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EDT

Iraqi Interim Government Briefing

(Note: The ministers' remarks are provided through interpreter.)

MIN. SHA'ALAN: In the name of God, the most gracious, most merciful, I will start by reading the statement of the prime minister, Dr. Iyad Allawi.

(Reading.) My fellow citizens, what is happening, the military operations taking place and the complete (outlawness ?) of the militias and also the targeting of the Iraqi security forces, all of these come under the category of breaking the law.

Our brave forces have never targeted the holiness of the sacred -- of the holy shrine, but the militias have targeted these locations by occupying them. These places have never been exposed to such violations in the past.

This occupation has led to many of innocent people being killed and also wide-ranged damage to governmental and public buildings, and also the repetition of such operations in the south of the country, which was committed by certain armed groups who are trying to strike our economic companies and economic structure, especially the oil industry, where certain oil pipes have been closed. And this has led to losses of about \$60 million. These large amounts of money were originally dedicated to the people and also to the rebuilding of Iraq.

Therefore, our government calls upon all the armed groups to drop their weapons and to return to the society. The political process is open for all, and everyone is invited to take part in it.

We also hope -- we also call upon all the armed men to evacuate the holy shrine and not to violate its holiness, its holiness, which has been violated by these armed groups.

Thank you very much.

The minister of Interior will give his statement.

MIN. AL-NAQIB: Thank you very much, and welcome.

I will talk about the last two days regarding the activities of the Ministry of Interior, represented by the Iraqi National Guard and also Iraqi armed forces. There have been certain breaches in the province of Al Basrah, and before that, in Najaf province also.

In Najaf, the Iraqi National Guard and Iraqi police who were supported by the air force of the multinational forces, they have scanned the cemetery and have confiscated large amounts of weapons and have captured about 1,200 individuals. Some of them are of non-Iraqi nationalities. This operation had lasted until today, and the Iraq National Guard and the Iraqi police were able to reach the perimeters of the holy shrine.

In spite of what media reports have said, the coalition forces, or the multinational forces, have crossed the red line and have started approaching the holy shrine. We say this to the Iraqi people and to anyone who is keen and has the holiness of this shrine in his interests. We say that the multinational forces right now are located in the 1920 Revolution Square. The operations are still continuing in this city and will continue to take place until these militias evacuate the holy shrine either by force or by surrendering to the Iraqi authorities, and to take advantage of the amnesty period issued by the prime minister.

Regarding to the province of Diwaniyah, two days ago some al- Sadr-related groups have come from Nasiriyah. They were about 200 in number, and they settled down at Diwaniyah and started launching attacks the next day in the morning and tried to enter some of the government's buildings. But they were repelled by the Iraqi police and the Iraqi National Guard, who were able -- in cooperation with the multinational forces, they were able to repel their attacks and captured 47 of them. And 10 of them were injured. These injured are now at the hospital. And also among these people were those who do not speak Arabic.

This situation also occurred in the province of Kut, where, with a high level of bravery and efficiency, the Iraqi police and the Iraqi National Guard in cooperation with the multinational forces were able to defeat 400 of the insurgents. Some of them were killed, captured or wounded. Some of them also came from abroad. This operation started yesterday at 8:00 a.m. and came to an end at 12:00 midnight. And the Iraqi security forces were able to search all the areas in the province except for the district of Al Hayy, which was scanned and searched today. And those individuals operating there were arrested.

There also were some demonstrations that took place. Some of them were peaceful; others were violent. These violent protests were faced and controlled by the Iraqi security forces in the province of Al Amarah. Some reports were anticipating the fall of this province, but our brave security forces took full control of this city and again were capable of killing or arresting some of the insurgents.

As for Baghdad, the activities of the Iraqi National Guard and Iraqi police, these activities were located at al-Sadr City. This city was isolated by blocking all bridges and routes to it. And also we were able to defuse 300 explosive devices. And we were also capable of repelling all attacks of al-Sadr groups and other groups related to them.

Today the Iraqi National Guard in Haifa Street carried out an attack on some safe houses taken by former Ba'athists and other terrorists, and they were able to arrest the leader of a dangerous group. He has been wanted since one year. And also other groups were also arrested. This operation lasted until 5 p.m. today, and the Iraqi National Guard and Iraqi police were capable of taking full control of the area.

The Sh'allah (ph) District in Baghdad also, there were some police stations there that were exposed to attacks by al-Sadr militia, but these attacks were repelled. And the Iraqi National Guard have supported these operations and they were able to arrest some of these criminals.

