

Maliki offers olive branch to Iraqi insurgents

REUTERS, Baghdad

Shia Prime Minister Nuri al -Maliki yesterday offered an olive branch to Iraqi insurgents waging war against his government and said he would announce a long-awaited cabinet reshuffle within two weeks.

Speaking at a Baghdad conference aimed at speeding up reconciliation among Iraq's warring communities, Maliki said a new US-backed security plan launched in the capital last month would be extended to "every inch" of Iraq.

"We do not need to implement security measures except against those who reject the language of reconciliation and dialogue, those who insist on restoring the past," Maliki said, in a reference to Sunni Arab insurgents loyal to Saddam Hussein.

"We present in our hand a green olive branch, and in the other hand we present the law."

Shia officials have said his government could collapse if the crackdown fails to put a brake on sectarian violence that threatens to plunge Iraq into full-scale civil war.

Maliki has pledged to tackle Shia militias as hard as Sunni insurgents, although some Sunni leaders are sceptical. He did not say if any insurgents who stopped fighting would be given an amnesty.

The prime minister is expected to replace under-performing ministers in the reshuffle, which he has promised for months.

In an earlier interview with a pool television camera, Maliki said the changes would be unveiled "either this week or next." He gave no hints about who he would replace in his cabinet, which is mostly made up of members of Shia, ethnic Kurd and Sunni Arab parties.

In early November, Maliki called for a "comprehensive" reshuffle "to send a message to all ministers that they may be replaced if they don't succeed."

He had said then he would not necessarily stick to "quotas" of cabinet posts according to parties' strength in parliament but would appoint those competent for their tasks -- something Iraq badly needs, with its potentially oil-rich

economy still in a morass and its ministries accused of rampant corruption.

The nearly three-week old offensive in Baghdad has sharply reduced the number of death squad killings in the capital, although car bombs still explode regularly.

US commanders say it will take months for the plan to produce concrete results. They say the aim of the Baghdad push is to create some "breathing space" to allow politicians to reach a political consensus.

Maliki told the reconciliation meeting on Sunday he hoped an international conference being held in Baghdad on March 10 would lay the foundations for increased international and regional cooperation in stabilising Iraq.

He has invited neighbouring countries and world powers to a meeting that could open the way for the United States to talk to Syria and Iran, which Washington says are fuelling violence in Iraq. Both countries deny the accusations.

'US probe uncovers terror financing by Arab Bank'

AFP, Washington

US investigators have uncovered evidence that Arab Bank, one of the largest in the Middle East, has channelled tens of millions of dollars from wealthy Saudi Arabians to Palestinian groups that finance suicide bombers and their families, The Los Angeles Times reported on its website Saturday.

The newspaper said the information was being turned up by the US government and lawyers suing Arab Bank.

It "will give people a better understanding of the way money moves in that part of the world to support Hamas" and other militants in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the report quoted Stephen Kroll, a terrorism finance specialist, as saying.

"It's important in focusing the public's attention on the issue of what is and what is not acceptable for banks to be involved in," Kroll was quoted as saying.

Arab Bank, which is based in

Jordan, is being investigated by the Justice Department, which is looking into its financial links to organisations and individuals accused of terrorism, The Times said.

In 2005, the bank agreed to pay the federal government 24 million dollars in fines for violating US laws aimed at preventing terrorist financing, according to the report.

The bank is also being sued in federal court in Brooklyn by Americans and Israelis injured in suicide bombings or other fighting in Israel and the occupied territories.

Lawyers suing Arab Bank accuse it of facilitating acts of terrorism by providing accounts and other financial services to Hamas, Islamic Jihad and similar groups, The Times noted.

Court documents charge that Arab Bank also acted as the administrator of a plan, in which suicide bombers and others designated as "martyrs" by the Palestinian Authority and other organisations were compensated for their actions, the paper added.



PHOTO: AFP

Georgian students shout as they hold posters during their rally in Tbilisi Saturday. They protest against the detention of three of their colleagues in Abkhazia. Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili voiced hope last January of enlisting Russia's help in bringing Georgia's breakaway regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, back under Tbilisi's control, citing Russia's huge leverage in the region.

Obama, Hillary converge at civil rights event

REUTERS, Selma

Democratic rivals Barack Obama and Hillary Rodham Clinton, along with former President Bill Clinton, take their high-voltage fight for the White House to a hallowed symbol of the US civil rights movement yesterday.

The trio of political stars descends on the small town of Selma, Alabama, for a series of events commemorating the 42nd anniversary of the 1965 civil rights march, a historic milestone in the drive to end racial segregation in America's South.

The early campaign collision between Clinton and Obama, the top two contenders for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination, is another sign of the budding intensity of their rivalry.



PHOTO: AFP

Democratic presidential hopeful Sen Hillary Rodham Clinton, D-New York, greets supporters after the kickoff of the Great American Cleanup at City Hall in Los Angeles on Saturday. Clinton joined Los Angeles mayor Antonio Villaraigosa to launch a national campaign to gather thousands of volunteers to pick up trash and plant trees in public recreation areas in an effort to educate people to have a lower impact on the environment.

Hamas picks 9 to form new Palestinian govt

AFP, Gaza City

Hamas presented Palestinian prime minister-designate Ismail Haniya on Saturday with the names of the nine people the Islamist movement proposes as its ministers in the new national unity government being formed, a spokesman said.

Ismail Radwan did not give the names of those chosen or say what ministries they would be expected to take.

He added that discussion was still underway on the name of the candidate to take on the critical post of interior minister. That person is to be chosen by Hamas from among independents but approved by president Mahmud Abbas.

Haniya, who formed a Hamas-led government after trouncing the long-ruling Fatah party in parliamentary elections in January 2006, is due to discuss the new coalition on Sunday with Abbas, who is also chief of Fatah.

Radwan said the new govern-

ment could be announced "at the end of the coming week."

Under the terms of a power-sharing accord signed by Abbas and Hamas supremo Khaled Meshaal in Saudi Arabia on February 8, Hamas will take 10 cabinet posts including Haniya, Abbas's secular Fatah faction six and others four.

The key finance ministry will go to the internationally respected Salam Fayad from the Third Way party, and the foreign ministry to independent MP Ziad Abu Amr, a moderate who was elected with Hamas backing.

The deal was negotiated to bring an end to an often bloody power struggle between the two parties that had carried on since Hamas took power and also to end a punishing 11-month long Western aid freeze.

Saudi, Iran agree to contain Shia-Sunni strife

AFP, Riyadh

The leaders of regional heavyweights Iran and Saudi Arabia agreed at talks in Riyadh to fight growing Sunni-Shia strife, warning that it was the greatest danger facing the region.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said he and Saudi King Abdullah agreed at their meeting on Saturday that their two countries would work together to thwart "enemy" plots seeking to divide the Islamic world.

"The two leaders affirmed that the greatest danger presently threatening the Islamic nation is the attempt to fuel the fire of strife between Sunni and Shia Muslims, and that efforts must concentrate on countering these attempts and closing ranks," Saudi Arabia's official SPA news agency added.

The meeting between the regional Shia and Sunni Muslim oil

powers was held against a backdrop of mounting fears that the sectarian bloodshed engulfing Iraq could spill over into the region.

Relations between Riyadh and Tehran have been strained over non-Arab Iran's growing influence in Iraq and its alleged backing of Shia

militias battling the once-ruling Sunni minority there.

At one point Saudi Arabia accused the United States of effectively handing the country to Iran and triggered reports -- swiftly denied by Riyadh -- of possible Saudi intervention on behalf of Sunnis.

