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Biden marks Independence Day with US troops US vice president in Iraq calls Saddam an "SOB"



Biden talks with soldiers at Camp Victory on the outskirts of Baghdad

BAGHDAD (Agencies)

American Vice President Joe Biden on Saturday celebrated Independence Day with American troops, including his soldier son Beau, at their base near Baghdad, giving a colorful speech that mocked Saddam Hussein.

Biden addressed soldiers at Camp Victory shortly after saying that the U.S. role in Iraq was switching from deep military engagement to one of diplomatic support, ahead of a complete withdrawal from the country in 2011.

He earlier told newly sworn-in American citizens, mainly soldiers, that the United States had honored its June 30 obligation to withdraw troops from Iraq's towns and cities and the focus was now on strengthening political ties.

No diplomacy

But his tone was far from diplomatic when he shared lunch with the 261st Theater Tactical Signal Brigade from Delaware, to which his son belongs, at the massive U.S. base on the outskirts of the capital.

"We did it in Saddam's palace and I can think of nothing better," Biden said, referring to the naturalization ceremony at Al Faw Palace near Baghdad airport.

"That SOB is rolling over in his grave right now," he said of executed Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein.

Biden joined hundreds of U.S. troops dining on chicken, ribs, hamburgers, salad, corn on the cob, mashed potatoes and cakes at a July 4 feast in a canteen decked out in red, white and blue streamers

and tablecloths.

The vice president spent 45 minutes working the room, greeting troops and saying "Hey Man, how you doing?"

The citizenship ceremony saw 237 men and women, mainly Mexican and Filipino who joined the army while resident in the United States, as well as several Iraqi military translators, take the oath of allegiance.

"There is still an awful lot of hard work to do here, but thanks to you Iraqis are beginning to take responsibility for their own destiny and we will begin to welcome you home with the honor and gratitude you deserve," Biden told them.

"Our diplomats and civilians will focus on helping Iraqis make the much needed political compromise necessary for a lasting peace and security."

"Hard road ahead"

His comments came a day after meetings with Iraqi leaders in which he warned of a "hard road ahead if Iraq is going to find lasting peace and stability."

"It's not over yet," Biden said after talks with Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, which focused on bolstering trust between the conflict-torn nation's various sects.

"There are still political steps that must be taken and Iraqis must use the political process to resolve their remaining differences and advance their national interest.

A senior U.S. official told reporters Biden had also warned that Washington would disengage politically if violence in Iraq spiked.

"If it actually reverts to violence, then that would change the nature of our engagement. He was quite direct about that," the official said.

Kurdish authorities meanwhile announced that Biden had to cancel a trip to the northern autonomous region because sandstorms prevented him from flying from Baghdad to Arbil.

Biden's visit to Iraq comes just after President Barack Obama charged him with overseeing the U.S. departure in 2011.

Following Friday's talks, Maliki, who is expected to visit Washington soon, said the June 30 U.S. troop pullback signaled that the two countries had "entered a new phase."

"We will work during the next visit to the United States to push forward bilateral relations in various areas," Maliki said according to a government statement.

"For his part, the U.S. vice president said that the United States will continue to support the government of national unity and assist Iraq in the United Nations to get out of Chapter VII," a reference to sanctions imposed during Saddam Hussein's regime which was toppled in the 2003 invasion.

Iraq marked Tuesday's American pullback with a national holiday.