

Monday, 29 June 2009

## Baghdad bids farewell to US on day of "national sovereignty" Iraq prepares massive party as US troops pull out



US troops are expected to fully withdraw by the end of 2011 (File)

**BAGHDAD (Agencies)**

Iraqis prepared for a massive party in Baghdad on Monday in a day of "national sovereignty" to celebrate the imminent withdrawal of American troops from cities, towns and villages, as the war-torn nation prepared to take sole charge of its security.

Festivities to mark "a day of national sovereignty" will start at 6p.m. (1500 GMT) in Zawra Park, the biggest in the capital, with singers and poets kicking off proceedings before music groups take to the stage.

The U.S. pullout, under a bilateral security accord signed last year, will be completed on Tuesday, which has been declared a national holiday.

In the wake of several massive bombings that have killed more than 200 people this month, however, security forces are out in force in the capital and motorcycles, used in a suicide bombing on Friday, have been banned from the streets.

In a measure of the seriousness of the threat, all police and army leave has been cancelled.

"Our expectation is that maybe some criminals will try to continue their attacks," said Major General Abdul Karim Khalaf, the interior ministry's operations director and spokesman.

"That is why orders came from the highest level of the prime minister that our forces should be 100 percent on the ground until further notice."

### Defending the nation

Iraqi Premier Nouri al-Maliki warned earlier this month that insurgent groups and militias were likely to step up attacks in the run-up to the June 30 deadline in a bid to undermine confidence in Iraq's own security forces.

There have been several large bombings since, the deadliest of which came in the northern city of Kirkuk on June 20, when a truck loaded with explosives was detonated, leaving 72 people dead and more than 200 wounded.

The toll from a bomb in a market five days ago in the Shiite district of Sadr City in northeast Baghdad was also bloody, killing at least 62 and wounding 150.

But Maliki and senior government officials have since insisted that Iraq's 750,000 soldiers and police can defend the nation against attacks attributed to al-Qaeda-linked insurgents and forces loyal to ousted leader Saddam Hussein.

"We assure you of Iraqi forces' readiness for the mission, despite some security violations, and we assure you that we are now more stable and steady," Maliki said after last week's attack in Sadr City.

He appealed to Iraqis to inform the army and police of any potential attacks, and to ensure that the country did not return to the sectarian violence that blighted it throughout 2006 and 2007.

The recent attacks were part of "a plan that aims to awaken sectarianism, create chaos, abort the political process and prevent Iraqi people from standing on their own feet," he said.

### **U.S. presence**

Only a small number of U.S. forces in training and advisory roles will remain in urban areas, with the bulk of American troops in Iraq, 131,000 according to Pentagon figures, quartered elsewhere.

The June 30 withdrawal from cities, towns and villages is the prelude to a complete American pullout by the end of 2011.

Although the Iraqi police and army remain fledgling forces, they have in recent months steadily taken control of military bases, checkpoints and patrols that used to be manned by Americans.

Iraq has also set up a joint operations center -- the Joint Military Operations Coordination Committee, based at Baghdad airport -- which must give its approval before a U.S. unit can intervene.

The Status of Forces Agreement, which set the June 30 deadline for a U.S. pullback, says U.S. commanders must gain permission from Iraqi authorities to conduct operations, but American troops retain a unilateral right to "legitimate self-defense."