

Talabani: U.S. presence needed through '08

by UPI

WASHINGTON -- Some benchmarks showing progress in restoring peace in Iraq should be reached by the end of the year, Iraqi President Jalal Talabani says.

"We are committed to do something tangible within (the) next weeks and months" and would meet them by the end of 2007, not September as recommended, Talabani said during an interview in Iraq aired Sunday on ABC's "This Week With George Stephanopoulos."

While rebuilding an army after a regime's collapse "is not so easy," he said he believed the Iraqi army will be ready to defend the country by the end of 2008.

"I agree to put constructive pressure on (the) Iraqi government, but I think we must be realistic," Talabani said his Friday interview with Stephanopoulos.

Despite reports to the contrary, Talabani said Iraqis want an American military presence at least in the near term.

"(The) majority of the political forces who are represented in Parliament and in the political council of national security have voted for having American forces stay," he said.

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