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Iraq Ambassador Warns Against Delaying U.S. Troop Pullout

By Caitlin Webber, CQ Staff

Despite a recent spate of violence, the United States needs to stick to its agreed-upon dates for withdrawal from Iraq, Ambassador Christopher R. Hill told lawmakers Thursday in his first appearance on Capitol Hill since his confirmation in April.

Members from both parties expressed concern that the Iraqi political system and security forces could contain a potential rise in sectarian conflict with the impending withdrawal of all but 50,000 American troops, about a third of the current level, by August 2010 as pledged by President Obama.

While acknowledging rising violence, Hill warned that “any indication that we were not going to move by these dates would be very poorly received by the Iraqi people.” In morning testimony to the House, Hill declined to suggest whether the agreed-upon December 2011 date for a complete U.S. withdrawal should be hastened if Iraqi voters fail to ratify that agreement in the planned January referendum.

But Senate Foreign Relations Chairman John Kerry, D-Mass., said that if the agreement is rejected in January, “we have no choice but to withdraw all of our troops as soon as we can ... I’m not sure how we could justify asking our soldiers to stay one day longer than necessary if they are formally disinvited by the Iraqi people.”

Concerns over a series of attacks in August dominated both hearings, but Hill tried to reassure lawmakers. “There is no question that the security situation remains a challenge,” Hill said. “We have done a lot of work with the Iraq forces and we have a lot of confidence in their ability to manage a difficult environment.” The insurgents failed in their goal to stoke sectarian violence because of the Iraqi people’s confidence in the police and “the perception that they play it fair,” Hill said. The role of Iran and the U.S. responsibility for protecting a group of Iranian dissidents in Iraq occupied a major portion of the House hearing, but were mostly absent during the Senate version. Hill accused Iran of “meddling” and having a “very malevolent relationship” with Iraq. “We continue to see signs of Iranian weaponry finding their way into various insurgent groups in Iraq,” he said. But Hill also warned about overestimating Iran’s role. “I don’t want anyone to be left with the impression that because Iraq has a large Shia population they are in some way Iranian surrogates,” he said. “People have a very strong national identity of being Iraqi.”

Several House panel members urged U.S. forces to do more to protect Iranian dissidents living in the Ashraf refugee camp near the Iran border. The Iranians, members of the Mojahedin-e-Khalq Organization, which had been friendly with Saddam Hussein’s regime, have complained of attacks and abuse by Iraqi forces. “I would hope that you would take back to the Iraq government that there are senior members of the United States Congress that are watching what they’re doing and taking prisoners from that camp in order to do the Iranian mullahs a favor is not acceptable,” California Republican Dana Rohrabacher said. Hill said he would “continue to monitor the situation closely” and noted that the Iraqi government has agreed to protect the dissidents’ human rights and not to forcibly repatriate any of them.

Sheila Jackson Lee, R-Texas, wasn’t satisfied with that response. “Why are we just monitoring the situation? ... There is no excuse for these individuals ... to be condemned and attacked.”

Bob Filner, D-Calif., has introduced a resolution (H Res 704) condemning the alleged violence.