

# Iraqi PM: No need for US troops to stay post-2011

Prime Minister Nouri Al Maliki said on Saturday that an agreement requiring US troops to leave by the end of 2011 will stand because Iraqi forces are capable of taking care of the country's security.

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Baghdad: Prime Minister Nouri Al Maliki said on Saturday that an agreement requiring US troops to leave by the end of 2011 will stand because Iraqi forces are capable of taking care of the country's security.

The comments are his first on the subject since being tasked with forming a new government following eight months of political deadlock, and some of his strongest to date on what is expected to be a key issue faced by the next government.

"The security agreement with what it included of dates and commitments will remain valid, and I do not feel the need for the presence of any other international forces to help Iraqis control the security situation," Al Maliki told reporters during his first news conference since getting the formal request on Thursday to form the new government.

Under an agreement between Iraq and the US, all American troops are to leave the country by the end of 2011. The US currently has a little less than 50,000 troops in Iraq, down from a one-time high of 170,000.

American officials have said they will abide by the agreement although they would consider any request by the new Iraqi government to stay longer.

Earlier this month, US Defence Secretary Robert Gates said the US government is open to discussing changes to the agreement. But he said the "initiative clearly needs to come from the Iraqis."

One sign of the Iraqi security forces' burgeoning capability came Saturday when Iraq's Interior Minister said they have arrested at least 12 insurgents behind a deadly church siege.

Interior Minister Jawad Bolani told The Associated Press that the arrests - the first in connection to the October siege at the Our Lady of Salvation church - occurred in recent days.

He said the insurgents were behind a wide range of operations in Iraq leading up to the siege and described their arrest as a coup for security forces.

"It is a painful blow to Al Qaida," Bolani said.

Insurgents took about 120 people hostage during the October 31 church attack. The siege ended hours later with 68 people dead in an attack that shocked many of Iraq's already-hardened citizens.

The attackers raided the church located in one of Baghdad's more affluent neighbourhoods during Sunday evening Mass. Dozens of cowering parishioners, and two priests were killed - one execution-style on the church floor - before Iraqi security forces stormed the building.

Al Qaida later claimed responsibility for the attack and vowed in an Internet message to continue a campaign of bloodshed against Iraq's dwindling Christian minority.

According to Bolani, security forces also seized money and explosives during the arrests.

Bolani gave no details as to where and how the arrests took place, but an intelligence official responsible for monitoring Al Qaida cells in Iraq, said security forces acted on a tip to make the first arrest.

From there, the security forces eventually managed to round up the entire group, the official said. He put the number of people arrested at 17.

The intelligence official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorised to talk to the media.

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