Turkish official urges Kurdish rebels to surrender

Selcan Hacaoglu
Associated Press

ANKARA: Turkey on Friday urged Kurdish rebels to "lay down their arms and come home," but rejected calls from rebel supporters and Kurdish politicians to start a dialogue with imprisoned Kurdish rebel chief Abdullah Ocalan.

Interior Minister Besir Atalay said Friday that the government was trying to end fighting with the autonomy-seeking rebels by improving democracy and human rights in the process. However, Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc ruled out any dialogue with Ocalan.

A group of unarmed Kurdish rebels and refugees arrived in Turkey from northern Iraq this week in a peace gesture. But celebrations by thousands of Kurds chanting illegal pro-Ocalan slogans and waving banners of the rebel group angered Turkish authorities, triggering protests and legal action by prosecutors. The military strongly criticized the celebrations after their arrival.

"The incidents are in no way acceptable," Major General Ferit Guler told a news conference. "Everybody should refrain from acts that could drag the country toward polarization, separation and conflict." The military stressed that these developments would not deter its "determination in fighting terrorism." Atalay issued a stern warning, urging everyone to use common sense for the sake of the peace process.

"No one should even think about a repeat of these scenes," Atalay told a televised news conference. "We are taking risks, making so many sacrifices. Don't block this process. It requires patience, we expect the public's support."

Atalay said: "All we want is to stop the bloodshed, to stop the killings. We want no more blood, no more tears." Amnesty for fighters and more rights for Turkey's Kurdish minority are key demands of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, which began attacks in 1984 and is labeled a terrorist group by the West. As many as 40,000 people have died in a war that reached its peak in the 1990s.

Turkish law pardons rebels not involved in attacks, but the PKK wants a broader amnesty that would include leaders who operate in northern Iraq, and Ocalan, a reviled figure for most Turks. The group backed the surrender of the rebels on Monday, apparently to test the goodwill of a government that is seeking reconciliation with its Kurdish citizens. The government also keeps a list of wanted PKK insurgents, which would probably bar them from being pardoned.

But the jubilant welcoming of the rebels in guerrilla outfits across Kurdish-dominated southeast triggered angry protests elsewhere in the country. Television showed a veteran soldier smashing his framed medal to the ground and removing and waving his prosthetic limb in protest.

A retired teacher, Hulya Saglam, petitioned military authorities in the northwestern town of Edremit not to send her two sons for obligatory military service in protest, saying "welcoming those who fired bullets at the state with drum beating and music has hurt me," Haber-Turk television reported.

"Giving them a hero's welcome is so wrong," Arinc said.

Atalay said Turkey was expecting the arrival of more rebels from PKK camps in northern Iraq as well as refugees from the Makhmur refugee camp in Iraq, which houses an estimated 10,000-11,000 Turkish Kurds who fled to Iraq in the early 1990s during fighting between Turkish troops and Kurdish rebels. Turkish authorities accuse Kurdish guerrillas of indoctrinating children in the camp to become rebels.

The rebels traveled from PKK headquarters in Iraq's Qandil mountains, which have often been bombed by Turkish warplanes in the past.

FIRST PERSON **BY ROBERTO SAVIO**

Men, conflicts, societies and common sense

Iraq triggered massive demonstrations across the globe, but the ratcheting up of the number of troops in Afghanistan has generated no more than brief debates in parliaments. Obviously the intervention in Afghanistan is far more "legitimate" than the invasion of Iraq, based as it was on false assumptions about the existence of weapons of mass destruction or the false argumentation of Sadam Hussein's involvement in the 9/11 attacks. Nonetheless, it is still significant that the Afghan war, with its high human costs, is accepted as inevitable and that even the world peace movement seems resigned to it.

Man tends to resort to conflict as something natural and spontaneous. Only a society of law and order can control this tendency with any effectiveness. Over the centuries, the values and principles adopted by societies have grown more refined, although we are still far way from what could be considered acceptable. For example, there is growing acceptance of the use of humanitarian intervention in conflicts that affect high numbers of civilians. In other words, it is now thought that wars are not supposed to exceed a certain level of barbarity.

It is worth asking whether or not the destruction of Dresden or Hiroshima could happen again without arousing universal moral condemnation, which the annihilation of civilian as opposed to military targets did not arouse in that epoch. Conflicts are characterized by the level of civilization of the period in which they take place. The more primitive a society, the more frequent its conflicts and the more killing of defenseless civilians, women and children.

