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IRAC ALLUJAH UPDATE: 18 APRIL
From: IRAQREP

TO IMMEDIATE FCO
TELNO 172
OF 181625Z APRIL 04
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Summary

1. The situation in Fallujah appears to be stabilising with relative calm in the city. Military action is not imminent. Meetings with Fallujan leaders bring progress on humanitarian steps; but differences remain. The US seek guarantees that the security threat will be definitively resolved, while the Fallujans want a return to normality as soon as possible, which they argue will help reduce the security threat. The parties plan to meet again on 19 April to review progress, especially on handing in weapons. CJTF-7 talk of allowing one week for dialogue to yield results. If it does not, they will press for a resumption of offensive operations.

Detail

2. Bremer's deputy Dick Jones and General Weber, CJTF7 Chief of Staff, led talks with a delegation of Fallujan leaders and Governing Council representatives at the 1 MEF HQ outside Fallujah on 16 and 17 April. 1 MEF commander General Conway and Ron Schlicher, Head of the CPA's Office of Provincial Outreach also took part. The Fallujan side included the Mayor of Fallujah, members of the City Council, the Deputy Chief of Police and observers from the Anbar Provincial Council. The talks followed an initial meeting on 13 April and aimed to build on the tenuous ceasefire already in place.

3. Both parties detected the semblance of a real ceasefire beginning to appear: attacks on Coalition Forces (CF) were still occurring, but were significantly reduced and no CF had been killed in the last two days. The Fallujans reported that the mood in the city was much improved, with some shops even beginning to reopen on 17 April.

4. The Fallujan delegation claimed credit for the improved adherence to the cease-fire. They had been able to get the message to people throughout the city, who had welcomed their efforts. The leaders of the armed groups formed a network of unconnected cells, but had generally responded positively; this reflected the whole city's desire for a peaceful solution. Those who continued to fight were either remnants of foreign fighters (though the Fallujans thought most of those had now left), criminals or drug addicts. They were beyond the pale of normal society and would be difficult to control. But the best hope would be to return the situation in the city to normality. This would allow the residents and those who rejected violence to put pressure on these elements.

5. The delegation made a number of requests for assistance:

- allowing access to the general hospital: a US military checkpoint on a bridge leading directly to the hospital should be moved to allow easy access to the hospital;

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- facilitating the movement of ambulances and other vehicles to help evacuate the injured and provide food and medicine to afflicted areas;
- permitting the return of engineers, doctors and other emergency service workers to help manage the crisis;
- coordinating the return of Iraqi Police and ICDC elements;
- withdrawing US snipers from residential areas;
- managing the return of families who had evacuated the city.

6. Conway was able to meet most of these requests. The checkpoint on the bridge was removed on the morning of 17 April. The delegation welcomed this. Ambulances and other vehicles would be marked to facilitate movement. Emergency service professionals would be registered and badged to enable them to enter and exit the city safely. All humanitarian convoys would be allowed access to the city. Conway agreed that re-assembling the IP and ICDC were priorities. Individuals were identified to lead on this and on recruiting new forces. Conway resisted removing snipers, since these positions were being held to secure areas from which hostile fire was still coming. He also counselled against the return of families, until hostilities had clearly ended, though agreed to review the issue in the light of developments.

7. Weber and Conway asked what they could do to ensure the ceasefire was fully respected and to prevent the violent minority from wrecking the process. The delegation responded that if the citizens gained confidence, they would be able to put pressure on the extreme elements. Weber pressed for a specific outcome: handing over weapons, especially heavy weapons, would be a signal of the Fallujans' good intent and of the delegation's ability to deliver. He suggested 48 hours for all weapons to be turned in. The delegation agreed on the need to collect weapons, but resisted attempts to set a deadline. Fallujans were a tribal people who were used to bearing arms: such a deadline could be viewed as provocative. 7-10 days might allow them sufficient time. Jones agreed to set no deadline but proposed an early review and thus a further meeting on 19 April. If sufficient progress were made on handing in weapons and the ceasefire were respected, joint patrols could begin, after which withdrawal of snipers and the return of families could be considered.

8. Bremer held a meeting with the CPA delegation, Sanchez and me on 18 April to review progress. He agreed to give time to the delegation to see if they could deliver on the ceasefire and weapons collection. Sanchez wanted to stipulate a seven day deadline after which military action would return as an option. Bremer warned against an explicit ultimatum which might constrain the President's freedom of manoeuvre but accepted that a week was a reasonable period to expect results.

Comment

9. The situation on the ground is much improved. This has bought time for everybody. It is possible that a major military operation can be avoided. This would require Bremer and Sanchez to conclude that the security threat had been resolved rather than simply postponed. Bremer is not ruling out some form of further military action, but wants to use the next week to minimise its scale by winning the political support of the people of Fallujah against elements who are damaging their interests. Whether he succeeds turns on the degree to which the recent hostilities have so embittered the Fallujans that resistance remains more attractive than compliance.