

Gloom descends on Iraqi leaders as civil war looms

REUTERS, Baghdad

Iraqi leaders have all but given up on holding the country together and, just two months after forming a national unity government, talk in private of "black days" of civil war ahead.

Signalling a dramatic abandonment of the US-backed project for Iraq, there is even talk among them of pre-empting the worst bloodshed by agreeing to an east-west division of Baghdad into Shi'ite and Sunni Muslim zones, senior officials told Reuters.

Tens of thousands have already fled homes on either side.

"Iraq as a political project is finished," one senior government official said - anonymously because the coalition under Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki remains committed in public to the US-sponsored constitution that preserves Iraq's unity.

One highly placed source even spoke of busying himself on government projects, despite a sense of their futility, only as a way to fight his growing depression over his nation's future.

"The parties have moved to Plan B," the senior official said, saying Sunni, ethnic Kurdish and majority Shi'ite blocs were looking at ways to divide power and resources and to solve the conundrum of Baghdad's mixed population of seven million.

"There is serious talk of Baghdad being divided into east and west," he said. "We are extremely worried."

On the eve of the first meeting of a National Reconciliation Commission and before Maliki meets President

George W Bush in Washington next week, other senior politicians also said they were close to giving up on hopes of preserving the 80-year-old, multi-ethnic, religiously mixed state in its present form.

"The situation is terrifying and black," said Rida Jawad al-Takki, a senior member of parliament from Maliki's dominant Shi'ite Alliance bloc, and one of the few officials from all the main factions willing to speak publicly on the issue.

"We have received information of a plan to divide Baghdad. The government is incapable of solving the situation," he said.

As sectarian violence has mounted to claim perhaps 100 lives a day and tens of thousands flee their homes, a senior official from the once dominant Sunni minority concurred: "Everyone knows the situation is very bad," he said. "I'm not optimistic."

RESIGNED TO INEVITABLE? Some Western diplomats in Baghdad say there is little sign the new government is capable of halting a slide to civil war.

"Maliki and some others seem to be genuinely trying to make this work," one said. "But it doesn't look like they have real support. The factions are looking out for their own interests."

The presence of 140,000 heavily armed foreign troops, most of them Americans, is keeping a lid on open grabs for territory by armed groups from various communities. But few see Washington willing to keep troops in Iraq indefinitely and many analysts question the new, US-trained Iraqi

army's cohesion.

Broadly speaking Iraq could split in three: a Shi'ite south, Kurdish north and Sunni Arab west. But there could be fierce fighting between Arabs and Kurds for Mosul and for Kirkuk's oil as well as urban war in Baghdad, resembling Beirut in the 1970s.

Officials say the Tigris river is already looking like the Beirut "Green Line", dividing Sunni west Baghdad, known by its ancient name of Karkh, from the mainly Shi'ite east, or Rusafa.

The US ambassador, Zalmay Khalilzad, and Washington's top military commander issued a public appeal this week: "We call on Iraqi leaders to take responsibility and pursue reconciliation not just in words, but through deeds as well," they said.

But a European diplomat said: "I wonder if accepting there must be division, and civil war, might be the only option ... It may be unavoidable and so it's better to get it over with."

GRAVE SITUATION In public, Iraqi and US officials make no secret of the gravity of the situation, five months after the destruction of a Shi'ite shrine at Samarra launched a new phase of conflict, with Shi'ite militias now as lethal as Sunni insurgents.

Maliki has called his national reconciliation plan, offering amnesty for some rebels and promising to rein in militias, the "last chance" for peace. Khalilzad has said the government, hailed by Bush as a major success for US-installed democracy in the Middle East, has just months to prove itself.

Even militia commanders say

popular anger means ordinary people, most of them armed, are ignoring calls for restraint.

Shi'ite member of parliament Takki said: "People are taking the protection of their neighbourhoods into their own hands."

Maliki meets Prime Minister Tony Blair in London on Monday before seeing Bush at the White House on Tuesday. Both leaders, penalised in polls since the 2003 invasion, will expect him to tell US and British voters of his hopes for a new Iraq.

He may focus on Saturday's meeting of the Reconciliation Commission, expected to feature loud public calls for unity.

Thai king okays new elections for Oct 15

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's King Bhumibol Adulyadej has signed a decree setting new elections for October 15, ending weeks of speculation over when the polls would be held, the government announced yesterday.

"The king has already signed the royal decree, which will be published in the royal gazette tomorrow," cabinet secretary Rongphol Chareonphanthu told reporters.

"The election is set for October 15," he said.

Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra called snap elections for April 2, hoping to end months of street protests calling for his resignation over alleged corruption.

His party won the vote, but the Constitutional Court invalidated the results following an opposition boycott.

Recovery dreams wiped out in Lanka's surf capital

REUTERS, Arugam Bay, Sri Lanka

Sitting on a bed in a surf shack overlooking the Indian Ocean, 33-year-old rickshawpuller AL Salaheen watches the handful of surfers catch the morning waves.

This year was supposed to be the best ever for Sri Lanka's surf capital of Arugam Bay.

Four years after a ceasefire halted the island's civil war and more than a year since the 2004 tsunami, the town hoped it had bounced back.

