

Iraq election impasse wanes as court voids ban on 9 candidates

Ruling clears way for forming new government

By Qassim Abdul-Zahra
ASSOCIATED PRESS

BAGHDAD — An Iraqi court overturned a ban yesterday on nine newly elected Parliament members who had been barred by a committee vetting candidates for ties to Saddam Hussein's regime, clearing a major hurdle to forming the new government.

The ban of the candidates, seven of them from a Sunni-backed bloc, was seen as an attempt to overturn election results that handed the Shi'ite prime minister a narrow loss and threatened a further delay what has already been a long, contentious election process.

"All the nine appeals were accepted, and we were informed officially about this and now they have the right to join the Parliament as lawmakers," said the Shi'ite head of the committee, Ali al-Lami.

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki narrowly lost the March 7 election to Ayad Allawi, a former prime minister and fellow Shi'ite whose nonsectarian stance made him popular with the Sunni minority.

But Maliki has challenged the results at every turn, by demanding a recount of votes cast in Baghdad and benefiting by and sometimes appearing to encourage the actions of the Accountability and Justice Committee, which initially pushed for the

ban of the nine winning candidates. If the candidates had been thrown out along with their votes, it could have tilted the election in the prime minister's favor.

The results of the recount demanded by the prime minister were released Sunday, however, and showed no fraud. They did not change the outcome of the election. And with the decision yesterday by the seven-member appeals court of the Accountability and Justice Committee, the challenges to the election results

appear to be coming to an end. In the intervening time, however, the prime minister was able to create an alliance with a rival, conservative Shi'ite bloc that put him in a solid position to create the next government.

Maliki's State of Law coalition has formed an alliance with the Iranian-backed Iraqi National Alliance, and now stands just four seats shy of the 163 seats needed to form a majority in Parliament.

Separately yesterday, assailants disguised in Iraqi military uniforms beheaded a Sunni cleric

and stuck his head on an electricity pole in the town where he preached against Al Qaeda, the cleric's son and Iraqi police said.

The son of the cleric Abdullah Jassim Shakour said the gunman wearing military uniforms came to the family house in the town of Sadiyah north of Baghdad, took his father into a room, killed him, and walked away with his head.

A neighbor said the cleric was known for speaking against Al Qaeda and called on worshippers to fight the militant group during last Friday's prayer.

Search for Afghan plane to resume at dawn

American among 44 passengers on flight to Kabul

By Jamey Keaten
ASSOCIATED PRESS

SALANG PASS, Afghanistan — Dense fog hindered rescuers who fanned out across mountainous terrain yesterday to search for the wreckage of an Afghan passenger plane that vanished with 44 people on board. There was no immediate word of casualties.

One American was among six foreigners on board, the State Department confirmed. The passenger was not immediately identified.

After receiving tips from local residents who heard a loud bang, Afghan authorities rushed to the Salang Pass, a major route through the Hindu Kush mountains that connects the capital to the north.

Late last night, officials said they suspected the plane may have gone down farther south, closer to its destination of Kabul International Airport. A search was to be undertaken in that area at daybreak.

The plane, operated by Pami Airways, a private Afghan airline, was traveling from Kunduz in northern Afghanistan to the capital. Myar Rasooli, the head of



Afghans first searched for the plane in mountains near the Salang Pass. Now it is thought to have crashed nearer to Kabul.

Kabul airport, said air traffic controllers' last contact with the plane was when it was about 55 miles north of Kabul. He said there was no distress call from the plane.

The British Embassy in Kabul said three British citizens were aboard the plane, but did not identify them. The nationalities of the two other foreigners were not immediately available.

Six crew members were among the 44 aboard, according to Deputy Transportation Minister Raz Mohammad Alami, who traveled to the crash site with the minister of aviation and other

top government officials. Ismail, a 35-year-old snowplow driver who lives in a village near the pass, said he was taking a morning break when he heard a crash.

"It was as if there was an accident of two vehicles. I didn't know what it was," said Ismail, who goes by one name.

At the request of the Afghan government, NATO dispatched a fixed-wing plane to the last known position of the aircraft. Captain Robert Leese, a spokesman for the NATO air unit assisting in the search, said the US plane got within 4 miles of the

suspected crash site, but had to turn back because of bad weather.

"The fog was so bad you couldn't tell where the mountain began and the fog ended," Leese said.

NATO helicopters were on standby at Bagram Air Field and at the Kabul airport to assist in any rescue effort, NATO said in a statement. The Afghan Defense Ministry also ordered the nation's air force to be on standby. Ambulances were dispatched to the pass.

When low cloud cover and fog hampered the aerial search, about 70 rescue workers began ascending the mountains on foot to hunt for the wreckage. That foot patrol, which included the governor of Parwan Province, descended the mountains about an hour later after authorities began to suspect that the plane had traveled farther south toward Kabul before going down.

Alami said authorities now believe the plane crashed about 12 miles north of the capital, possibly in the Ghorband district of Parwan Province.

He said the governor had asked officials in the province's dozen districts to help locate the wreckage.

Pami Airways' chief executive officer said the plane was last inspected about three months ago in Bulgaria.

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SENATOR SCOTT BROWN: THE PEOPLE OF MASSACHUSETTS WANT YOU TO HELP PREVENT NUCLEAR WAR

Later this year, the US Senate will be asked to vote on two treaties that are critically important to US national security. The new START treaty with Russia will reduce the size of both nuclear arsenals and decrease the number of nuclear weapons targeted on the cities of both countries. The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) will outlaw nuclear test explosions worldwide and make it harder for more states to acquire or improve their nuclear weapons and for non-state actors to acquire them.

These treaties have broad support among Democratic and Republican defense experts, but some politicians in the Senate are opposing these treaties. No one should be playing partisan politics with our national security and the survival of humanity.

Senator Brown, you have indicated to us, the citizens of Massachusetts, that you will be an independent voice in the Senate. There is no better way for you to demonstrate your promised independence than by pledging now to vote for these treaties, showing your colleagues in the Senate that you will put the future of human life and your constituents' wishes ahead of any potential partisan gain.

Call Senator Brown at 202-224-4543 and ask him to support the new START.

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Calderón could address Arizona law

US visit affords Mexico's leader a chance to vent

By William Booth
WASHINGTON POST

MEXICO CITY — President Felipe Calderón arrives in Washington this week for a two-day state visit that was supposed to be a celebration of US-Mexican cooperation in his drug war. Instead, it is likely to showcase Mexico's frustration over Arizona's tough new immigration law, which Calderón has described as anti-Mexican.

The measure, which will soon require police to check the documents of people they stop for committing a crime and who they also suspect are in the country illegally, has put the hot-button issue of illegal immigration onto the bilateral agenda.

At home, Calderón — who is usually cautious, lawyerly, and scripted in his remarks — speaks daily about the fight against the drug cartels, but rarely about immigration, although roughly 10 percent of Mexico's population lives in the United States.

He has been frank in his condemnation of the Arizona law, however, saying it "opens the

door to intolerance, hate, discrimination, and abuse in law enforcement" and noting that the US economy was built with a lot of Mexican sweat, including that of many in the country illegally.

In remarks to Spain's El Pais newspaper Friday, he asserted that the law is creating tensions between the two countries.

CITES STRAINED RELATIONS

Mexico President Felipe Calderón has been frank in his condemnation of the Arizona immigration law.

In Mexico, the political class from right to left has closed ranks to deplore the Arizona measure, which has dominated front pages and television news here.

Elected officials from the three major parties are exhorting Calderón to challenge it in Washington, where tomorrow he will be greeted with pomp at the White House and feted with high-end Mexican fusion food at a state dinner, and will address a joint session of Congress.

But the atmosphere might be a little strained.

Soon after Arizona's governor, Jan Brewer, a Republican, signed the measure last month, Mexico issued a rare "travel advisory" to its citizens warning them of possible harassment in the state. The law goes into effect this summer.

The governors of the six northern Mexican states that share a border with the United States have denounced the law and said they would boycott an upcoming governors' conference in Phoenix.

The Mexican Embassy in Washington is preparing amicus briefs to support lawsuits by civil rights groups seeking repeal of the measure. The head of Mexico's National Human Rights Commission declared the law xenophobic.

Mexican universities said they would suspend student-exchange programs involving Arizona. And cartoonists here have had a field day depicting an Arizona without Mexicans, where US citizens are forced to cook their own food, cut their lawns, pick their crops, and care for their children.

"So, yes, we don't like this law," Mexico's interior secretary, Fernando Gomez-Mont, said at a forum in Washington this month.

There are an estimated 460,000 illegal immigrants in Arizona, most of them from Mexico. Mexican migrants, legal and not, sent home more than \$20 billion last year, the second leading source of legitimate foreign income in the country after oil sales. Illegal drug sales may account for as much as \$25 billion.

The US ambassador to Mexico, Carlos Pascual, who worked for six months to arrange the state visit for Calderón, has sought to calm emotions, repeating at every opportunity that President Obama and his administration consider the Arizona measure misdirected and are exploring legal challenges.

A former Mexican foreign minister, Jorge Castaneda, now a professor at New York University, has described the law as "stupid but useful," meaning that it may help create momentum for federal immigration reform.

The law also appears to be feeding Mexican frustration — usually expressed off the record — that the United States is not doing enough in the drug war. Mexican officials are complaining more openly that authorities here are under grenade attack by drug-smuggling syndicates while pot pharmacies in Los Angeles sell bags of marijuana to so-called patients.

Authority figures in Mexico are coming under increasing assault. This weekend, a former presidential candidate mysteriously disappeared, and police think that kidnappers or drug gangs may be responsible. Diego Fernandez de Cevallos, a power broker in Calderón's political party, went missing in the central state of Queretaro near his ranch, leaving his empty car and few clues.

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