

ParsBrief

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Anti-MKO protest held in Iraq

Wisam al-Bayati, Press TV - November 18, 2011

Hundreds of Iraqis from different parts of the country held a protest to show their support for the Iranian families who have been waiting for more than six months to see their family members and relatives who reside in the camp Ashraf.

Camp Ashraf, has been the principal home of the anti Iranian group known as Mujahedeen Khalgh organization or MKO since the group allied itself with Saddam Hussein in the 1980s, receiving weapons and training from his regime.

A number of Iraqi officials and tribal leaders were among those who had gathered to have their voice heard. The protesters carried banners with anti-MKO slogans on condemning the MKO presence.

A number of defected MKO members were among the Iranian families, they stated that they have been living in dire conditions and deprived of their rights.

During the protest the Iraqi officials urged the government to expel the MKO members from Iraq as scheduled, saying any delay in doing so may give members of the group enough time to launch attacks against the civilians living near their camp.

Many here are concerned about the possibility of interference by the UN to keep the MKO in the country.

The MKO is listed as a terrorist organization by much of the international community, and is responsible for numerous terrorist acts against both Iranians and Iraqis. The group is especially notorious in Iran for siding with former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war.

Situation at Ashraf

Press Statement
Hillary Rodham Clinton
Secretary of State
Washington, DC

December 25, 2011

Today, the United Nations and the Government of Iraq signed an important agreement on the temporary relocation and eventual resettlement of the more than 3,000 residents of Camp Ashraf in Iraq. We commend the Government of Iraq for its work with United Nations Special Representative Ambassador Martin Kobler, and welcome this important step toward a humane resolution to the ongoing situation at Ashraf. The UN effort has our full support.

The signing of this Memorandum of Understanding represents significant progress on this issue and outlines steps necessary to achieve a peaceful and viable solution for the residents of Ashraf, including their temporary relocation to Camp Liberty, a former U.S. military base near the Baghdad International Airport. At this new location, the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) will be able to conduct refugee status determinations for the residents of Ashraf -- a necessary first step toward resettlement to third countries.

We are encouraged by the Iraqi government's willingness to commit to this plan, and expect it to fulfill all its responsibilities, especially the elements of the MOU that provide for the safety and security of Ashraf's residents. We welcome the agreement by the Government of Iraq to allow the United Nations to station monitors at this new location around the clock and to observe the move from Ashraf to this new location. In addition, officials from U.S. Embassy Baghdad will visit regularly and frequently. We also welcome the Iraqi government's willingness to delay the final closure of Camp Ashraf to give this plan time for implementation.

To be successful, this resettlement must also have the full support of the Camp's residents, and we urge them to work with the UN to implement this relocation. All those who want to see the people at Camp Ashraf safe and secure should work together to see that the agreed upon plan is carried out.

Iraq/MEK: Ensure Camp Residents' Safety

Human Rights Watch, December 23, 2011

Camp Ashraf Impasse Requires All Parties' Cooperation

(Washington, DC) – All parties involved with the UN plan to resolve the situation of Camp Ashraf residents should work to make sure it is carried out safely and effectively, Human Rights Watch said today. Everyone involved, especially the Iraqi authorities and the Mojahedin-e Khalq organization, should guarantee the safe transfer of Camp Ashraf residents to a protected site for refugee status determinations.

“Both Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and MEK leader Maryam Rajavi have issued statements suggesting they agree, in principle, to the UN plan, but both sides remain far apart on the details,” said Bill Frelick, refugee program director at Human Rights Watch. “Successful implementation of the UN plan requires good faith negotiations by all sides, including the Iraqi government and the leadership of the Mojahedin-e Khalq.”

On December 21, 2011, Maliki announced that the closing of Camp Ashraf would be delayed for six months if the MEK agrees to a Memorandum of Understanding for the relocation of the Camp Ashraf residents. However, a December 20 statement from Rajavi, which also agreed to the transfer in principle, set out conditions that have not been agreed upon. Because of the impasse, the prospect still looms that Iraq will stick to its December 31 deadline and use force to close the camp, raising fears for the safety of the approximately 3,200 residents.

Human Rights Watch sent letters on December 15 and 16, 2011, to the governments of the United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Denmark and Sweden seeking their support for the appeal by Martin Kobler, the United Nations special envoy for Iraq, to the Iraqi government to extend a December 31 deadline for closing Camp Ashraf. Human Rights Watch also urged the governments to help ensure the safe transfer of camp residents for individual refugee status interviews, and respond quickly and positively to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon's call for UN member states to indicate their willingness to accept Camp Ashraf residents for resettlement.

