

Chorus Grows for Bulgarians to Quit Iraq

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The execution of two truck drivers has given a massive fillip to demands for the withdrawal of troops.

Pressure is growing on Bulgaria's coalition government to withdraw military forces from Iraq, as new groups opposed to involvement in the US-led coalition join a burgeoning anti-war movement.

Two new anti-war organisations - Citizens of Bulgaria for Bulgaria and Citizens against War - based in Dobrich and Montana, on August 6 issued a joint request for the immediate withdrawal of soldiers from the multinational stabilisation force.

They launched a nationwide petition in support of their demands, which they intend to submit to parliament, the president and the council of ministers on September 1.

Their demands mark a radicalisation of the anti-war rhetoric in Bulgaria. The main opposition party, the Bulgarian Socialist Party, only wants forces withdrawn by January 2005.

President Georgi Purvanov, a socialist, has said the country should redefine the criteria over participation in foreign military operations, in future confining itself to the Balkans.

Bulgaria has dispatched a total of 480 troops to the US-led force in Iraq. Having joined NATO in April, the country has tried hard to live up to the expectations of its new partners.

But two serious incidents since the start of military operations have stirred - and then strengthened - opposition to the government's policy of active involvement.

The first was an insurgents' attack on Bulgarian military headquarters in the city of Kerbala on December 27 last year, which left five soldiers dead and 26 injured.

At the time, the government resisted calls for an open public debate on military participation in the Iraq operation, despite opposition criticism and attacks by some marginal political groups.

However, the second event, a hostage crisis, generated a far stronger reaction. On June 29, two Bulgarian truck drivers were kidnapped, allegedly by the al-Zarqawi group, and later murdered. The cruel manner of their execution - the death of one man was shown on the Internet - overshadowed the government's valiant but unsuccessful efforts to save the hostages.

To rub salt into Bulgaria's wounds, the execution of the drivers coincided with the release by al-Zarqawi of a Filipino hostage in exchange for the Philippines government agreeing to withdraw troops from Iraq.

After initially insisting that Sofia would not give in to "extremist blackmail", the Bulgarian leadership began having doubts about contributing troops to international military operations.

Purvanov first broke ranks by suggesting the government needed to revise the terms for taking part in such missions and questioned the worth of armed involvement outside the Balkans.

The Socialists went further. While party leader Sergey Stanishev said that his party did not question the government's refusal to negotiate with terrorists, it demanded a comprehensive revision of the country's engagement in overseas military operations.

Later, the Socialists submitted a motion in parliament urging the Bulgarian soldiers to return from Iraq by January 2005.

Stanishev said his party's proposal dovetailed with a UN Security Council resolution of June 8, which set a timetable for Iraq's transition to a democratic government and the holding of elections by January 31. The left-wing opposition supported the motion in Bulgaria's 240-seat parliament but, with only 49 deputies, could not push it through.

Stanishev's moves appear to be a nuanced response to pressure from various small communist and green groups, which hold more radical views on the issue and want the immediate withdrawal of troops.

Now, two new civic groups have added their voices to what appears a growing chorus. They have denied any links with existing political forces, claiming their main motive is pacifism.

"If any politician offers support we will accept it," said Nina Nikolova, head of Citizens of Bulgaria for Bulgaria, cautioning that the group was not "here to serve his political games".

Petur Penchev, chair of Citizens Against War, has also refused to align his group with any political party, such as the Socialists. "Their demands for withdrawal are far too conditional, vague and distant in time," he told IWPR.

In reality, however, the two civic groups will bolster the Socialists in their opposition to Bulgaria's involvement in Iraq - much to the annoyance of their centrist or right-wing rivals.

Former prime minister Ivan Kostov complained that the Socialists were indulging in "populist abuse of public shock over the tragedy of two cruelly murdered men".

The head of the Democrats for Free Bulgaria, a right-wing opposition party, qualified the Socialists' motion in parliament as an invitation "to give in to terrorists' demands for withdrawal - but only half a year later".

How far the Socialists can go in their demands, and how serious pressure is becoming for withdrawal is not clear, as observers vary in their interpretation of the current popular mood.

They agree only that no dramatic policy change on Iraq is likely before the next parliamentary elections, planned for July 2005.

The Socialists seem unlikely to go beyond verbal criticism of government policy on Iraq. Significantly, when Stanishev recently visited the United States, the issue of Iraq was noticeably absent from his rhetoric.

Andrey Raychev, a political scientist affiliated with Gallup International, says Stanishev probably told his US hosts he would not openly support Bulgarian participation in Iraq, but would not make serious obstacles, either.

Stoyana Georgieva, editor of Mediapool.bg, an online analytical publication, sees the picture differently. The Socialists, she says, actively undermine government policy, "Their campaigning might be a pretence and their wording tempered, but they are nourishing public discontent with the country's involvement in Iraq."

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