Imagine a creature from another planet landing on earth and asking where he was. He is told that on earth societies are divided into nations and peoples. The visitor asks how these nations relate to one another, and is told that there is an institution in charge of global governance called the United Nations that represents all countries and is charged with preventing wars between them, and that it is composed of the General Assembly, the Secretariat, the Security Council as well as different agencies, funds and programs. The extraterrestrial asks what wars are, how do they work? They are conflicts fought with weapons, the traveller is informed, although the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council have veto power and also happen to be responsible for 82 percent of world arms sales, with the United States the leader by far. At this point the extraterrestrial gets back into his ship and leaves in search of a planet with more logical inhabitants and better suited for peace tourism.

It may be because of this lack of logic that major historical events usually awaken people's hope for a better future with a substantive reduction of conflicts and arms trade. The end of the Cold War aroused the expectation of a significant reduction in military spending and thus of a giant "peace dividend" that could be invested in the development of the two-thirds of humanity in the South of the planet. But this dividend never materialized, and today the US is spending as much on weapons as the next 20 arms-buying countries.

The change in power and the inauguration of President Barack Obama has been generally perceived as a crucial time for hope, especially after eight years of a "War President" that was in an open-ended God-driven fight against the evil. But in what refers to military expenditure, legal affairs, or the Afghan conflict, few have changed apart from the important efforts by Obama's administration to reduce nuclear weapons. On the contrary, today's issue is how to increment the troops in Afghanistan. Curiously, in modern US history the only president under whom Washington was not involved in major conflicts was the very unpopular Jimmy Carter.

It has already been 10 years since the UN General Assembly approved the Declaration and its recommendations for a Plan of Action for a Culture of Peace, which is one of the most modern and ethical documents ever generated by the international community. Very little came of it since. Nonetheless, this effort raised the level of the civilisation we live in and makes war all the more detestable. Each wave of peace that breaks against the wall of violence brings its collapse a little closer.

Roberto Savio is founder and president emeritus of Inter Press Service news agency (IPS), as well as DEVNET and others. He wrote this article in collaboration with the Foundation Culture of Peace and IPS, in the framework of the 10th anniversary of the Declaration and Plan of Action for a Culture of Peace 1999-2009.

Iraqi cleric's aide warns of chaos if vote postponed

Barbara Surk
Associated Press

BAGHDAD: A delay in the January parliamentary elections could lead to chaos, a top aide to Iraq's Shiite spiritual leader warned Friday, as lawmakers remained deadlocked over legislation that would regulate the crucial national vote.

Sheikh Abdel-Mehdi al-Karbalaie, the representative of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in the holy city of Kerbala, said the revered cleric wants elections – set for January 16 – to be held on time.

A delay in the balloting "will lead to political and constitutional vacuum and security chaos," Karbalaie said during his regular Friday sermon in Karbala's Imam Hussein Mosque.

Iraqi lawmakers missed a deadline last week to approve new election guidelines for the January vote. The delay has worried many observers, including the United States, who fear that lack of political compromise could undermine Iraq's fragile stability and possibly affect the American troop withdrawal.

A representative of the Shiite movement led by the anti-American cleric Moqtada al-Sadr on Friday demanded a speedy withdrawal of the US forces from Iraq, warning that the continued American presence could destabilize the country that has yet to recover from years of horrific sectarian violence.