"Resolution of the Camp Ashraf situation requires the active involvement by other major players like the United States and the EU who can play a critical role in resettling Camp Ashraf residents and monitoring to make sure they are safe and are treated fairly," said Frelick.

The Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK) was founded in 1965 as an armed group to challenge the Shah of Iran's government. In 1981, two years after the Iranian revolution, the group went underground after trying to foment an armed uprising against Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the former Supreme Leader of Iran. After a period of exile in France, most of the group's leaders relocated to Iraq in 1986 and established Camp Ashraf, although its top leadership remains in France.

Human Rights Watch called on all parties to allow international diplomats, UN agencies, and independent observers to be present to monitor every step of the transfer of these residents to a protected transit site, such as the former Camp Liberty at Baghdad's international airport. Human Rights Watch also urged the UN to continue monitoring the human rights and humanitarian situation after camp residents have been relocated to the transit site.

Human Rights Watch previously appealed to both the Iraqi government and the leadership of the MEK to cooperate fully with the UN to ensure the protection and safety of Camp Ashraf residents. Tension and mistrust between the MEK leadership and Iraqi security forces remain high following two violent incidents involving Iraqi security forces that led to the deaths of more than 40 Camp Ashraf residents, in July 2009 and April 2011. Human Rights Watch has repeatedly called on Iraqi authorities to refrain from using excessive force against Camp Ashraf residents, and for independent and transparent investigations to investigate the two incidents and any crimes committed during them.

The Iraqi government has not opened investigations into these incidents.

The UN Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials states that "law enforcement officials may use force only when strictly necessary and to the extent required for the performance of their duty." The UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms provide that law enforcement officials "shall, as far as possible, apply non-violent means

before resorting to the use of force” and may use force “only if other means remain ineffective.” When the use of force is unavoidable, law enforcement officials must “exercise restraint in such use and act in proportion to the seriousness of the offence.”

Human Rights Watch has also called on the Iraqi government not to return the exiles to Iran against their will, saying they may risk torture or other serious abuse.

As a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Iraq is bound to apply the principle of nonrefoulement. The UN’s Human Rights Committee, which interprets the covenant, has explained this obligation.

The Iraqi government has assured Washington that it would not forcibly transfer any member of the group to a country where they face a risk of torture.

State Department scrambling to move the MEK -- to a former U.S. military base?

Josh Rogin, Foreign Policy, December 21, 2011

The Iraqi government has promised to shutter Camp Ashraf -- the home of the Iranian dissident group Mujahedeen e-Khalq (MEK) -- by Dec. 31. Now, the United Nations and the State Department are scrambling to move the MEK to another location inside Iraq, which just may be a former U.S. military base.

The saga puts the United Nations and President Barack Obama's administration in the middle of a struggle between the Iraqi government, a new and fragile ally, and the MEK, a persecuted group that is also on the State Department's list of foreign terrorist organizations.

The Marxist-Islamist group, which was formed in 1965, was used by Saddam Hussein to attack the Iranian government during the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, and has been implicated in the deaths of U.S. military personnel and civilians. The new Iraqi government has been trying to evict them from Camp Ashraf since the United States toppled Saddam in 2003. The U.S. military guarded the outside of the camp until handing over external security to the Iraqis in 2009. The Iraqi Army has since tried twice to enter Camp Ashraf, resulting in bloody clashes with the MEK both times.

Now the United Nations, led by Martin Kobler, the head of the U.N. Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI), is working with the State Department to convince the Iraqi government and the MEK to open up a new home for MEK members inside Iraq, at a facility near the Baghdad airport. U.S. officials won't confirm, but also won't deny, that facility is a U.S. military base that was recently handed over to the Iraqis.

"Ambassador Kobler and we are working flat out to put together the deal for the beginning of the implementation of his plan, which is to move the people in Camp Ashraf to a new facility," a State Department official told reporters in a special Monday briefing. The United Nations and State are hoping that if an agreement is reached, the Iraqi government will push back the deadline and not invade Camp Ashraf on Dec. 31 and forcibly extradite the MEK to Iran. But time is running out.

"Time is extraordinarily short," the State Department official said. "Oh yes, we're talking days."