"Last year there were not enough cabanas because of the tsunami and lots of customers," Salaheen told Reuters. "Now there are lots of cabanas and no customers."

Dozens, including foreign surfers who have been visiting the resort since the 1970s, died when the tsunami slammed ashore in Arugam Bay. Even 100 metres back from the coast, whole buildings were swept away by waters perhaps 15 to 20 feet high.

But less than six months later, surfers descended on the town on Sri Lanka's southeast coast for the World Championships. Hoteliers, most of them without insurance, pulled together money to rebuild and take advantage of the goodwill and publicity.

"This year we were hoping for real big money," says Naleen, co-owner of the Tsunami Hotel, named for the big surfing waves and then completely destroyed by its namesake.

"This should be the peak season. But this is the worst in years. People have been scared away."

Renewed violence between Sri Lanka's government and Tamil Tiger rebels has killed more than 700 people so far this year, most of them

Drug mistakes injure 1.5 m in US a year

REUTERS, Washington

Medication errors hurt 1.5 million people every year in the United States and cost at least \$3.5 billion, according to a report issued on Thursday.

If hospitals, clinics and other providers owned up to each and every mistake, it would help to keep track of and eventually reduce them, and systems such as electronic prescribing would also help, the Institute of Medicine report said.

"Medication errors are among the most common medical errors, harming at least 1.5 million people every year," the Institute said in a statement.

Such mistakes kill at least 7,000 people a year, according to the institute, an independent, non-profit organisation that advises the federal government on health issues.

"The extra medical costs of treating drug-related injuries occurring in hospitals alone conservatively amount to \$3.5 billion a year, and this estimate does not take into account lost wages and productivity or additional health care costs," the institute added.

One example - a Denver hospital gave a newborn infant a tenfold overdose of penicillin in case it had been infected with syphilis from its mother in 1996.

Nurses balked at giving the baby five injections so administered the medicine in what turned out to be an unusual and improper way - intravenously. The baby died, and the autopsy showed it did not have syphilis and never needed the treatment in the first place.

"This case illustrates that medication errors are almost never the fault of a single practitioner or caused by the failure of a single element," the report read.

"According to one estimate, in any given week, four out of every five US adults will use prescription medicines, over-the-counter drugs, or dietary supplements of some sort, and nearly one-third of adults will take five or more different medications," the report said.

ONE-A-DAY "The committee estimates that on average a hospital patient is subject to at least one medication error per day."

Errors occur when prescriptions are written, filled, administered, when patients are monitored and when drugs interact with one another, according to the committee of experts who wrote the report.

"Our recommendations boil down to ensuring that consumers are fully informed about how to take medications safely and achieve the desired results, and that health care providers have the tools and data necessary to prescribe, dispense, and administer drugs as safely as possible and to monitor for problems," said J Lyle Bootman, dean of the University of Arizona's College of Pharmacy and a committee chairman.

The US Food and Drug Administration said it was already working on some of the recommendations, including better patient education and labeling.

Health care providers typically do not inform the patient or the patient's guardians about errors unless injury or death results, the report said. But if they did, it would help make everyone involved more aware of the errors and would encourage them to take more care, the report said.

since early April, raising fears of a return to war and scaring away all but the hardiest tourists.

HIPPY SURFER HAUNT There has been no violence in Arugam Bay so far. But it is only a few miles from areas in the east where the Tigers, government and a break-away group of ex-rebels frequently clash.

"People see there is trouble in the Eastern Province and they do not realise there has been nothing in Arugam Bay," said Naleen.

While overall tourist figures for Sri Lanka have so far held, visitors have been staying away from Arugam Bay, leaving newly rebuilt hotels empty.

When Reuters visited recently, hoteliers estimated there were only about 25 visitors in town, compared to the 600 they had been hoping for. Many of the visitors were aid workers taking a break from reconstruction

work further north.

But hard-core surfers, some of whom first came through the chain of army checkpoints around Arugam Bay at the height of the war, seem largely unconcerned. Indeed, some are glad there is a dearth of tourists.

When the first hippy surfers came to the area in the late 1970s, they slept in villagers' huts or out on the beach under the stars. Swiss physio-therapist Nadim Ismail first came before the ceasefire and says since the town has changed for the worse,

"The atmosphere has changed," he says, sipping a beer after a day on the water. "People are much more money-centred. But the atmosphere is much more relaxed again this year."

SPECIAL TASK FORCE SOCCER That said, he's wary of the Police Special Task Force commandos as they patrol through the town carrying

M-16 and AK-47 assault rifles.

During the war, Ismail says the relationship between the surfers and the security forces was awkward, and might become so again.

Once, he says the surfers protested to the local base commander after an ethnic Tamil boy was imprisoned and beaten up by police. That worsened the relationship, but they managed to build bridges with a friendly football game with the commandos.

"We were one nil up at one stage," he says. "But they won 7-1. It was a really friendly game."

For some of the hotel owners, the new, quieter Arugam Bay is good and bad.

"Commercially, it's not very pleasant," says Briton Steve John, who has just rebuilt a hotel after the tsunami. "But in other ways, it is very... pleasant."