

New Iraqi government starting to take shape

By Ferry Biedermann
Special to Sentinel-Voice

AMMAN (NNPA) - The Iraqi parliament that was elected some ten weeks ago has finally picked the three-man presidium of the Republic, making Jalal Talabani the first Kurdish president of Iraq. The appointments follow a breakthrough last week when the National Assembly at last agreed on a Sunni Arab speaker.

The presidency has two weeks to appoint a prime minister and a team of ministers, but the announcement may come as early as this week. The main political grouping, the Shia United Iraqi Alliance, has already agreed to nominate one of its members, Ibrahim Jaafari, a member of Iraq's Islamist Dawaa Party, to head the government.

The slow pace and the difficulty in filling the appointments until now have laid bare the problems Iraq is facing in establishing its first democratic government. Predictably, the balance of power between Iraq's three main sectarian groups — Shias, Kurds and Sunnis — has proven to be the biggest stumbling block.

Getting suitable Sunni politicians to fill some high-profile but essentially powerless jobs has been a particularly wrenching part of the process.

The drawn-out process and the open bickering between factions is said by some Iraqis to have further encouraged the Sunni-led insurgency. Sunnis barely participated in the elections, and feel sidelined by the new political order imposed by the Americans after the invasion two years ago.

The government now being installed is taking over from the appointed interim government of prime minister Iyad Allawi. The new government and the National Assembly are charged with drafting a new constitution that should be completed by August. New elections, under the new constitution, should then take place in December.

The make-up of the presidium was predictable from the start. Talabani became the new president in an acknowledgement that the Kurds are now the second-most numerous group in the country, and in parliament where they hold the balance of power. The appointment may also help stem the most extreme Kurdish separatist urges. It is a historic occasion — the country has never before had a Kurdish president.

Talabani has one Sunni deputy, outgoing interim president Ghazi Al-Yawar, and one Shia vice-president, current finance minister Adel Abdul Mahdi. Mahdi be-

longs to the main Shia political grouping, the United Shia List that holds more than half of the 275 seats in parliament.

The appointment of the presidium required a two-thirds majority in parliament, placing the Kurds with their combined 75 seats in the position of kingmakers. Kurds make up 20 percent of the country's 26 million people; Shias are 60 percent, and the Sunni Arabs roughly 15 to 18 percent. Christian and other minorities make up the rest.

The hardest bargaining over the last two months has been over relations between the sectarian groups. This included bargaining over territorial issues such as the oil-rich northern city of Kirkuk, which Kurds want administered as a part of an autonomous Kurdish area.

Control over the huge petroleum reserves has also been hard fought, and it is still not clear whether Kurds or Shias will head the oil ministry.

Another hotly debated issue has been the system of government — whether Iraq should be a federation, and how far devolution of powers should go. The Kurds have practically run their northern mountain fiefdom as an independent state with the help of the U.S. since the 1991 Gulf War, and not much changed after the overthrow

of Saddam Hussein.

Kurdish leaders have said they will not dissolve their Peshmerga militia that fought Saddam Hussein for more than 30 years, and resisted other Iraqi governments before him. Talabani is the leader of one of the two main Peshmerga groups and its political arm, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

His long-time rival, Massoud Barzani of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) is now expected to

head Kurdistan's autonomous regional parliament.

Kurds and Shias suffered most under the Baath regime of Saddam Hussein, who relied more on his own Sunni Arab part of the population. Kurds and Shias are united in their resolve to resist any domination by the Sunnis again, but there are also huge differences between them.

The Shia parties are mostly religious, and want a strong Islamic component in the government. Several Shia

leaders have ties with the clerics who run neighboring Iran, where many found refuge during the years of Saddam Hussein.

The Kurds are much more secular in outlook, at least where the government of the country is concerned, and they advocate a stricter separation between church and state.

The Sunnis, despite the many Islamic fundamentalists who seem to be involved (See Iraq, Page 15)

Apartheid-backing political party dissolves in S. Africa

CAPE TOWN, South Africa (AP) - The party linked to decades of White racist rule in South Africa formally left the political stage Saturday, its leader apologizing for "a system grounded in injustice."