This is with regard to the operations throughout Iraq.

MIN.: Salaam aleikum. The minister of Defense gave us a briefing of what has happened in Iraq. The situation taking place in Iraq right now is conspiracy against the Iraqi people, and it targets the Iraqi people and the whole of Iraq. This is a war on Iraq and aiming for the destruction of Iraq.

We have noticed in more than one area of these mentioned previously and in a number of provinces there have been organized criminal activities targeting the Iraqi people. In spite of the names, we say that these activities represent a conspiracy against Iraq, and more than one side is taking part in this conspiracy.

What's happening right now in Iraq is a try to -- these groups are trying to destroy the people. And there are certain reasons behind this attempt, because the support from Arab countries, especially after the visit of the prime minister to these countries, these countries are supporting Iraq, which has raised concerns among the terrorists. So these groups are trying, as far as possible, to incite violence in Iraq.

We never had a predetermined intention for any military actions in Najaf. We were surprised by an attack on the police stations, the government buildings and also the locations of the Iraq national guards. So we had no other solution. Previously we have tried to solve all our problems politically and peacefully.

What is happening at this stage is not to the benefit of anyone -- no political party nor religious party or any other party. What is happening is the murdering and massacring the Iraqi people, and destroying the public institutes (sic), whether in Najaf and Amarah and Baghdad and in Kut and Basra and Nasiriyah. The goal was not to confront any occupying forces. The goal was to destroy and target the Iraqi people. Those parties taking part in this conspiracy have forgot that the Iraqis will never give up and will always stand up to them. They are trying to derail the rebuilding of Iraq, trying to prevent

Iraqis from carrying out their normal life, are trying to threaten their future. They're targeting all the vital institutes in Iraq. The security forces are targeted. This doesn't fall in the category of resistance to occupation. It is insulting the Iraqi people.

In a simplified manner, what we see right now in Najaf, which is very dear to all of us, especially in the holy shrine of Imam Ali -- we will show some photos for what is going on right now in Najaf. They are taking refuge in the holy shrine. What is happening is that they are taking refuge in this shrine. These are photos of mortar rounds being fired from the shrine and also the planting of mines within the shrine.

So who seeks benefits from this? Who will benefit from targeting these holy locations?

We will not allow for any foreign forces to enter the shrine of Imam Ali. The Iraqi police and the Iraqi armed forces will be the forces to liberate these locations that have been occupied by these gangs. I would like to ensure our Iraqi people and also Arabic and Muslim nations that Iraq is capable -- has military capabilities and human resources capable of repelling any attack, whatever its nature.

And I thank you very much.

If you have any questions.

Please specify who the question is directed to. We will receive the questions.

Q: Minister of Interior, is it a possibility to send Mr. Rubaie as a delegate to carry out negotiations with al-Sadr? Thank you.

MIN. AL-NAQIB: Even during our visits to Najaf, in company with the prime minister, we have opened the door of negotiations, and it is still open. Any crisis could be resolved peacefully.

Q: Minister of Interior, there have been reports that Mr. Chalabi has held a meeting with president and the prime minister, and it has been reported that he would mediate in this crisis in order to drop all the charges filed against him. Is this true?

MIN. AL-NAQIB: No, this is absolutely untrue.

Q: I have two questions. The first: Two days ago the deputy governor of Basra threatened to declare the independence of the southern part of Iraq. And hours ago we have contacted Al Basrah and our sources there told us that Iraqi police vehicles, Iraq National Guard vehicles have been located and have declared their allegiance to al-Sadr. Is this true?

MIN. AL-NAQIB: Let us be accurate regarding the information here. I will concentrate on two points. You are only mentioning negative issues here. Some Iraqi officials have taken part in the clashes, trying to keep the unity of Iraq, such as the governor of Kut and the governor of Najaf. So why

are you concentrating only on the deputy governor of Basra. Please do not concentrate on these subjects that target the unity of Iraq. Some of these officials have given their lives for our unity.

I have no knowledge of what you have mentioned, and you can --

Q: (Through interpreter.) Kholouda Ziyadi (ph), Al-Furat newspaper.

The security situation is unstable in wide regions in Iraq, and the Iraqi national conference is to be held soon. So are there any security arrangements in order to secure the holding of this conference?