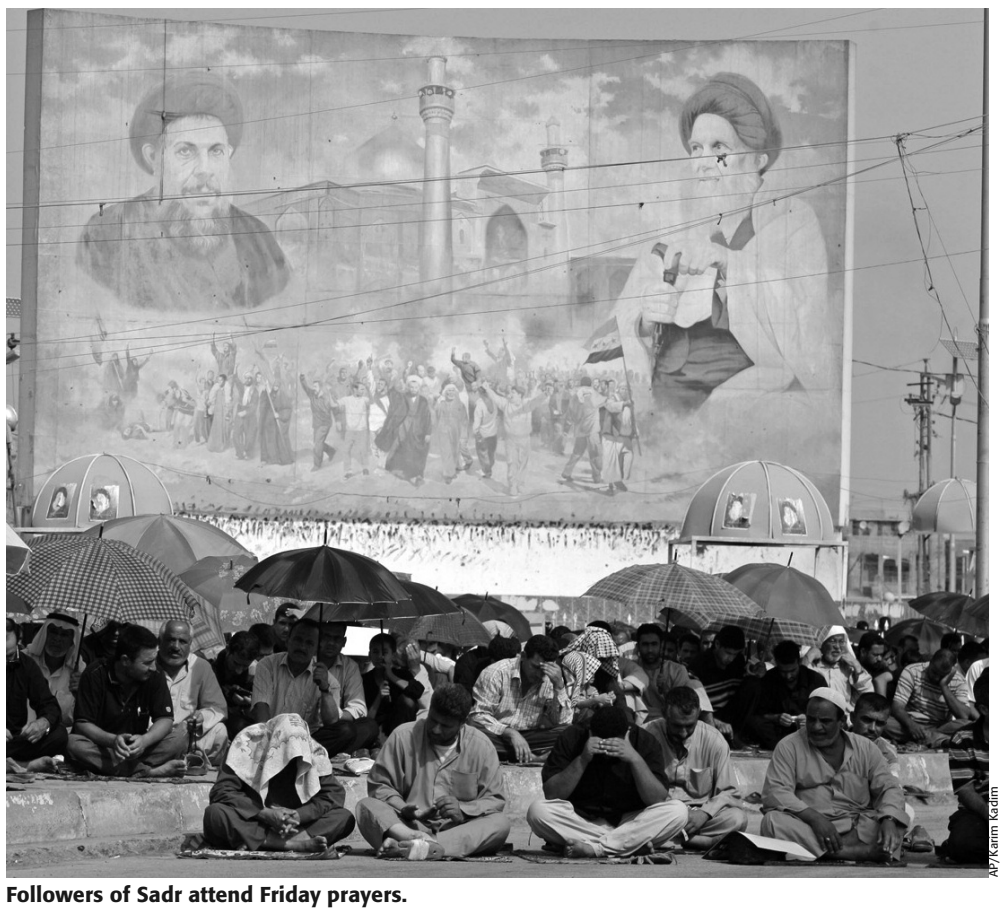
Sadr and his Mehdi Army militia bitterly fought the American and Iraqi forces in the aftermath of the US invasion in 2003. In the past years, thousands of his followers and fighters have been detained during the Iraqi government's crackdown on militias.

Sadr himself moved to Iran over two years ago, leaving the once fearsome militia riveted with divisions and his popular political movement with weakened leadership.

In a message Friday, Sadr demanded "an immediate departure of the American forces in order to preserve Iraq's safety, security and stability." His message was delivered by his aide, Sheikh Harith al-Idhari, during Friday's sermon in Baghdad's Shiite district of Sadr City.

> **Delay worries US, which fears it can undermine the fragile stability**

Thousands gathered in Sadr's largest Baghdad stronghold and in other southern Iraqi cities Friday to commemorate the death of Sadr's father Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Sadeq Sadr. He was gunned down by suspected Saddam Hussein agents in 1998.



AP/Karim Kadim

Followers of Sadr attend Friday prayers.

US DEACTIVATES ARMY ENGINEERING ARM IN IRAQ

BAGHDAD: The US military on Friday closed its command center for the corps responsible for pouring billions of dollars into major construction and engineering projects across Iraq since the invasion.

In a ceremony at Al-Faw Palace in Camp Victory on Baghdad's outskirts, General Ray Odierno, the top US commander in Iraq, led tributes to the joint civilian-military effort.

Underneath a three-storey-high American flag, the US Army Corps of Engineers' Gulf Region Division (GRD) flag was rolled up as around 100 soldiers, civilian consultants and contractors looked on in the palace rotunda.

"For nearly six years now, the Gulf Region Division's mission … has constantly returned dividends not only to our mission and achieving our objectives but to the people of Iraq," Odierno said at the ceremony.

"So congratulations on a job well done – be proud of what you've all accomplished, but understand that we still have work to do."

Since its inception in January 2004, the GRD has completed more than 5,000 civilian and military projects across Iraq at a cost of around $9 billion, according to US Army information.

More than six years after the invasion of Iraq, US forces are gradually reducing their presence in the country as part of a security agreement signed nearly one year ago between Baghdad and Washington.

Under the terms of the agreement, all US combat troops must leave Iraq by the middle of next year while all American forces must withdraw from the country by the end of 2011. – *AFP*

Tunisia upholds Islam but prohibits Islamists … and liberties

Alfred de Montesquiou
Associated Press

CARTHAGE, Tunis: Clad in ample white robes, a turban and red skullcap, Sheikh Mohammad Machfar slips on a pair of large black earphones as he sits behind the microphone in the gleaming new studios of Radio Zitouna. Now one of the most popular talk-show hosts in Tunisia, he happily explains how his programs embody the comeback of Islamic values in a nation viewed as among the most secular in the Arab world.