The State Department official said the new facility under discussion is near the Baghdad airport, and has extensive infrastructure that "is very well known to the United States." Pressed by The Cable, the official refused to confirm that it was a former U.S. military base, but wouldn't deny it either. "It's a highly credible facility," the official said.

The official could not say if there was any precedent for a group that the United States labels a foreign terrorist organization being housed in a facility built by the U.S. military with U.S. taxpayer dollars, but emphasized that all U.S. military installations have now been turned over to the Iraqi government. The Victory Base Complex near the airport has several facilities that could be used for the Camp Ashraf residents.

Nobody knows how many people are in Camp Ashraf, because nobody can go inside. The residents are also suspected to be well armed. There could be as many as 3,200 people there, according to the State Department. If they are evicted from the camp, some will voluntarily go back to Iran and some will go to other countries. Others still may not actually be MEK members but could be living there for their own reason, making their relocation easier, the official said. The unknown number of "card-carrying members" of the MEK who can't or won't be relocated are the ones who the United Nations and State are trying to move to the new camp.

The United Nations and the Iraqi government have agreed on the basic way forward, but the MEK is not on board, the State Department official said. The Iraqi government won't talk directly to the MEK, and the MEK leadership living in Paris may have different priorities than the people actually living in Camp Ashraf.

Of course, the Iraqis have been warning for months that they would close Camp Ashraf by the end of the year. So why is everybody scrambling in the last two weeks? The State Department is placing the blame squarely on the MEK.

"For a long time, the MEK position was 'here we are and here we stay, period,'" a State Department official said. "In recent days we've had the first signs that the MEK is finally, at long last, beginning to engage in a serious way, rather than simply politically through its many, many advocates. This is a good sign."

Reporters at the briefing wondered why the United Nations and State think simply relocating the MEK to another facility will solve the problem of its status as a terrorist group whose members are unable to get refugee status in a country where they are not welcome. The official said the new facility would be better because it would give the Iraqi government some control over what goes on there.

"[Camp Ashraf] is a state within a state. It is run by the MEK and when anybody else tries to enter, well, we've seen what occurs," one State Department official said, explaining that the new camp would have some type of Iraqi government administration and yet not be in total control of the MEK. "Iraqi sovereignty will prevail with a robust set of arrangements and U.N. monitoring."

Another reason the United Nations and State are pushing for the MEK to be moved from Camp Ashraf to another facility is that the U.N. High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has refused to give refugee status to Ashraf residents because of the MEK's tight control over the people there.

"Many international observers have regarded the current facility at Camp Ashraf as a coercive environment. Independent observers have called it a cult," the State Department

said. "The UNHCR requires an atmosphere in which people can make their own choice free of group pressure. What's happened in Camp Ashraf has not been conducive to this." Advocating for the MEK is a tricky proposition for the State Department, because the organization is on its list of foreign terrorist organizations. The MEK has been lobbying hard for its removal from that list and State's review of their status has been "ongoing" for years.

As part of its multi-million dollar lobbying effort, the MEK has paid dozens of top U.S. officials and former officials to speak on its behalf, sometimes at rallies on the State Department's doorstep. MEK supporters have been stationed outside the State Department non-stop for months now, and are even showing up at Congressional hearings.

Their list of advocates, most who have admitted being paid, includes Congressman John Lewis (D-GA), former Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell, former FBI Director Louis Freeh, former Sen. Robert Torricelli, Rep. Patrick Kennedy, former CIA Deputy Director of Clandestine Operations John Sano, former National Security Advisor James Jones, former Vermont Gov. Howard Dean, former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, former Joint Chiefs Chairman Gen. Richard Myers, former White House Chief of Staff Andy Card, Gen. Wesley Clark, former Rep. Lee Hamilton, former CIA Director Porter Goss, senior advisor to the Romney campaign Mitchell Reiss, Gen. Anthony Zinni, former Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Ridge, former Sen. Evan Bayh, and many others.

The State Department officials didn't say outright that these officials are making the challenge of dealing with the MEK worse by shilling for the organization around Washington. But they did call on the MEK's paid representatives to use whatever clout they have to urge the MEK to go along with the relocation now.

"It is important for those advocates to support a solution that is feasible. Because maximalist demands and echoing a kind of martyrdom and complex of defiance and blood will produce the results they fear. Now is the time for everybody who says they want a peaceful solution to back that solution right now," the official said.