MIN. AL-NAQIB: Practically, the Iraqi government has put all its efforts in order to achieve the success of the political process here in Iraq, which will lead to the general elections in early next year. The Iraqi national conference will be held at its predetermined date. All political movements, parties and trends are invited to participate. All people and personalities are invited. It will be held next Sunday, and all the procedures are being carried out in order to secure its safety.

Q: (Through interpreter.) The minister of Defense, you have said that foreign fighters have been captured. Could you please specify their nationalities and numbers?

MIN. SHA'ALAN: There is an investigating body that will travel tomorrow to the city of Kut, and they will be shown on TV and you will be able to specify their nationalities.

Q: (Through interpreter.) Bahram Hamid Ali (ph), Al Mashriq newspaper.

Vice President Ja'afari issued yesterday an initiative and asked to hold back all military operations in Najaf. And also, you have mentioned that the Iraqi security forces are leading the battles in Najaf, but we have heard that these forces have thrown down their weapons with the first -- at the first clashes taking part there. Is this true?

MIN.: My dear sir, the ministers of Interior and Defense have clarified that the Iraqi forces -- whether Iraqi police, National Guard, or armed forces -- they cleared up these forces were forced by the militias to take part in these clashes. We have tried to seek a peaceful solution, a political solution, but we -- these courses have failed.

Some say that these events were instigated by the closure of a certain newspaper by al-Sadr, but this newspaper was reissued but the violence did not stop. And we have seen the recent events in Najaf and Kut and the occupation of the police stations by the militias and also the occupation of other civilian institutes and government buildings, and finally violating the holiness of the holy shrine in Najaf. All of these operations were imposed on the security situation, so the political course was forced to come to a halt.

But we, till now, invite everybody to take part in the political process, and this is emphasized with regards to the Iraqi National Conference. But again, what you said about Iraqi security forces

surrendering and throwing down their weapons in the first clashes taking part, this is not true. You have tried to get a statement by this question, so I would like to clarify that the Iraqi forces did not start these clashes and they are standing bravely in all of these clashes.

Q: Minister of Defense, is there a timeline for the end of these operations?

MIN. SHA'ALAN: Hopefully soon. And you and your colleagues will see the truth of the Iraqi armed forces and the Iraqi police. The Iraqi armed forces will stay unified and will be the protector of the Iraqis with the Iraqi police. But there are some voices that were allowed to speak in the name of democracy. Some of these voices are trying to derail the democratic process in Iraq. But we will stay serving the democracy here and we will reserve it.

Q: (Through interpreter.) Ashur TV. The house of Mr. al-Sadr has been surrounded. Does this declare the start of the final military actions?

MIN.: I have no information regarding any negotiations in the Shi'a House. But with regard to surrounding the house of Mr. al-Sadr, this is not true, because till this moment we do not know where Mr. al-Sadr resides. And till now we are not seeking the arrest of Mr. al-Sadr. So I believe that my answer was clear. Thank you.

Q: (Through interpreter.) Al Kablisda (ph). A statement by the prime minister said that the holiness of the shrine will not be violated, while the minister of Defense said that this crisis will come to a solution either by force or peacefully. So what do you mean by force? How does this come with regard to the prime minister's statement?

MIN.: Some reports said that those fighting the al-Sadr militias are the multinational forces, but I tell you that these forces are not engaging the militias, the Iraqi forces are engaging the militias. And these militias have violated the shrine and, as you have seen in the pictures, mortar rounds being fired from inside the shrine. All of this violates the holiness of the shrine. And anyone who aims to violate this shrine, we will stand up to him and defeat him.

Q: (Through interpreter.) Da'Wa newspaper. You have said previously that you are open for any political solution. What are your conditions to stop the bloodshed? And second question, who has the authority to withdraw the multinational forces from Najaf? I say this because no one of the presidential board has this authority.

MIN.: Could you please repeat the first question?

Q: (Through interpreter.) The first question was that you were open for any political solution. So what are your conditions?

MIN.: With extreme simplicity, our only condition is the rule of law, and not trying to seize power through the militias, these militias who are trying to deprive the Iraqi people from their rights. We

demand that everyone should abide by the law. No one is above the law.

As for the second question, I have no idea about this question, so I would go back to the statements of Mr. al-Ja'afari, and I will return to you on that.

Q: (Through interpreter.) Adia (sp) satellite channel. You mentioned -- the minister of Defense talked about operations in the south of Iraq and the threat to the oil industry facilities. So could you please describe to us the situation of these facilities right now in Basra?