Named after Tunisia's most famous mosque, the radio airs recitations from the Koran for half the day and discusses Islamic values and culture the rest of the time.

Funded by the son-in-law of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and broadcast from a plush house next to the presidential palace, Zitouna says his station has become the single most popular private radio in Tunisia, with over 12 percent ratings – and clear government backing in a country where any form of public expression is tightly controlled.

"I think our success proves to the people how well the government treats Islam in Tunisia," beams Machfar, a cleric who graduated from the prestigious Zitouna religious university.

The radio's spectacular rise over the past two years illustrates the Tunisian regime's apparent knack for placating popular sentiment while keeping a tight grip on power.

Ben Ali, in place since a bloodless palace coup in 1987, seems assured of a landslide victory in Sunday's presidential and legislative elections. He is running against three officially approved candidates.

The president's Constitutional and Democratic Rally, or RCD, party – which dominates all state structures, unions and media – should also see an easy victory in its bid for Parliament's 214 seats. A handful of small, left-of-center parties fielding candidates are expected to win about a quarter of the seats.

Besides the radio station, there are other apparent concessions to Islamic values, like alcohol-free zones in Saudi-funded housing projects spreading around the capital and an increased tolerance for female headscarves.

Headscarves were banned by decree from public buildings in 1981. However, a court ruled in December 2006 that the ban was unconstitutional.

"Tunisian Islam is very secure, so it's fine," Machfar said.

Even Ben Ali's opponents acknowledge he has steered tiny Tunisia toward economic growth, a large measure of stability and comparatively good social welfare.

> **'They let go of some crumbs to keep the system rolling'**

However, when they are out of earshot of the near-omnipresent police, many Tunisians say the trade-off is increasingly hard to bear: little or no freedom of speech, few public liberties and next to no alternative political choices.

The Islamists have been enduring the brunt of this pressure over the past decade. Thousands are behind bars and their political parties are outlawed – even though authorities now allow much of what they had sought.

"The regime is very good at sensing the mood of the people and letting go of just enough to keep the calm," said Zied Daoulatli, a leader of the banned Hizb en-Nahda movement, who spent 14 years in jail for belonging to an unauthorized political party. "But look at how they do it," he said, pointing at three plainclothes police who had tailed him into a hotel lobby.

Even moderate Islamist parties are outlawed, but officials say it's fair because Islam is the state religion and no group can claim it for itself. And authorities contend that some other forms of freedom are gaining ground.

"Some cases of human-rights violations can be noticed, but these cases don't constitute a systematic violation," Justice and Human Rights Minister Bechir Tekkari told reporters. He claimed that numerous Websites were blocked because they publish either "terrorism, pornography or pedophilia." However, the AP saw that these include Youtube, Dailymotion, and the Reporters Without Borders media watchdog.

There are no more political prisoners or prisoners of opinion in Tunisia, Tekkari claimed, although some 3,000 Islamists are estimated to be behind bars. Most were arrested in a crackdown after a 2002 terror bombing on the tourist island of Djerba that killed 21 people, mostly German tourists.

The state's few outspoken opponents say the slow-paced reforms are above all a facade to soothe Western partners.

"They let go of some crumbs to keep the system rolling," said Ahmad Brahim, the only presidential candidate who voiced criticism during his campaign.

Tunisia is a strong US and European ally. It managed a 3 percent GDP growth rate this year despite the global recession. The small country of 10 million deprived of any significant natural resources fuels its economy with millions of tourists pouring to its seaside resorts, and industries or services outsourcing from Europe.

International benchmarks show it has greatly reduced poverty, achieved strong literacy rates and promoted the role of women in society like no other Arab country, although unemployment remains at 14 percent.

Four Pakistanis slain in Iran Guard attack – report

Aresu Eqbali
Agence France Presse

TEHRAN: Four Pakistani citizens were among those killed in the attack on Iran's elite Revolutionary Guards in Sistan-Baluchestan province, Fars news agency reported on Friday.

On Sunday, a suicide bomber blew himself up in Pisheen during a meeting of Guards and local tribesmen, slaughtering more than 40 people, including 15 members of the Guards.

The bomber struck in front of a local gymnasium where a handicraft exhibition was taking place in the town near the Pakistani border in the southeastern province.

"Four Pakistani citizens, who were near the handicraft exhibition, also died in the incident," Jalal Sayyah, deputy governor of Sistan-Baluchestan told Fars.