But what happens after the MEK moves to the new facility, even if the current deal is worked out in time? What's the plan to deal with these people over the long run?

"Right now our priority is in a successful, peaceful relocation," the State Department official said. "One huge problem at a time."

UPDATE: The AP reported has just reported that Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has decided to grant a 6-month extension on the closing of Camp Ashraf, although he is backdating the start of the extension to November.

Iranian exiles living in Camp Ashraf agree to move, ending standoff with Iraq government

By Associated Press, December 28, 2011

BAGHDAD — The head of an Iranian exile group holed up at a camp in Iraq said Wednesday that the first of the camp's residents are ready to move to a new location picked by the Iraqi government, solving a potential crisis.

The announcement Wednesday by Maryam Rajavi, the Paris-based leader of the group, averted what could have been a bloody showdown with Iraqi authorities if the residents had refused to move.

“After receiving assurances ... and as a sign of goodwill, 400 Ashraf residents are ready to go to Camp Liberty with their moveable property and vehicles at first opportunity,” read the statement. Camp Liberty is the former American military base in Baghdad that has been chosen as the group’s new home.

The agreement comes as militants this week twice tried to target the camp with rockets. No one was injured.

The Iraqi government vowed to close Camp Ashraf, home to about 3,400 Iranian exiles, by the end of this year. The exiles, members of the People’s Mujahedeen Organization of Iran, one-time allies of Saddam Hussein in a common fight against Iran, favor the overthrow of the Iranian government.

But since the ouster of Saddam they have become an irritant to an Iraqi government that is trying to establish good ties with Iran and sees the group as an affront to Iraqi sovereignty. At least 34 people were killed in April during an Iraqi government raid on the camp.

The United Nations on Sunday announced an agreement to move the residents of Camp Ashraf to a temporary location, but until Wednesday, the exiles had not said whether they would go.

Rajavi said 400 residents are ready to move first as a sign of goodwill. The statement made no mention of when the other residents would go, but the group’s residents are believed to want to stay together. If the first move is successful and safe, it’s likely the rest would be relocated soon.

“The transfer of the first group of residents is a test of the Iraqi Government’s attitude in respecting obligations as professed to the U.N. and U.S.,” Rajavi said.

At Camp Liberty, the U.N.’s refugee agency will interview the residents to determine their eligibility for refugee status, before they can eventually be resettled in third countries. Returning to Iran is ruled out because of their opposition to the regime.

Rajavi’s statement also gave rare insight into a camp that was built during the 1980s and has largely been closed off to the outside world. The group’s residents have not left the camp for years, and the little contact they have with outsiders is through the Iraqi military, visiting diplomats and aid agencies. They do have extensive communications equipment that allows them to communicate with the outside world.

The group’s leader said residents had taken a piece of land in the desert and transformed it into a “modern city with their labor and extensive cost.”

“It has a university, library, museum, hospital, power station, cemetery, mosque, parks, lake, sports and recreation facilities, and underground bomb shelters,” she said.

The group carried out a series of bombings and assassinations against Iran’s regime in the 1980s and fought alongside Saddam’s forces in the Iran-Iraq war. The group says it renounced violence in 2001. U.S. soldiers disarmed them during the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Under the agreement outlined by the U.N., the international organization will monitor the relocation process, and then a team from the U.N.’s refugee agency will be deployed at

the new location to process the refugee claims. The U.S. has said that its embassy personnel will also frequently check on the camp's residents.

Families representing Camp Ashraf residents want fast and peaceful resolution

Anne Singleton, Middle East Strategy Consultants, December 22, 2011

The most unhelpful aspect of the negotiations to close Camp Ashraf and remove the residents from Iraq is that the Western agents continue to act on the myth that the people inside the camp are somehow a single, discrete entity with no connection to the outside world and no say in their own treatment. Thus it is reported without context, analysis or explanation that the Mojahedin-e Khalq will need to be transferred to a separate facility - specifically the former U.S. military base Camp Liberty. Once there they will need to be interviewed by the UNHCR for decisions to be made on their refugee status, with UNAMI overseeing Iraqi conduct at the new camp. And out of this process their futures will be determined.

But even this, 'the desired outcome', is being promoted without the actual cooperation of the MEK leader.

This proposed mass movement of the camp's residents can only give rise to a pseudo angst-ridden hand-wringing which at one time fears mass suicide, at another their mass deportation to Iran, it fears they are labelled as terrorists and will not be 'allowed' to come to the West, and then fears that they will come to the West and pose a security threat. Underpinning the whole Washington-led negotiation process is the basic principle 'how do we conserve the MEK'.

Behind the naive and unhelpful scenario of convincing Massoud Rajavi to agree the mass relocation of his captives to an open camp over which he has no control lies a blatant violation of fundamental human rights which is taking place before everybody's eyes but which nobody apparently wants to acknowledge. This is because focusing on this situation would remove any legitimacy from the negotiations. It would expose the reality behind the myth; Massoud Rajavi is nobody's representative. It would mean acknowledging that Rajavi has falsely imprisoned over three thousand individuals and is daily violating their basic human rights and it would mean moving forward on that basis.

There are currently around 400 families at the gates of the camp. They have come determined to rescue their loved ones and protect them from harm. These are the true representatives of their captured relatives in the camp. Why do they still have no voice? Why do international agencies ignore them and pretend they have no stake in the negotiations and outcome.

Over the past eight years family after family has tried to assert their basic right - to meet with their closest relatives in a secure and private atmosphere outside the control of the MEK. The demand pre-dates the decision to close Camp Ashraf, and will certainly post-date any moves at the camp. Indeed, the biggest scandal is that this demand has nothing to do with the Iraqi determination to close the camp before the end of 2011, but it is still being ignored.

While nobody expected the MEK leaders to welcome the families with open arms, and nobody expected the MEK's callous and cynical owners to care for the individual welfare of their gladiators and slaves, it is shocking that even internationally renowned human rights organisations like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the UNHRC have not uttered a word about this situation. These protectors of human rights may as well have been paid by the Rajavis for their spurious appeals to the Iraqis to 'protect the human rights' the camp's residents. Not one single word of criticism has been said against the Rajavi's blatant and cruel denials of these families' just demands. Not one word of criticism has been levelled against the Rajavis' daily abuse of human rights inside the camp in spite of the on-going testimonies of both past and recent escapees.

It is the urgent obligation of every humanitarian agency involved to prefix the mythical negotiations with the unequivocal demand that Rajavi immediately and peacefully open the gate of Camp Ashraf and allow the people inside to have contact with their families. There can be no legal or moral obstacle or objection to such a course of action.

Anne Singleton is the author of the books "Saddam's Private Army" and "Camp Ashraf"
<http://camp-ashraf.com>

Camp Ashraf deal undermines Western pro-MEK advocacy

Daniel Larison - December 26, 2011

The Washington Post reports on Iraq's acceptance of a new deal concerning the MEK's Camp Ashraf:

Iraq's leaders agreed Sunday to a U.N.-brokered deal that could lead to the peaceful emigration of thousands of Iranian dissidents who have lived in the country under U.S. protection since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein eight years ago.

But the agreement, confirmed by Obama administration officials, has not yet been accepted by the Iranian exiles, who have repeatedly insisted on a U.S. troop presence to guard against possible attacks by Iraqis. Dozens of members of the dissident group, known as the Mujaheddin-e Khalq, have been killed by Iraqis since 2009 in assaults on the desert enclave where they have lived since being invited to Iraq by Hussein in 1986.

Put another way, a path has been cleared to free the civilian hostages that the MEK leadership is keeping in Camp Ashraf to use as bargaining chips in their effort to manipulate American opinion to get the government to change the official status of their group. American advocates for the MEK's de-listing regularly exploit the misfortune of the inhabitants of Camp Ashraf, wrap themselves in the mantle of humanitarianism, and confuse the very different issues of the inhabitants' safe departure from Iraq and the status of the MEK. Naturally, the MEK is not very interested in accepting a deal that deprives its leaders of the symbolism and political leverage that the plight of Camp Ashraf's inhabitants provides, and its American advocates will have a harder time pretending that their advocacy for this terrorist group is linked to protecting the rights of a vulnerable population.

The deal seems to have provided an opportunity for the inhabitants of Camp Ashraf to escape from a country that is understandably hostile to their group, and it avoids repatriating them to Iran or anywhere else against their will:

The official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss diplomatically sensitive negotiations, said the accord would allow the Iranian exiles to move from their remote enclave, known as Camp Ashraf, to the grounds of Camp Liberty, the former U.S. military base near the Baghdad airport. They could then apply for emigration to other countries while under constant watch by unarmed U.N. observers.

This would appear to be a good outcome for everyone except the MEK leadership and its friends in the West.