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Russia: Putin Calls For Withdrawal Timetable For Iraq

By Claire Bigg



President Vladimir Putin (file photo)
(CTK)

Russian President Vladimir Putin called yesterday for a timetable for pulling foreign troops out of Iraq. The Russian leader said many Iraqis view the foreign troops as "occupiers" and suggested the withdrawal will encourage insurgents to abandon violence in favor of contributing to the creation of the state. The United States was quick to reject his call, saying it is still too early for a pullout.

Moscow, 19 August 2005 (RFE/RL) -- Speaking to reporters in the Black Sea resort of Sochi after a meeting with Jordan's King

Abdullah, Putin first reiterated his call for an international conference on Iraq.

Putin disapproves of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and insists such a conference might help bring peace to the strife-torn country.

Then the Russian president went one step further. He said it is imperative to draw up a timetable for the withdrawal of foreign troops from Iraq.

"We deem it necessary to work out a timetable for the gradual withdrawal of foreign troops from Iraq," Putin said. "Many Iraqis, we know this well, still consider these forces to be occupiers."

Encouraging Iraqi insurgents to take part in their country's political process, he added, is another argument in favor of a swift pullout.

"Resolving this task will enable a significant part of the armed Iraqi resistance to be brought into the process of creating a state," Putin said.

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President George W. Bush has consistently rebuffed international calls to set a schedule for withdrawing the 138,000 U.S. troops from Iraq. Putin's plea was no exception.

A few hours after the Russian president's statement, U.S. State Department spokesman Sean McCormack told a news briefing in Washington that Iraq was not yet ready for a withdrawal of foreign troops.

"I think [U.S.] President [George W.] Bush has spoken very clearly on our views on the issue of security assistance to the Iraqis," McCormack said. "As Iraqis stand up [increase] their capabilities, we and the multinational forces will be able to stand down [withdraw]."

McCormack also suggested the United States had little intention to hold an international conference on Iraq by the end of the year, as Putin proposed.

"We did, recently, have an international conference that was organized in Brussels, which had great attendance from around the world, from around the region, from Europe -- there was a delegation from Russia there, I believe, as well -- in which countries came together to express support for Iraq," McCormack said.

Putin has openly opposed the Iraq war. But this is the first time he has made such a clear-cut statement on the withdrawal of foreign troops from Iraq.

Putin's statement comes just days after Russia carried out military exercises in the Barents Sea during which new intercontinental ballistic missiles were tested.

Yevgenii Volk, a political analyst and the director of Moscow's Heritage Foundation think tank, said both events indicate Putin might be trying to gain more influence in world affairs by flexing his country's military muscle.

"It is significant that the declaration was made directly after the Northern Fleet's military exercises where, whatever people might say, scenarios of an atomic war with the U.S. were developed," Volk said. "This [declaration] is clearly a display of strength, and Putin is showing that Russia's military power must and can translate into the strengthening of its political influence, no matter where the area of conflict is located."

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Russia and China also launched unprecedented joint military exercises yesterday amid U.S. concerns that the two giants might form a military alliance.

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