Hundreds of thousands of Shia Muslims made their way to this holy city on a long-suppressed pilgrimage, flexing their new-found political muscles. Such a mass outpouring of faith was unthinkable before Saddam Hussein's regime was swept away on April 9. Religious leaders in this Shia holy city say opposition to US occupation should be non-violent and rule out the establishment of an Iranian-styled Islamic republic in Iraq.



PHOTO: AFP

Syrian Foreign Minister Faruq al-Shara (R) fields a question as Spanish Foreign Minister Ana Palacio looks on at a press conference in Damascus on Monday following talks on developments in the region in the light of increasing US pressure on Damascus, which it has accused of harbouring ousted Iraqi leaders and of possessing weapons of mass destruction.

Spain, Syria for key UN role in post-war Iraq

AFP, Damascus

SYRIA and Spain voiced support yesterday for the United Nations to retain a key role in efforts to establish global peace and security, the official Sana news agency reported.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Spanish Foreign Minister Ana Palacio called for the UN "to regain its effective and positive role for security and peace in the world," Sana said after the two met in Damascus.

"Syria supports solutions which guarantee the interests of Arab people and resolutions on international legality," it quoted Assad as saying.

He reiterated that Damascus favoured "Iraqi unity and territorial integrity and that the Iraqi people

decide its own future."

Syria, which borders on Iraq, strongly opposed the US-led war, which was as strongly backed by the Spanish government of Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar.

Palacio had arrived the night before in Damascus amid tension between the United States and Syria, which Washington said possesses chemical weapons, had smuggled military equipment into Iraq and provided a sanctuary for associates of deposed Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

Conservatives in the administration of US President George W Bush have also suggested the UN should not play a leading role in rebuilding Iraq, after the US failed to get Security Council backing for the war.

Newspaper hits Baghdad stands

REUTERS, Baghdad

It would not be Washington's first choice, but the long-banned Iraq Communist Party on Sunday won the race to publish the first newspaper in Baghdad since the fall of Saddam Hussein.

The eight-page "People's Path" was handed out for free, snapped up eagerly by passers-by hungry for any kind of news after the US invasion eradicated state-run media.

"Collapse of a Dictator" read the headline under the hammer and sickle on the front page, followed by an article railing against the abuses of Saddam's "bloody, terrorist reign."

"With the dictatorship's collapse, all the wishes of the vast majority of the Iraqi people have come true," it said, printed around a picture of a child victim of the US-led war, his head bandaged and a tear rolling down his cheek.

When US forces rolled into Baghdad 11 days ago, ending Saddam's rule and toppling a statue of him for good measure, they created an information and authority void, with practically no electricity, no papers, no TV and no officialdom to turn to.

Angry citizens yearn for order and advice, but the last written US information came in the form of air-dropped leaflets urging people to stay calm during the war.

Others have moved in to fill the void, with influential religious leaders setting up community services, but the Communists were the first into print.

In Firdos Square in the centre, Iraqis stopped in their tracks to read the paper, amazed to see criticism of their former leader in writing.

"It is telling us about Saddam, how he did harm to our country," said 27-year-old Khudair. "Of course we knew it, but we have never seen it written in a newspaper before."

Jordan seizes looted pictures

BBC NEWS ONLINE

Jordanian customs officials say they have seized 42 paintings believed to have been looted from Iraq's national museum.

The paintings were seized earlier this week from unidentified journalists entering from Iraq at the al-Karameh border post, 420 kilometres (260 miles) north-east of the Jordanian capital Amman, Jordan's al-Dustour newspaper reported.

The head of Jordan's customs department, Mahmoud Quteishat, said border officials had been instructed to take the necessary measures to seize any stolen artefacts from the Iraq.

The latest seizures are part of a massive hunt for artefacts - some of which date back 10,000 years - looted from Baghdad's museum.

Reuters news agency quoted Mr Quteishat as saying 41 photographs depicting the life of ousted Iraqi President Saddam Hussein were also confiscated from a Western traveller at al-Karameh.

Mr Quteishat said the traveller, who was not identified, admitted having stolen the items from Iraq's national museum.

"They are rare pictures of the former Iraqi president taken during his years of

exile in Syria and Egypt and other pictures of his childhood home along with audiences with world leaders and more recent pictures," Mr Quteishat said.

As well as the national museum in Baghdad, a museum in Mosul has been looted.

Anger is mounting across the world at the loss of the ancient statues, manuscripts and other treasures.

