

# U.N. to Send Team to Baghdad to Prepare for Possible Return

By Colum Lynch and Robin Wright  
Washington Post Staff Writers  
Wednesday, January 14, 2004; Page A14

UNITED NATIONS, Jan. 13 -- The United Nations will send a team of four military and security experts to Baghdad within two weeks to prepare for the organization's possible return to Iraq in support of the country's transition to self-rule, U.S. and U.N. officials said Tuesday.

The decision comes nearly three months after the United Nations withdrew most of its international staff from Iraq after deadly terrorist attacks, and it signals a renewed willingness by the United Nations to reengage in the country. But senior U.N. officials cautioned that it is unlikely the United Nations will play a major role in Iraq's political transition until a new provisional government is established by June 30.

"The return to Iraq of U.N. international staff is contingent on acquiring and upgrading suitable working and living accommodations and enhancing security arrangements," Kieran Prendergast, the head of the United Nations' department of political affairs, wrote in a confidential letter to John D. Negroponte, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. The U.N. team will explore security issues for U.N. personnel who might return and for several hundred Iraqi employees who are still there working with needy Iraqis, he said.

The Bush administration has stepped up pressure on the United Nations to return to Iraq. U.S. officials want the United Nations to help rally support for the American plan to create a provisional Iraqi government by June 30 through a series of regional caucuses. A U.S. delegation including representatives from the National Security Council, the State Department and the Defense Department met with Prendergast in New York on Tuesday to discuss U.S. plans for the political transition and to explore ways to improve security for the United Nations.

The Bush administration said again Tuesday that it does not intend to bend to renewed demands in Iraq that elections, not caucuses, be used to select the provisional government. Iraq's most popular Shiite cleric, the Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, argues that is the only way to name a legitimate government.

"The problem we have is a technical one," L. Paul Bremer, the civilian administrator of Iraq, said on CBS's "Morning Show," referring to Sistani's demand. "There are none of the things that you need to conduct a legitimate and effective election here in the next six months." The caucus method is "not as good as an election, but we believe it's important to return sovereignty and return the dignity to the Iraqi people on the timeline that we've agreed, which is by the end of June," he said.

But in response to Sistani, U.S. officials in Washington and Baghdad are exploring possible "refinements" to their plan, which was agreed to in November by the United States and its handpicked Iraqi Governing Council.

"We're not talking about rewriting the November 15 agreement," said State Department Deputy spokesman J. Adam Ereli. But Bremer is talking with various parties in Iraq "about the modalities or the technicalities" of how the caucuses can be organized to meet "the needs of both transparency and openness," Ereli told reporters Tuesday.

The possibilities include simple solutions such as ensuring that the caucuses are televised to give Iraqis the sense that a new national assembly was created in an open process. The assembly would in turn name a provisional government. More extreme options include expanding the process so that as many people as possible participate in the caucuses, U.S. officials said.

"Everyone of a certain voting age could be invited to a hall to propose candidates for the provisional national assembly, like a New England town hall. The candidates might have to be vetted, but then everyone votes," said a senior U.S. official.

The danger with this option, however, is that it is susceptible to intimidation or bribery to win votes, U.S. officials say.

The administration officials do not anticipate coming to conclusions quickly.

Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld predicted further hiccups as the process unfolds. "There are going to be ups and downs and zigs and zags in the road," he said. The United States, he said, is "very much in favor of elections," he added. "But . . . most outside experts look at it and say that it would be very difficult to have broad elections between now and July 1. And so the question is, is it more important to have elections and, in the event the experts are correct, delay the transfer of sovereignty, or to transfer sovereignty and have elections thereafter and in support of that in some way? And those are things that are going to be worked out."

In the United Nations, meanwhile, the Bush administration sought to head off any new challenges to its political goals by trying to keep the 15-nation U.N. Security Council from participating in Iraq discussions set for Monday, senior council diplomats said.

Officials of the U.S.-appointed Iraqi Governing Council are scheduled to visit the United Nations on Monday, and France, Russia, Germany and other council members are trying to arrange a meeting with them. The United States opposes the initiative, proposing instead that U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan, who is hosting the meeting, or one of his advisers provide the council with a briefing on the meeting.

The dispute underscores Washington's lingering suspicion that key Security Council members, including Russia, Germany and France, who actively opposed the war and who could use the event to reopen divisive disagreements over Iraq's political future.

"Some Security Council members, like the French and the Germans, want to play a more active role" in the political transition, said a U.S. official. "We'd like to avoid the politicization of the discussion that the U.N. body would have with Iraqi participants," added a State Department official. He said that the United States prefers that the Iraqis devote their time to engaging Annan on the United Nations' role in Iraq. "That's what's in our interests," the official said.

*Wright reported from Washington.*

© 2004 The Washington Post Company