

Al-Sadr loyalists quit Iraqi Cabinet

By **QASSIM ABDUL-ZAHRA**
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BAGHDAD — Cabinet ministers loyal to the radical Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr resigned today to protest the prime minister's refusal to set a timetable for an American withdrawal, raising the prospect that the Mahdi Army militia could return to the streets of Baghdad.

The departure of the six ministers, while unlikely to topple Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's government, deals a significant blow to the U.S.-backed leader, who relied on support from the Sadrists to gain office.

Al-Sadr, who has tremendous influence among Iraq's majority Shiites, has been upset about recent arrests of his Mahdi Army fighters in the U.S.-led Baghdad security crackdown.

Thirteen Iraqi soldiers, meanwhile, were killed today when more than a dozen gunmen hiding in the back of a truck ambushed their military checkpoint near the northern city of Mosul.

"When the driver approached the checkpoint and reduced speed, preparing to stop for a routine search, all of a sudden more than a dozen gunmen ambushed the checkpoint members and showered them with gunfire," a security official said on condition of anonymity out of safety concerns.

In Ramadi, U.S. forces mistakenly killed three Iraqi police officers today during a raid targeting al-Qaida in Iraq members.

Insurgents

Iraq | Guerillas flock to Baqouba, which might be the next headache for the U.S. military

By **RICHARD A. OPPEL Jr.**
NEW YORK TIMES NEWS SERVICE

BAQOUBA, Iraq — They maneuver in squads, like the U.S. infantrymen they try to kill. One squad fires furiously so another can attack from a better position. They operate in bad weather, knowing U.S. helicopters and surveillance drones are grounded. Some carry GPS receivers so mortar teams can calculate the coordinates of U.S. armored vehicles. They kidnap and massacre police officers.

The Sunni guerrillas and extremists who dominate this city demonstrate a sophistication and lethality born of years of confronting U.S. military tactics. While the "surge" plays out in Baghdad just 35 miles to the south, Baqouba has emerged as a magnet for insurgents from around the country and, perhaps, the next major headache for the U.S. military.

Some insurgents have moved into Baqouba to escape the escalation in Baghdad. But the city has attracted insurgents for years, and particularly after U.S. officials in Baghdad proclaimed it and surrounding Diyala province relatively pacified over a year ago and drew down their troop presence.

When 70 insurgents broke out of a Mosul jail last month, for example, escapees from Chad, Yemen, Syria and Afghanistan were apprehended here, the Iraqi police said. And Sunni fighters continue to heed calls by insurgent leaders to converge here.

It is impossible to say how many insurgents are in Baqouba. Some military officials put the number at more than 2,000, a nasty stew that includes former members of Saddam Hussein's army and paramilitary

handling of demonstrators, who included many elderly people, would fuel a growing sense that the leader is strangling democracy ahead of parliamentary elections in December and a presidential vote next spring.

But the opposition is in severe straits. Opinion polls rate Putin as Russia's most popular political figure by far, thanks to newfound political stability and rapid economic growth fueled by high world oil prices. That popularity has cowed mainstream politicians in the parliament and allowed Putin to strengthen the Kremlin's powers.

— From wire reports

St. Petersburg, Russia Police clash with Putin protesters

Riot police beat and detained dozens of anti-Kremlin demonstrators Sunday on a second day of protests that tested the weak opposition's ability to challenge President Vladimir Putin.

As in Moscow a day earlier, only a few thousand people turned out in St. Petersburg to criticize the government. Opposition leaders called that a heartening response in the face of the huge police forces massed against both rallies. Putin's foes said the harsh

Al-Qaida: Uzbek sources tipped off the French

Continued from Page One

hijacking plot — nothing that foreshadowed the scale of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

"It wasn't about a specific air-

Lines, Continental Airlines, United Airlines, Air France and Lufthansa. The list also included a mention of "US Aero," but it was unclear exactly what that referred to.

Two of the airlines, United and American, were targeted months later on Sept. 11.

Lorenzi said details of the threat would certainly have been passed along to the CIA, though he was unable to specifically confirm they had been.

"That's the kind of information concerning a friendly country that we communicate," he

How's he doing?

Gov. Ted Kulongoski's 2007 agenda

PASSED — Rainy day fund; corporate kicker suspension; state insurance pool for teachers

MOVING — Tax breaks for wind, solar, alternative energy; requirement for state to use 25 percent alternative energy by 2025; tax breaks for biofuel production; "shared responsibility" grants for college students

IN LIMBO — Cigarette tax increase to pay for children's health insurance; guarantee 61 percent of state general fund and lottery revenue for education; corporate minimum tax increase to pay for more Head Start programs

IN TROUBLE — Auto insurance tax to pay for more state police troopers

Voter voices

Oregonians comment on Gov. Ted Kulongoski's second term:

Phil Dekker, 51, Democrat, Portland: "I don't know whether to blame him or the Legislature, but they can't seem to get things figured out. To me, the state tax structure is kind of screwed up. It doesn't seem to be getting resolved."

Elaine Brazil, 42, Republican, La Grande: "I don't think we need a higher cigarette tax. Seems like they're expensive enough. I don't think that's the way we should get health insurance for kids."

Kelly Paul, 34, Republican, Tigard: "I'd say he's doing a good job. I wouldn't want anyone else. I'm a teacher, and he sides with education."

Kulongoski: Funding for higher ed may cause standoff

Continued from Page One

"He's a rock star," crooned Portland environmental lobbyist Stephen Kafoury, jazzed by Kulongoski's all-out effort to pass expansive tax credits for renewable and alternative energy in Oregon. "He has just come alive this session."

Even Republicans note the difference. "It's night and day," says Senate Minority Leader Ted Ferrioli, R-John Day. Ferrioli tempers his remarks, however, by saying the difference is Kulongoski is following a "script" written for him by labor leaders.

Of course, Kulongoski retains a wide circle of critics. Conservatives fault his zeal for new taxes. Evangelicals oppose his support of civil unions for same-sex couples. And, as Ferrioli's comment suggests, there's mounting concern about the governor's close ties to public employee unions.

But snide asides about his leadership style — commonplace during Gov1.0 — have mostly gone away. The changing attitudes toward Kulongoski reflect his conscious strategy to be more accessible this time and an acknowledgment that he's on track for his most successful session yet.

New era, new opportunities

It's not hard to figure out why. In his first term, Kulongoski fought a budget-sapping recession and a split Legislature, divided not just by party labels but by deep ideological conflicts. This time, he's been handed Oregon's biggest budget surplus since statehood and a Legislature in which his Democratic colleagues control both the House and Senate.

Oregon's new political landscape doesn't guarantee Kulongoski will get all he wants out of this session. But he could come close.

Already, the governor has celebrated an agreement on Oregon's first-ever rainy day fund, paid for in part by suspending corporate "kicker" tax

says, Oregonians already have voiced their support for his priorities.

"I ran a campaign for a year talking about these very issues," Kulongoski said. "And I said if I was elected, this is what I was going to do."

During his first term, Kulongoski was dogged by criticism that he wasn't forceful enough in pushing for big issues he and his Democratic supporters cared most about, such as environmental protection and tax reforms aimed at making business pay a bigger share. He developed a reputation, especially during the 2005 legislative session, for being disengaged.

"Last session, the guy was barely perceptible," Ferrioli says. "We were thinking about putting his picture on a milk carton."

This time, Kulongoski has played a much more hands-on role, Ferrioli says. However, the main beneficiaries have been unions and environmental groups — those who backed Kulongoski's re-election effort.

"He's been extremely effective for his constituencies," Ferrioli says, "but I don't think that includes all the people of the state."

Since his re-election, in which he beat Republican challenger Ron Saxton by seven percentage points, Kulongoski clearly has been much more visible at the Capitol, holding news conferences, attending rallies and testifying on bills.

And he seems to be enjoying himself more. First-term reports of the governor brooding in his office haven't resurfaced this year. Previously, many at the Capitol wondered whether the governor's policy of attending all military funerals took a mental toll. That question hasn't come up this session.

Richter Taylor, the governor's spokeswoman, says the governor started changing his approach shortly after the 2005 session ended. She rejects the criticism that he was out of touch, saying Kulongoski spent much of his time working behind the scenes to balance the fractured state budget.

But she acknowledges that the governor talked about "lessons learned" during his first term, deciding the public wants — and deserves — more tangible evidence of his work.

"During the interim, he started meeting regularly with

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