



U.N. ENVOY TO IRAQ OUTLINES PLAN FOR JUNE 30 HANDOVER

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The man the U.S. government has largely turned to to plan the turnover of power in Iraq to Iraqis by June 30, has said that despite recent violence in parts of the country the deadline for handing over sovereignty, or control of the government, would stick.

U.N. envoy to Iraq Lakhdar Brahimi laid out his plan for creating a temporary government to the United Nations Security Council Tuesday. Under the plans, this temporary, appointed administration will set up elections in early 2005 to create a permanent government.

"Though it will certainly not be easy, we do believe that it shall be possible to identify by the end of May a group of people respected and acceptable to Iraqis across the country, to form this caretaker government," Brahimi said.

Calls for a June 30 handover

Since the onset of the latest fighting in Iraq that has made April the deadliest month for U.S. soldiers since the war started, some American lawmakers have questioned whether the president's stated deadline of June 30 can hold.

An uprising by radical Shiites in the city of Najaf opposed to the U.S.-led occupation in Iraq and battles between coalition forces and anti-American militants in Fallujah has seriously undermined efforts by the United States to establish a stable environment in which to usher in democracy.

"The time frame is very small to disarm the militia, to bring about a security situation in which the governing council, the 24 Iraqis or however many others they appoint, can govern the country," said Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Richard Lugar, R-Ind.

Plans for the new government

Despite these concerns, Brahimi said he still thought the process could move forward.

Brahimi's plan calls for a "caretaker" government that would take control of Iraq on July 1, 2004. A prime minister would lead the government made up of "Iraqi men and women known for their honesty, integrity and competence," according to Brahimi. A president would serve as head of state in the country and would be aided by two vice presidents.

In addition to the executive branch, Brahimi would convene a National Conference to promote "national dialogue, consensus building and national reconciliation," he said. The National Conference would elect an assembly to serve as an advisory body to the government.

As part of the U.S.-approved plan, the current Iraqi Governing Council would be dissolved. In a press conference in Baghdad earlier in April, Brahimi stressed many of the members of this council, which the United States created and selected members for, may be called on for other positions in the new government.

The plan would also call for U.S. troops to remain in Iraq after June 30 to oversee security, an aspect of the plan that has led to questions about how much control the new Iraqi leadership actually will have.

The man President Bush wants to represent the United States after the turnover on June 30, current U.N. Ambassador John Negroponte, told the Senate Tuesday that the U.S. military would maintain command but that the interim Iraqi leadership would be responsible for administrative duties like foreign policy and running the government.

Limits to the new government's power

During his presentation, Brahimi has also confirmed the presence of a U.N. electoral team working in Baghdad to help plan for elections in January 2005.

Until those elections occur, any Iraqi government's power will be limited by law and by several key figures.

Under the so-called transitional law adopted earlier this year, the temporary government does not have the power to change or make new laws. Also, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, a leading Shiite cleric in Iraq and a favorite among the country's most populous religious group, has demanded that the government not be granted real powers since it will be appointed by the United Nations and not elected by the people.

Earlier in the year, U.S. officials resisted calls by al-Sistani to hold direct elections within the next few months. The leading Shiite cleric has said such a vote is critical. Many observers see the call as an attempt to ensure that Shiite leaders, who represent the majority of Iraq's population, hold more power in the new government.

The next two months

The next step in the process for securing the June 30 handover is for the United States to convince member nations of the U.N. Security Council to approve plans for a new Iraqi government that shares power with U.S. troops. A resolution is expected in May.

In the meantime, Brahimi will begin searching for the members of the new government and continue talking with key figures in Iraq about how to ease the transition.

The United States must also begin planning for the establishment and protection of its first embassy in Iraq. It would house an ambassador and up to 3,000 employees.

By Kristina Nwazota, Online NewsHour

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