

Thursday, January 18, 2007

Give us guns – and troops can go, says Iraqi leader



America's refusal to give Baghdad's security forces sufficient guns and equipment has cost a great number of lives, the Iraqi Prime Minister said yesterday.

Nouri al-Maliki said the insurgency had been bloodier and prolonged because Washington had refused to part with equipment. If it released the necessary arms, US forces could "dramatically" cut their numbers in three to six months, he told *The Times*.

In a sign of the tense relations with Washington, he chided the US for suggesting his Government was living on "borrowed time". Such criticism boosted Iraq's extremists, he said, and was more a reflection of "some kind of crisis situation" in Washington after the Republicans' midterm

election losses. Mr al-Maliki conceded that his administration had made mistakes over the hanging of Saddam Hussein. But he refused to accept all criticism over the execution. When asked about the Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi's attack on Iraq's capital punishment laws, Mr al-

Maliki cited the Italians' summary killing of Benito Mussolini and his stringing-up from a lamppost.

Asked how long Iraq would require US troops, Mr al-Maliki said: "If we succeed in implementing the agreement between us to speed up the equipping and providing weapons to our military forces, I think that within three to six months our need for American troops will dramatically go down. That is on condition that there are real, strong efforts to support our military forces and equipping and arming them."

The US Government is wary of handing over large amounts of military hardware to the Iraqis because it has sometimes ended up in the hands of militias and insurgents.

Gordon Johndroe, the White House national security spokesman, conceded that some of Mr al-Maliki's criticism was "valid". The training and equipping of Iraqi troops would be speeded up, he said, adding that by "self-admission we have had to redo our training and equipment programme".

Although Mr al-Maliki's tone was measured throughout, he is clearly irritated at US criticism that he has failed to curb Shia militias. Robert Gates, the new US Defence Secretary, said that Mr al-Maliki could lose his job if he failed to stop communal bloodshed and Condoleezza Rice, the Secretary of State, gave a warning that he was living on "borrowed time" and that American patience was running out.

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Posted by Stewart Rhodes at 4:10 PM 

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