The federal council of the New National Party — the successor to the National Party that led apartheid — overwhelmingly approved the party's dissolution at a meeting in Johannesburg. This followed the party's decision last year to join forces with the ruling African National Congress after a humiliating defeat in national elections.

"What we do today is part of our contribution to finally ending the division of the South African soul," said NNP leader Marthinus van Schalkwyk. "The forerunner of the NNP, the NP, brought development to a section of South Africa, but it also brought suffering through a system grounded in injustice." In the vote, 88 members were in favor of the motion to disband, two were against and three abstained.

The National Party, which came to power in 1948, presided over 48 years of systematic and often brutal oppression of the country's Black majority, who were denied

the right to vote or to mix with Whites.

After prolonged international sanctions and rising domestic pressure, then-National Party leader F.W. de Klerk released African National Congress leader Nelson Mandela from jail in 1990 and launched reforms that led to the first multiracial elections in 1994. Mandela became the country's first Black president from that vote while de Klerk became deputy president in a power-sharing government. The two men shared the 1993 Nobel Peace Prize for South Africa's political transition.

The National Party pulled out of the government in 1996 and was relaunched to try to make a break with the past. But it failed to carve out a new identity for itself in post-apartheid South Africa and rapidly lost support. The NNP won less than 2 percent of the vote — seven seats — during last April's elections, down from 20 percent in 1994. This prompted van Schalkwyk to pledge his allegiance to the ANC.

The White-led Democratic Alliance, which won 50 seats last year and is South Africa's largest opposition party, has invited NNP's 257,000 voters into its fold.

WHO resumes staunch battle vs. Ebola-like virus plaguing Angola

LISBON, Portugal (AP) - Health workers who left western Angola after they were attacked by residents fearful of a deadly Ebola-like virus have resumed efforts to contain the disease, the World Health Organization said Sunday.

Residents in Uige province had mistakenly feared the WHO teams were spreading — instead of helping contain — the rare Marburg virus, which has killed 184 people out of a total 200 people infected, WHO's spokesman in Angola, Dave Daigle, told the Associated Press by phone.

"Three teams have already resumed activities and are now following up on anyone who had contact with infected people recently," Daigle said.

Like Ebola, which also has hit Africa, Marburg is a hemorrhagic fever. It spreads through contact with bodily

fluids and can kill rapidly. There is no vaccine.

Daigle said the WHO had launched an education campaign to help contain the virus and prevent a recurrence of Thursday's attacks.

"We're doing radio announcements, meeting with church leaders and local authorities, to reach out to people and not only explain to them what we're doing but get their support," Daigle said.

Meanwhile Doctors Without Borders, a global relief organization that runs an isolation ward at a hospital for victims of the virus, has advised that the hospital should be closed to contain the spreading of the virus.

The organization's emergency coordinator in Uige, Monica de Castellarnau, characterized the situation as "very worrying" and said Sunday by phone that "the hospital be shut down tem-

porarily, until the outbreak is controlled."

She said Doctors Without Borders was also attacked on Thursday and said hostility toward medical workers was due to a lack of information.

"We are doing the best to inform people because they are afraid and not only become hostile, but fail to report cases of the disease to us, making it harder to contain the virus," she said.

Several deaths attributed to the virus have been reported in four other provinces, but the only confirmed Marburg deaths can be traced back to Uige.

Two cases have been confirmed in Angola's capital, Luanda, but there has been no transmission of the virus there. The worst previously recorded outbreak of the virus killed 123 people in neighboring Congo between 1998 and 2000, the last known outbreak of Marburg.



FEMALE GUNMAN

A male government soldier, wearing a wig and female clothes in the belief it will protect him in battle, stands guard at the Irongate checkpoint at the edge of the Liberian capital Monrovia in this July 8, 2003 file photo.

Thousands of young men and boys, many of whom have committed atrocities while fighting in West Africa's brutal civil wars, face recruitment into the regions emerging conflicts, Human Rights Watch said in a new report released Wednesday.