



IRAQ WAR ENTERS FOURTH YEAR

March 20, 2006

On the third anniversary of the invasion that toppled Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, the Bush administration argues that progress has been made while critics say the country has fallen into civil war.

President Bush traveled to Cleveland Monday to spread his message that the mission in Iraq is progressing and that the country is on its way to becoming one of the few democracies in the Middle East.

On Sunday, three years to the day after the start of the war, the president gave brief comments to reporters outside the White House.

"On this third anniversary of the beginning of the liberation of Iraq, I think all Americans should offer thanks to the men and women who wear the uniform and their families who support them," he said.

President Bush encouraged the public to put the conflict into a larger perspective, beyond the violent images seen daily in the media.

"We are implementing a strategy that will lead to victory in Iraq," the president added.

Is Iraq entering a civil war?

The president's comments were in sharp contrast with those of former Iraqi Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, who said the country was slipping into civil war.

"We are losing each day, as an average, 50 to 60 people through the country, if not more. If this is not civil war, then God knows what civil war is," Allawi said in an interview with BBC News.

Vice President Dick Cheney discounted Allawi's assertions, arguing that the violence is the work of terrorists trying destroying the nation's new constitutional democracy.

"What we've seen is a serious effort by them to foment civil war, but I don't think they've been successful," he said in a CBS interview Sunday.

U.S. and Iraqi forces have been battling Sunni Arab resistance to the Shiite- and Kurdish-led government. The Sunnis, a minority in the nation, held power during Saddam Hussein's brutal regime, but have suffered political isolation since his removal.

Sectarian violence increased dramatically last month when a bomb damaged the Golden Mosque, a revered Shiite holy site in the town of Samarra.

U.S. critics and public opinion

Much of the U.S. public disagrees with the Bush administration's optimistic outlook. More than three-fourths of the public think it's likely that Iraq will develop into civil war, according to an Associated Press-Ipsos poll taken in early March.

Some members of President Bush's Republican Party have sought to distance themselves from the president's strategy, arguing that Iraq has been liberated and that American troops should not be expected to solve civil strife.

"I think it's important that we stop this talk about we're not going to leave until we achieve victory," Senator Chuck Hagel of Nebraska, who is considering running for president in 2008, told ABC News.

"Well, what is victory? We achieved victory: Saddam's gone, the Iraqis have a constitution, they had an election, it's now up to them," he added.

However, while poll numbers are not supportive of the president's Iraq strategy, there were few antiwar protests to mark the third anniversary.

Chicago saw 7,000 demonstrators on Saturday, New York had about 1,000 and smaller protests were held in Boston, San Francisco, Portland and other cities.

In the three years since military action began, 2,313 American military personnel and Defense Department civilians have died. Iraqi casualties measure between 33,000 and 37,000, according to the Iraq Body Count Project, an independent group that monitors the media.

--Compiled by Annie Schleicher for NewsHour Extra
© 2006 MacNeil/Lehrer Productions