He said investigations revealed that the bomber had wanted to enter the meeting, "but fearing he would be searched... he blew himself up inside the exhibition."

The bomber had crossed into Iran from Pakistan a day before the attack, Sayyah said.

"He was trained four months ago in one of [Abdolmalek] Rigi's bases in Pakistan," he added, referring to the leader of the rebel Jundallah [Soldiers of God] group which said it carried out the bombing.

The militant group says it is battling Tehran's Shiite rule to fight for the rights of the province's Baluchi people, who adhere to Sunni Islam.

Police in Pakistan's province of Baluchistan, which borders Iran, said the bodies of five Pakistanis killed in the explosion had been repatriated.

Iranian Interior Minister Mostafa Mohammad Najjar meanwhile held talks on Friday in Islamabad with Pakistani counterpart Rehman Malik, aimed at securing Pakistan's help to crack down on Jundallah and to hand over Rigi.

"We have evidence that shows Rigi easily crosses [the border] and conducts his activities," Mohammad Najjar told Iran state television after landing in Islamabad.

"We have come to ask our friends... to deliver Rigi to us to ease this tension in the Islamic republic and it's of course not good for the relations of the two countries," he said.

A spokesman for the Pakistani interior minister quoted Malik as telling Mohammad Najjar that "Pakistan would never allow its territory for any terrorist activity against Iran or any other country."

> **'Pakistan would never allow its territory for any terrorist activity'**

Malik said it was "imperative that Pakistan and Iran work in harmony for peace in the region."

But the statement made no reference to calls from Tehran for Islamabad to hand Rigi over.

Pakistan insists that the attack was aimed at souring relations between the neighboring states.

Top Iranian officials, including President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, have alleged that Pakistan's intelligence service, along with those of Britain and the United States, had a role in Sunday's bombing.

Iranian state televsion said on Tuesday that three people had been detained in connection with the bombing, but gave no details.

BRIEFS

Obama to make address at major Jewish conference

WASHINGTON: President Barack Obama is making his first major address to the US Jewish community since taking office. Obama will speak on November 9 in Washington at the annual conference of the United Jewish Communities and The Jewish Federations of North America. Conference organizers say the gathering is one of the largest meetings of the Jewish community in the US top Israeli government officials are also expected to attend. Despite criticism from some in the Jewish community, Obama has long maintained that he is an ardent supporter of Israel. – *AP*

Poll shows Israeli PM gaining greater home support

OCCUPIED JERUSALEM: A new Israeli poll shows support for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu growing at home even as Israel's relations abroad grow rockier. Friday's poll shows that if elections were held now Netanyahu's Likud party would win with 33 seats, six more than it has now. The poll gave 28 seats to his closest rival, the centrist Kadima. It also shows that two-thirds of Israelis are pleased with Netanyahu's handling of foreign affairs and 60 percent are pleased with his leadership on security. Netanyahu's hard-line government has seen ties with the US and other allies cool over Israel's refusal to freeze West Bank settlements. – *AP*

Yemen says army commander killed in rebel ambush

SANAA: A Yemeni military official and a provincial official say a senior army commander died in an ambush in the restive northern province where troops are battling Shiite rebels. The officials say Brigadier General Omar Ali al-Issa, who headed an infantry division engaged in the fighting in the Saada Province, was killed along with several soldiers by a rocket-propelled grenade on Friday afternoon. Both officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they are not allowed to speak to the media. Yemen has been embroiled in a five-year conflict with the Shiite rebels in Saada, who accuse authorities of neglecting their needs and of allying with hard-line Sunni fundamentalists. – *AP*

UN chides Britain, others for forcing back Iraqis

GENEVA: The UN refugee agency has criticized Britain and other European nations for forcing asylum seekers from central Iraq back to a region it considers unsafe. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees says Britain tried to deport 44 Iraqi men to Baghdad earlier this month. It says 10 of them agreed to go back, while the others were put in immigration centers in Britain. UNHCR says asylum seekers from central Iraq should be considered in need of international protection because the region is not safe and there are serious human rights abuses. – *AP*

Israel probes pro-settler demo during army parade

OCCUPIED JERUSALEM: A group of Israeli Army conscripts who disrupted their swearing-in ceremony by calling for continued Jewish settlement in the occupied West Bank were threatened on Friday with dismissal. Although Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is in no rush to remove settlements from occupied land where Palestinians seek statehood, Thursday's protest gave voice to nationalists' fears that he will eventually cave in to US peacemaking pressure. – *Reuters*