MIN.: In Basra there have been direct threats to the personnel working in the oil companies in the south of Iraq and also threats of blowing up oil pipes. But nothing has happened till now in Basra. But we are taking these threats seriously, and we are taking extreme security measures to secure these facilities. And we are expecting everything. Today an agriculture institution in Basra was occupied, and then they threatened to blow it up. I have no idea what the agriculture institute had to do with this situation. It is only a criminal act.

So for the well-being of the Iraqi people, we are taking extreme caution with regard to these threats.

Q: (Through interpreter.) (Al-Arabiya ?) Channel. Question to the minister of Interior. There have been reports about Mahdi militia's breaking into police stations in Baghdad and seizing them. Is this true? And if yes, what stations are these?

MIN. AL-NAQIB: The operation was or in general are groups coming out in two or three cars and trying to target police stations, but they have not succeeded in taking control of any of these police stations. So their operations are simply attacking these police stations, and there's some cars that are carrying mortar tubes, and they're trying to target certain locations in Baghdad.

For example, yesterday two petrol tankers were identified as bearing explosive devices, but the Iraqi police was able to defuse them.

Also, they are trying to target some gas stations. In general, they are trying to target locations that are -- that directly affect the life of the Iraqi people.

Some of these insurgents were killed yesterday also, in some operations.

Two last questions, please.

Q: (Through interpreter.) I have two questions. The first is for the Ministry of Interior, and then the minister of Defense.

One question. We have heard today that a terrorist was captured today who has been killing Iraqi policemen in the disguise of being a member of al-Mahdi Army. So is this true?

And the second question, for the minister of Defense. You have talked a little while ago about arresting some terrorists who are carrying out attacks in Iraq. Does this mean that there is -- does this indicate that the rest of these foreign fighters -- indicates direct interference from neighboring countries?

MIN. AL-NAQIB: In fact, yes, there has been such an arrest. A leader of a criminal gang has been arrested, and he has claimed that he is a member of al-Mahdi Army. He has previously been sentenced. He has been convicted of many murder crimes. He was arrested. What he did is to arrest a number of policemen, and they killed them and mutilated them and left them on the streets. They also arrested or kidnapped some Iraqi national guards, and also dismembered them. He was arrested, and once he is in Baghdad he will be taped and his statements will also be taped and aired.

MIN. SHA'ALAN: With regard to your second question, what I say are facts. I do not fear anyone, whether it's a country or a single person, but I will not give you the facts right now because right now they are considered to be classified. Once the investigations are completed, we will release these facts. Please go back to the Shoful Ausraf (ph) newspaper yesterday and you will have more information about this subject. And also we are investigating the events taking place in Kut, and after that you will be able to assess the damage taken place.

Q: John Burns with The New York Times. If I could address this to all of you, but particularly to the Interior Ministry and the Defense minister.

If you read the history of Iraq, foreign forces who have come here, with whatever purposes, have not, generally speaking, left in victory. Do you gentlemen believe that the enterprise in which you are engaged, attempting to stabilize Iraq under the banner, under the umbrella of a foreign military force, can be achieved? Can you get the support of the Iraqi people for this enterprise? And if you can't, what then?

MIN. KASIM DAOUD (minister of State): (In English.) Okay. Is it sufficient if I answer your question by myself?

Q: Absolutely.

MIN. DAOUD: (In English.) First of all, we think that -- we are deeply in belief in the capacities of our people, the Iraqis, the Iraqi people. This is -- we are very sure about it.

Second thing, I do agree with your statement that yes, indeed, no any foreign forces can leave -- any can occupy any country or invade any country in a very peaceful way. I do agree with you this fact.

Third thing: We actually need temporary these forces till we will finish the building of the skeletons of our security bodies. So as the Security Council resolution mentioned, that we have the right to tell the foreign forces, "Thank you very much, bye bye; you have finished your job, and we can depend on ourselves and upon our people."

So this is my answer to you, my friend, and I will ask minister of Interior if he has some more comments on your question...

MIN. AL-NAQIB: (In English.) I mean, actually the minister, Daoud, has said what I had in mind.

I would like to say one thing, that one of the most important issues for us, as a government, we want to rebuild our security forces of this country in order to ask all foreign forces to leave this country as soon as possible. And most of the Iraqi peoples, they know that. And definitely, we won't be able to act or lead this country without the support of our people. But many of the Iraqi people know exactly that's our target.

Thank you.

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