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From the Los Angeles Times

Maliki wants U.S. to relinquish condemned men

Three former Hussein aides face hanging for killings of Kurds in the 1980s. Many officials, including two Kurds, want one spared.

By Doug Smith and Raheem Salman

Los Angeles Times Staff Writers

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BAGHDAD — Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Maliki on Sunday prodded U.S. officials to hand over three former aides of Saddam Hussein who have been condemned to die for their role in a campaign that killed as many as 180,000 Kurds.

Despite pressure from within his government to spare one of the men, Maliki said all three would be hanged once their American captors relinquished custody. Though the death sentences were issued in June, U.S. officials have continued to hold the men while their fate is debated.

Maliki said the constitution required the government to carry out the executions and accused those who opposed them of politicizing the judicial process. He also criticized American officials for the delay.

"We won't back down on our demands of receiving them and executing the verdict as was stated by the law," he said.

Several members of the government, including prominent Shiite Muslims, have urged leniency for the late Hussein's former minister of defense, Sultan Hashim Ahmad Jabburi Tai.

Tai was the military commander in Hussein's Anfal campaign, which killed as many as 180,000 Kurds during the 1980s. He was sentenced to death in June along with Ali Hassan Majid, Hussein's first cousin, who is known as "Chemical Ali" for his role in the poison-gas killings of the Kurds, and Hussein Rashid Mohammed, the former deputy head of army operations.

Iraqi President Jalal Talabani and Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari, both Kurds, argue that Tai should be spared. Zebari says leniency would set an example for reconciliation.

Although some Shiite Muslim clerics have urged that Tai be hanged, others have said he was a soldier following orders and that he had been in contact with the country's political opposition before the 2003 war that toppled Hussein.

The death sentences were upheld by an appeals court, but Vice President Tariq Hashimi, like Tai a Sunni Arab, petitioned a Justice Ministry panel to decide whether the hangings could be carried out without the approval of the Iraqi Presidential Council. The council is made up of Hashimi, Talabani and Vice President Adel Abdul Mehdi, a Shiite who also favors leniency.

Maliki brushed aside the petition, saying the executions would be carried out.

In his wide-ranging news conference Sunday, Maliki said the country's improved security was stimulating an economic resurgence that has reduced unemployment to 20% from 60%. He did not provide documentation to back up the claim.

Repeating his assertion last week that the insurgency is defeated, Maliki said the government would move toward amnesty for detainees who had not killed.

"We don't want crowded prisons; we want crowded universities, schools, hospitals and research centers instead," he said. "Start with development and raze prisons."

He said he would set up a committee to resolve ambiguities in an amnesty endorsement in a 24-point reconciliation plan drafted in June 2006.

The plan has languished since then, with key members of parliament's dominant Shiite bloc opposing any amnesty for insurgents from Hussein's former Baath Party regime.

Maliki said he had found a consensus among his legal advisors that amnesty should be granted to those who were lured to support the insurgency, as long as their violations were minor. He ruled out those who had committed homicide or had forcibly evicted people from neighborhoods to achieve "sectarian cleansing."

He did not specify which crimes could be forgiven, but said amnesty would apply to people whose families would prevent them from "committing terror."

Abbas Bayati, a member of parliament with Maliki's United Iraqi Alliance bloc later said that the prime minister was referring not to a general

amnesty, which would require parliamentary approval, but to the release of detainees where there is insufficient evidence to file charges.

The U.S. has about 25,000 Iraqis in custody, after releasing about 7,000 this year. The detainees are often held for several months without being charged.

Iraqi authorities also have detained thousands of people during counterinsurgency operations. It is not known how many remain in custody.

On Sunday, a 12-year-old girl was killed and four people were injured by a roadside bomb apparently targeting an American convoy in the east Baghdad neighborhood of Baladiyat.

Five people were injured by a grenade thrown from a car at a minibus in the Mansour neighborhood of west Baghdad.

The Iraqi army said it killed two suspected insurgents and captured 38 others in several provinces.

The pretrial hearing of a U.S. Army sniper accused in the shooting death of an Iraqi began Sunday.

The hearing will determine whether Sgt. Evan Vela stands trial on charges of premeditated murder, planting a weapon, making false statements and obstruction of justice.

In an earlier hearing, Vela had said he shot the man under orders from his platoon's senior sniper.

But during the superior officer's trial last week, Vela testified that he remembered little of the incident.

doug.smith@latimes.com

Times staff writer Saif Hameed and special correspondents in Baghdad contributed to this report.

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