Three White House cultural advisers have resigned in protest at the failure of US forces to prevent the looting of the museum.

And Baghdad's Islamic Library, which housed ancient manuscripts including one of the oldest surviving copies of the Koran, was ravaged by fire.

The UN's cultural agency Unesco has called the loss and destruction already suffered "a disaster". It has urged Iraq's neighbours and the international police, Interpol, to watch out for any Iraqi items which might have been stolen from its museums.

Unesco chief Koichiro Matsuura also called for a "heritage police" to be set up in Iraq to protect the country's archaeological treasures, as experts said organised gangs were behind much of the looting.

Thousands of Iraqi artefacts were also looted during the Gulf War in 1991.

Russia likely to lose oil contracts

AFP, Moscow

A senior US defence adviser hinted in an interview published Monday in Moscow that Russia was likely to lose rights to Iraqi oil contracts signed under the Saddam Hussein regime.

"There is a high probability that all previous deals with Russia will be declared meaningless," Richard Perle, counsellor to Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, said in an interview with the Kommersant business daily.

"Of course this is something for the new Iraqi government to decide," Perle said in an interview published in Russian.

"But I would be surprised if Russia wins the support of the new Iraqi leadership -- the same support that it received from (Saddam) Hussein," he said.

Reuters adds: Russia will insist on UN arms inspectors declaring Iraq free of weapons of mass destruction before sanctions against it can be lifted. Itar-Tass news agency quoted a senior foreign ministry official as saying on Monday.

The unnamed official said chief weapons inspectors Hans Blix and Mohamed ElBaradei, who headed UN inspections in Iraq prior to the US-led war, should be allowed to return and

quickly finish their work.

"This could be done within a couple of weeks as it is obvious that there are no such weapons there," the official told Itar-Tass.

Russia, which has veto power on the UN Security Council, has turned down Washington's requests for an immediate lifting of economic sanctions against Baghdad after US-led troops toppled the government of Saddam Hussein.

UN resolutions link the lifting of sanctions, imposed after Iraq's 1990 invasion of neighbouring Kuwait, to the country being certified free of weapons of mass destruction.

Russia, along with France and Germany, staunchly opposed using force to disarm Baghdad.

The fall of Baghdad into US hands has put Moscow in an awkward situation, leaving it torn between its own policy of preaching an end to sanctions and a desire to preserve a leading role for the United Nations in world affairs.

"The sanctions should be lifted as quickly as possible, immediately after Iraq complies with UN Security Council resolutions," the foreign ministry official said.

The official rejected any automatic steps to rid Baghdad of UN control over its foreign trade.

Saddam's hometown still awaits his return

REUTERS, Tikrit

US soldiers dive into his indoor swimming pool for fun. His photographs are scattered in the ashes of his bombed palace. A broken statue of him on a horse reminds people of his downfall.

But many residents of Saddam Hussein's home town insist he lives and cling to the hope he will come home.

"Saddam is still alive. Nobody knows where he is right now but he will return here. We are sure," said Saleh Attiya.

While Iraqis in many other parts of the country are eager for political change, Tikrit residents preferred the Saddam era.

One of the big unanswered questions of the US-led invasion is whether he survived a military attack that included at least two air raids aimed at sites where he was thought to be.

Speculation that Saddam might still be alive has been fuelled by television

footage said to show him surrounded by adoring crowds in northern Baghdad on April 9, the day US forces seized the capital.

Posters of their former president are plastered on every telephone pole in Tikrit, a dusty town of sand-colored houses 110 miles north of Baghdad. His name is scribbled on many buildings.

The opposition leaders the United States is trying to groom as Iraq's future rulers get short shrift here.

"If those exiled opposition people come back to Tikrit, they will be killed. They will leave dead. They are crooks. These people who spend their lives abroad making money should not come back," said Mohammad Jassem.

Many Iraqis complain that Saddam brutalised them, but Tikritis say that is the only way to keep Iraq's volatile mix of Kurds, Sunnis and Shi'ites from turning on each other.

Bodies of 2 UK soldiers found buried in Iraq

REUTERS, London

The bodies of two British soldiers, who their government says may have been executed, have been found in a shallow grave in Iraq, a spokeswoman for Britain's Ministry of Defense said on Monday.

The bodies of 36-year-old Simon Cullingworth and 24-year-old Luke Allsopp were found near Al Zubayr, outside Basra in the south of the country.

