

Iraqis between 'hope, fear' as U.S. troops withdraw

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Iraqi soldiers march in a parade June 29, the day before U.S. troops pull out of Baghdad and other urban areas. (CNS/Reuters)

Baghdad

Hope and concern. This is how Iraq is experiencing the withdrawal of U.S. troops from the cities, six years after the conflict that led to the fall of Saddam Hussein and a bloody civil war, according to Catholic prelates in Baghdad and Kirkuk.

Today, June 30, the official withdrawal of the U.S. combat troops from Iraq begins and should be completed by the end of 2011. Today, Iraqi forces officially assumed control of security in Baghdad and other urban areas.

"People are worried and afraid for the future," said Chaldean Archbishop Louis Sako of Kirkuk. "Yesterday, Christian families did not send their children to catechism classes for first communion, and neither will they in coming days. They are waiting to see what will happen, they have little confidence.?"

A car bomb has killed at least 27 people in Kirkuk, a northern Iraqi city. At least 45 other people were wounded when the car bomb exploded at a market, leaving smoldering rubble where people had been shopping for food and other goods.

Speaking of such attacks in recent days, the archbishop urged the Iraqi authorities to deal with the situation "with force" and show "responsibility" in managing the transition of command.

Shlemon Warduni, auxiliary bishop of Baghdad, tells of a climate of "great hope" on the streets of the capital, where people are celebrating the withdrawal of American troops with fireworks.

"There is hope for a new era of national reconciliation and cooperation for the good of the entire country, not only personal interests," Warduni said. "The hope is that Iraqis are able to maintain peace by themselves." He did acknowledge also a general feeling of "fear.?"

Internal and external threats and unresolved issues remain the main obstacle on the path to peace. "The people expect reconciliation among political factions, stability, construction, infrastructure projects and the return of

refugees," Sako said. He said he is "sure" that the government will work to "stabilize the situation" but is not so sure that the target will be achieved.

"I'm afraid of the negative influence of the neighboring countries," he said. "The Iraqi army by itself is not yet able to protect order. This is compounded by ethnic divisions exacerbated over the years that have brought deep divisions between Sunnis, Shiites, Arabs, Turkmens, Kurds and even among Christians themselves."

Warduni said he shares the same concerns. "We hope that the Iraqis themselves become aware of the value of unity and leave aside those who want evil and chaos," he said. "We want Iraq to govern itself by its own strengths, political, economic and military. But there are outside interests that seek to foment divisions."

The bishops pointed to the fragmentation that characterizes the Christian community, divided into factions and political parties. "We must set an example for others and take part in the reconstruction of the country in a sign of unity and respect," Warduni said.

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