

Iraqi PM calls for stronger, non-sectarian govt

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Associated Press Writer /March 7, 2009

BAGHDAD—Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki on Saturday called for an end to the practice of distributing top government jobs along religious and ethnic lines, saying the system leads to weakness and mismanagement.

Al-Maliki, a Shiite, also renewed his call for changes in the 2005 constitution, which he believes restricts the power of the central government to deal with national problems after nearly six years of war.

"There is a difference between sectarian distribution of posts in the government and the principle of partnership," al-Maliki told a conference of Iraqi tribal leaders.

Also on Saturday, a U.S. soldier was killed during an attack on an American patrol in Salaheddin province in northern Iraq, the U.S. military announced. It was only the third combat fatality suffered by U.S. forces in Iraq this month.

U.S. casualties have dropped sharply in Iraq over the past year, with most of the fighting taking place in Sunni areas north of the capital.

Speaking to tribal leaders, al-Maliki called the sectarian distribution of government posts a "bridge to weakness and mismanagement."

He also said it was "not unwise" to review the constitution and correct unspecified mistakes committed in the rush to complete the charter in 2005.

Under agreements among Iraqi opposition groups even before the U.S.-led invasion of 2003, jobs in the Cabinet and other senior posts are given to specific political groups. Those groups are religiously or ethnically based, meaning some jobs are reserved for Sunnis, Shiites or Kurds.

Critics believe the system limits options in choosing top managers and also opened the door to extremist infiltration of the security services during the height of Sunni-Shiite fighting two years ago.

Supporters, however, insist the system allows all the major religious and ethnic groups a voice in national policy in a country where Shiites form an estimated 60 percent of the population.

Al-Maliki acknowledged there were broad political differences among Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds but that agreements on major issues could be resolved through dialogue.

The prime minister's remarks came one day after he called on Iraqis on Friday to reconcile with former supporters of Saddam Hussein's Sunni-dominated regime.

"We should reconcile with those who made mistakes, who are forced and obliged at one time to be on the side of the former regime during a time of hardship in Iraq's history," al-Maliki said. "We must reconcile but on condition that they turn back to Iraq, and turn the dark page of Iraq's past history."

U.S. officials have been pressing Iraq's leaders for years to reconcile the country's rival ethnic and religious groups -- a campaign that has taken on new urgency now that the U.S. has agreed to withdraw all its troops by the end of 2011.

Sunni politicians welcomed al-Maliki's remarks but said they wanted tangible steps -- including a sweeping amnesty for insurgents and abolition of laws that ban thousands of Baathists from holding elected office and government jobs.

On Friday, Iraqi security forces in Baqouba arrested six men suspected of being members of Saddam's Baath party, which is banned under the constitution. Police said they found assault rifles, fake identity cards and other materials during the raid.

Also Saturday, an official in the government office that takes care of Sunni mosques, Wissam al-Mufti, said two Sunni clerics were arrested this week. Al-Mufti said lawyers were trying to establish the reason for the arrests.

The Baghdad military command and the Iraqi Interior Ministry said they had no knowledge of the arrests.

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