

Kurdistan's Hope for Talks

By Nechirvan Barzani

Monday, November 5, 2007; A19

When President Bush and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan meet today to discuss ongoing conflict between the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and Turkey, we in the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq (KRG) will be

listening with hope. We welcome this meeting. The only solution to this decades-old problem lies in diplomacy.

Let me be clear: The KRG is, and will remain, fully prepared to find a long-term solution to this problem. To this end, we propose talks among Ankara, Baghdad, Erbil and Washington. This is a transnational issue, complicated by ethnic ties, and no party can find a solution on its own. We will sit down at any time with anyone who seeks a negotiated, diplomatic resolution.

We must discard the rhetoric of violence and recognize that a military response to the current crisis would be a disaster for everyone except the PKK. We in the Kurdistan region of Iraq would be slowed on our path to peace, democracy and prosperity; the Turkish army would become bogged down in a bloody and unproductive struggle against the PKK outside its borders; the United States and Western allies would become estranged from a vital NATO ally; and the economies and peoples of the region -- particularly Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq - - would suffer.

We have tried to explain to our Turkish friends that we want only peace and cooperation with them. Our region depends heavily on investment and trade with Turkey. The great majority of foreign businesses operating here are Turkish, nearly all of our construction is done by Turkish contractors, we receive much of our electricity from Turkey and well over 75 percent of our imports arrive via Turkey. Why would we provoke Turkey into a military action that would severely damage our economy?

The history of this conflicted part of the world carries a message: Problems such as the PKK cannot be solved through military means. For decades the government of Saddam Hussein tried to liquidate the Kurdish people by violence, at a tremendous price for both sides. We ourselves fought against the PKK in the late 1990s with help from the Turkish military, and 10 years later we again find ourselves at a crisis point. The mountains inside our region and in Turkey have protected the PKK for decades, and there is little reason to believe that new military actions would be any more successful than past attempts. Problems for which military solutions are sought here seem to have a way of never getting resolved.

We have condemned and will continue to condemn the PKK for its unwarranted attacks in Turkey. We insist that its members lay down their arms immediately. We do not allow them to operate freely, contrary to what some have suggested. Turkey, with its

substantial military capability, has not been able to eradicate the PKK within its own borders, yet some Turks inexplicably expect us to be successful with far fewer capabilities and resources.

Just as we ask the Turks to seek a peaceful resolution, so must the PKK abandon its failed strategy of armed conflict. Diplomacy and dialogue must be given a chance. With time, patience and stability, we believe that peaceful change can occur. Just 10 years ago the PLO and the IRA were considered terrorist organizations. Today they have begun a process of transformation and are working within the political arena. Can such a transformation take place within the PKK? We cannot be certain. But we do know that military action will only radicalize the situation further, and violence will surely breed more violence.

We want peace along our border with Turkey. We want to cooperate on economic, social and cultural issues. We want to be a good neighbor and to exercise our responsibilities as good neighbors. Our successful efforts in cooperation with Ankara and Baghdad to secure the release of Turkish soldiers demonstrate our sincere desire to find peaceful solutions to the problem. We will continue taking concrete steps to improve the security environment at the border. But the Turkish government needs to overcome its refusal to talk to us as neighbors.

The Kurdistan region is the only part of Iraq where peace and development have prospered since the liberation of 2003, and we are the constitutionally recognized regional government in the area. We have come a long way both economically and politically. But much more work remains. We have chosen to become part of a federal Iraq and will uphold that commitment. We threaten no one as we move toward greater development. We hope that we can extend the hand of friendship to Turkey and work together to find solutions to this crisis that will lead to long-term stability and peaceful relations.

The writer is prime minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq.