

Shiite Muslims march in support of early elections for Iraqi leader

By Hamza Hendawi
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BAGHDAD, Iraq — Tens of thousands of Shiite Muslims marched in Baghdad on Monday to demand early elections, the biggest public display of Shiite political power here since the collapse of Saddam Hussein's Sunni-dominated regime.

The protest aimed to send a message to the United Nations and the White House that Shiites will not accept a U.S. formula for transferring power by July 1 to a legislature selected in regional caucuses instead of by a direct vote as the Shiite clergy demands.

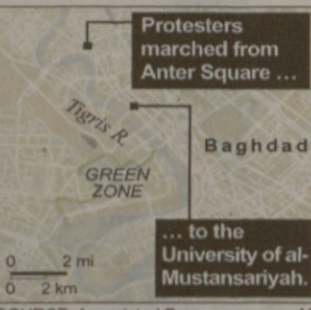
Hours after the march, U.S. and Iraqi officials asked the United Nations to send a team to study the possibility of holding elections in Iraq. Secretary-General Kofi Annan said he wanted more details but acknowledged the issue was urgent. He said he hoped to make a speedy decision.

"On the elections, I have indicated that I ... don't believe there may be enough time between now and May to hold elections," Annan told reporters. "But the team will go down and look into that further and report to me."

The protesters, estimated by reporters at up to 100,000, carried posters of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Husseini al-Sistani, Iraq's

Iraqis stage peaceful march in Baghdad

Tens of thousands of Iraqi Shiites marched through the streets of Baghdad on Monday to protest U.S. plans for a provisional government not directly elected by Iraqis.



SOURCE: Associated Press AP

most influential Shiite cleric, whose opposition to the U.S. plan threatens to delay the July 1 deadline for the end of the U.S.-led occupation.

Al-Sistani also wants an elected assembly to ratify security accords governing the presence of coalition troops after July 1 as well as an interim constitution to take effect until a final charter can be drafted and ratified in 2005.

Shiites are believed to comprise about 60 percent of Iraq's 25 million people. U.S. authori-

ties cannot afford to alienate a community which has so far generally avoided attacks on coalition forces.

"The sons of the Iraqi people demand a political system based on direct elections and a constitution that realizes justice and equality for everyone," Hashem al-Awad, a representative of al-Sistani, told the crowd. "Anything other than that will prompt people to have their own say."

In response, the crowd chanted: "Yes, yes to elections! No, no to occupation!"

Saying he had a message for the United Nations and the U.S.-led coalition, al-Awad told the crowd: "No regime can exist without a role for the people."

Of the protests, Bremer said in New York: "There are demonstrations all the time, some of them not always very friendly to the coalition, I might add, but they're peaceful and we welcome it."

U.S. officials insist early elections are not feasible because of Iraq's precarious security situation, the absence of an election law and the lack of voter rolls. An election could also hand power to well-organized groups such as remnants of Saddam's now-banned Baath party and religious extremists rather than Iraqis willing to cooperate with the coalition.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Non-surgery skin cancer treatment looks better

CHICAGO (AP) — A non-surgical treatment for basal cell skin cancer results in better cosmetic results but might be less effective than surgery at preventing the disease from returning, a study found.

The treatment is called photodynamic therapy and uses skin cream and concentrated light to activate the cream, which kills cancer cells. It is used in Europe, Australia and New Zealand, but a Food and Drug Administration advisory committee last

year recommended against U.S. approval.

Basal cell skin cancer, often caused by over-exposure to sunlight, is diagnosed in about 2 million people worldwide each year, making it among the most common cancers. It is also among the most curable. Surgical removal is generally the preferred treatment, but since basal cell cancers typically appear on or around the face, some patients worry about scarring.

The new study, published in Monday's Archives of Dermatology, involved 101 patients who received either surgery or two treatment sessions a week apart with Metvix.

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