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AFTER THE WAR: OUTLOOK; Iraqis Plan War-Crime Court; G.I.'s to Stay Until Elections

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Iraq's postwar government moved today to form a special war-crimes court to try members of President Saddam Hussein's government, and the top American civilian official in Iraq said American troops would leave as soon as the government ratified a new constitution and held valid national elections. He did not give a timetable for elections.

"The timing of how long the coalition stays here is effectively now in the hands of the Iraqi people," L. Paul Bremer III, the American occupation administrator in Iraq, said at a news conference here. He also said American officials still had a daunting amount of work to "undo the enormous economic damage" done by Mr. Hussein.

Mr. Bremer said that within weeks, Iraq's electricity system would be producing as much power nationwide as it was before the war, though he emphasized that that would still leave the nation more than 30 percent short of demand, especially in the capital, where the power shortage is hurting efforts to provide power for basic services.

Mr. Bremer's comments followed fresh attacks on American troops west of Baghdad, where most of the strikes against American forces have happened in recent weeks.

In one attack, at 1:30 a.m., soldiers in the Third Infantry Division in Falluja were hit in a "substantial rocket-propelled grenade ambush," said Staff Sgt. J. J. Johnson, a military spokesman. An unknown number of attackers were killed, he said; there were no American casualties.

In another attack, five Iraqis were killed and another was captured after insurgents ambushed American troops near an ammunition depot between Ramadi and Habbaniya, Reuters reported. No soldiers were killed or wounded.

Thirty-three American troops have died in such attacks since May 1, when President Bush declared the end of major combat; 49 have died in other incidents, like traffic accidents and weapons discharges. Another 239 have been wounded, a coalition official said.

A typical day brings about a dozen attacks on troops across the country, the official said, adding that troops are continuing to search for any evidence that they are coordinated regionally or nationally.

American officials are bracing for attacks Wednesday and Thursday, the anniversaries of July 16, 1979, the day Mr. Hussein took power, and July 17, 1968, the day of the coup that brought his Baath Party to power.

As security continued to dominate the concerns of Iraqis and the occupation authority, the 25-member Governing Council affirmed that it would establish a special court to try senior members of Mr. Hussein's government and security services for war crimes. Details of how to set up such a court, who would prosecute and who would represent defendants were left to a committee.

The session of the Council today, closed to reporters and ordinary Iraqis, was again dominated by a discussion of reclaiming Iraq's seat at the United Nations, Council members said. The Council summoned Sérgio Vieira de Mello, the special representative of Secretary General Kofi Annan, and informed him of their plan to send a delegation to New York for a special United Nations session on Iraq on July 22.

Mr. de Mello informed the group that because Spain, a strong American ally in Iraq, holds the presidency of the Security Council this month, he was certain a request for a special session could be arranged. But, he added, the question of where Iraqi sovereignty resides in the transition would be up to the credentials committee of the Security Council.

The Security Council voted in May to recognize the American-British occupation of Iraq and called on the occupation powers to appoint an interim administration. The Governing Council has been recognized as that body, but Western diplomats and some Iraqis say a sovereign Iraqi government will not emerge until elections have been held.

Ahmad Chalabi, the leader of the Iraqi National Congress, said in an interview that he was pressing the issue of granting sovereignty for the interim body in part to defend it against statements from some Arab capitals that the new Council lacks international legitimacy.

Tonight the leaders of the former Iraqi opposition met in a Baghdad hotel to ventilate concerns that the Governing Council is already facing difficulties in projecting an image that is both independent of the occupation authority and representative of the Iraqi people.

At his news conference, Mr. Bremer said the Governing Council would decide the process for writing a new constitution and submitting it to a referendum.

Some members of the Governing Council say a functioning government could be established within 18 months, but the departing commander of the United States Central Command, Gen. Tommy R. Franks, has said troops could be in Iraq as long as four years.

Another small step taken today was the first payment of wages to former Iraqi soldiers, Agence France-Presse reported. Soldiers had been increasingly unhappy over not being paid since the government collapsed.