



PHOTO: AFP
Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari (L), Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki (C) and United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon attend a high level meeting at the United Nations Saturday to discuss Iraq's future. The Iraqi leaders are in New York for the 62nd meeting of the United Nations General Assembly debate.

Bush seeks \$195b for Iraq, Afghan wars

AFP, Washington

The White House will ask Congress next week to approve another massive spending measure for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan totalling nearly 200 billion dollars, The Los Angeles Times reported on its website late Saturday.

Citing unnamed Pentagon officials, the newspaper said if President George W Bush's spending request is approved, 2008 will be the most expensive year of the Iraq war.

US war costs have continued to grow because of the additional combat forces sent to Iraq this year and because of efforts to quickly ramp up production of new equipment, such as mine-resistant trucks, the report said.

The new trucks can cost three to six times as much as an armoured Humvee, according to the paper.

The Bush administration said earlier this year that it probably would need 147.5 billion dollars for fiscal 2008, but Pentagon officials now say that and 47 billion dollars more will be required, The Times said.

UN meet for greater role in Iraq

AFP, United Nations

A high-level meeting on Iraq ended here Saturday with support for a bigger UN role in the war-scarred country but acknowledgment that this would require greater improvement in the security situation.

UN chief Ban Ki-moon, who co-chaired the meeting with Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, outlined plans for a modest hike in the world body's presence but cautioned that although security has been improving in Iraq, "much more needs to be done."

"There was an emphasis by many speakers on the key UN role in helping to promote national reconciliation," Ban said during a joint press conference with Maliki.

"There was clear agreement that the international community cannot turn away from or ignore Iraq," he added.

The world body has been under strong pressure from Washington to adopt a higher profile in Iraq, despite continuing violence more than four years after US-led troops invaded the country and ousted the regime of the late Saddam Hussein.

On Friday, US Assistant

Secretary of State for international organization affairs Kristen Silverberg said Washington "wants to see more UN officials on the ground in Baghdad".

But while Ban is committed to increasing the world body's role in Iraq, he faces resistance from his staff, many of whom are still traumatized by the August 19, 2003 truck bombing of the Baghdad UN mission, which killed 22 people including special envoy Sergio Vieira de Mello.

"I think that the security situation in Iraq is difficult but improving and certainly, the security of UN personnel will be a very high priority for all of the forces there, the multinational forces," US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told reporters after the meeting.

She said that there was "a long discussion about the new (Security Council) resolution 1770."

Resolution 1770 adopted last month extended the mandate of the UN Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI) by one year and urged it to "advise, support and assist" the Iraqi government on a wide range of issues.

Current tensions won't lead to Iran war

Says US military chief

AP, Baghdad

The commander of US military forces in the Middle East does not believe current tensions with Iran will lead to war and urges for greater emphasis on dialogue and diplomacy.

"This constant drum beat of conflict is what strikes me which is not helpful and not useful," Adm. William Fallon said in an interview with Al-Jazeera television, which made a partial transcript available Sunday.

Fallon, the head of US Central Command, wraps up a seven-nation tour of the region on Tuesday that included stops in Persian Gulf countries, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Many of the talks with military and political leaders were dominated by worries about expanding Iranian influence and US accusations that Iran is supplying arms and training to Shia militiamen in Iraq.

"I expect that there will be no war and that is what we ought to be

working for," said Fallon during the Friday interview at Al-Jazeera's headquarters in Qatar. "We should find ways through which we can bring countries to work together for the benefit of all It is not a good idea to be in a state of war. We

ought to try and to do our utmost to create different conditions."

Al-Jazeera was expected to broadcast the complete interview later this week.

Fallon, who leads US forces in Central Asia, the Middle East and the

Horn of Africa, was in Iraq on Sunday for a second day of meetings.

At the United Nations, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said Saturday that the world body plans to open a new office in Baghdad to encourage cooperation

between Iraq and its neighbours, calling Iraq's stability "a common concern." The UN greatly scaled back its presence in Iraq since a 2003 bombing at its Baghdad headquarters that killed 22 people.



Fukuda wins poll, likely to become next PM

AP, Tokyo

The veteran moderate Yasuo Fukuda easily won election as Japan's ruling party president Sunday, pledging to keep a pro-US foreign policy and improve ties with Asia after he almost certainly becomes prime minister later this week.

Fukuda, the 71-year-old son of a prime minister from the 1970s and a former right-hand man to two premiers, won 63 percent of the vote among Liberal Democratic Party lawmakers and delegates, beating his lone rival, former Foreign Minister Taro Aso.