"The circumstances of the soldiers' deaths remain unclear," the spokeswoman said.

Last month, the Qatar-based news channel Al-Jazeera showed pictures of two dead Britons in uniform surrounded by an exultant mob.

The British government said the two soldiers "may well have been executed," though Iraqi Information Minister Mohammad Saeed al-Sahaf said Iraq had not executed anyone.

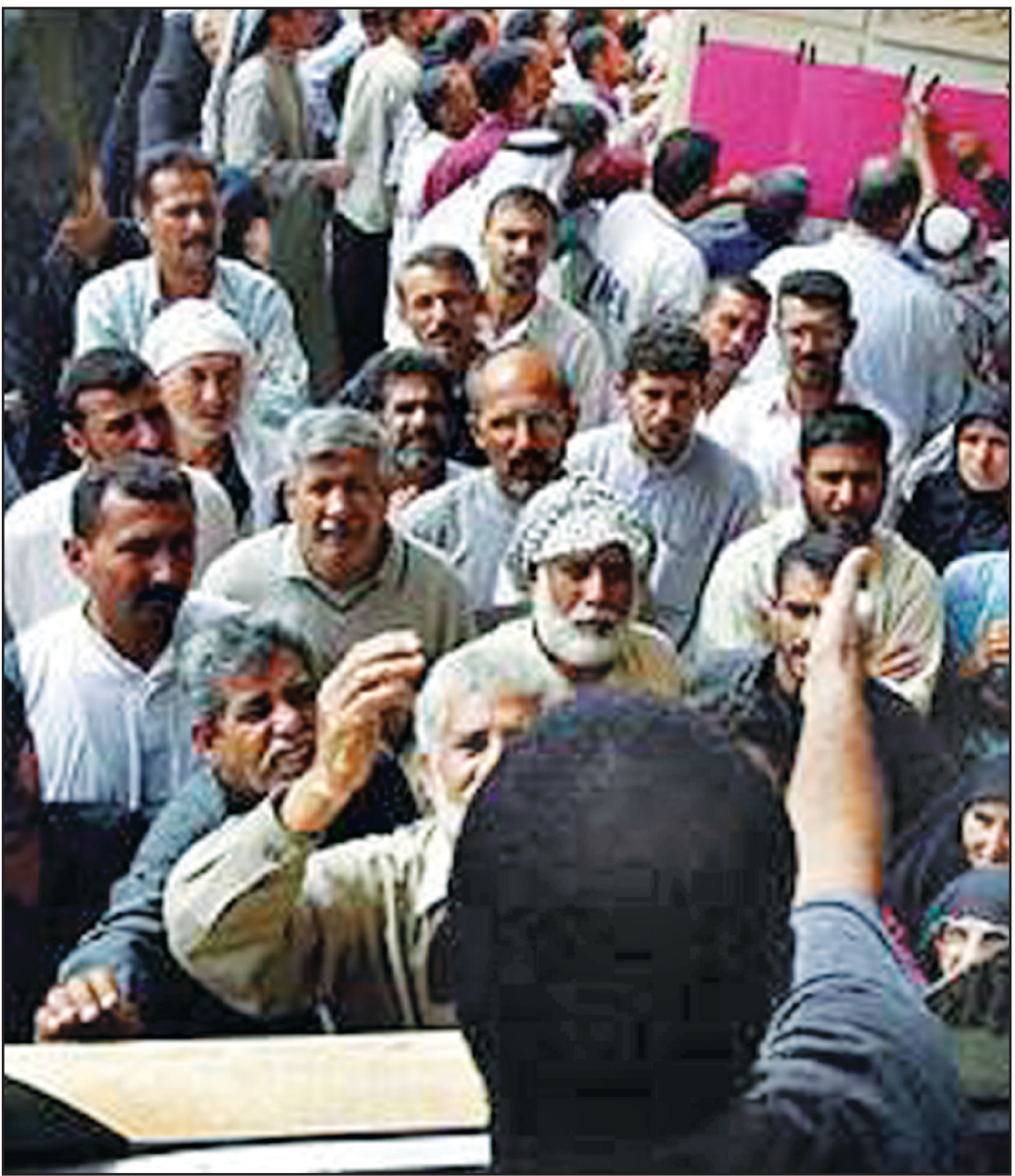


PHOTO: WASHINGTON POST

Relatives of hundreds of Iraqi prisoners gone missing during Saddam's regime still wait for news of their near and dear ones.