Iraq's Basra to Ban Beggars to Prevent Attacks

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BASRA, Iraq (Reuters) -- Iraq's southern oil hub of Basra will ban beggars from streets and other public places to help prevent attacks in the lead up to a parliamentary election in March, a security official said on Tuesday.

Like most of Iraq, security has improved greatly in Basra, which was controlled by Shi'ite militiamen until U.S. and Iraqi military offensives in 2008, but some fear an outbreak of attacks before the vote on March 7.

"The decision will be implemented within days to include all streets and public places and will require the arrest of beggars, who will be released for a fine," Ali Ghanim al-Maliki, head of the security committee at the provincial council, said.

"This decision is based on fears and real information from security operatives about the possibility of (militants) using some beggars or disguising themselves as beggars to conduct attacks that target officials or candidates for the election."

Iraq is trying to cement security gains made over the last two years, ramp up oil production to fill government coffers and boost development after more than 6-1/2 years of war preceded by years of sanctions and underinvestment.

Attacks by suspected Sunni Islamist insurgents continue and are expected to increase ahead of the vote while political infighting among Shi'ite factions in the south could also lead to more bloodshed.

Most of the world's third largest oil reserves are in the south near Basra, and the predominantly Shi'ite city is considered an important barometer of voter sentiment in Iraq.

Despite sitting on top of Iraq's largest oil reservoirs, Basra remains a decrepit city. Beggars crowd many intersections demanding money from drivers. Women hold out babies seeking alms.

Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's Shi'ite-led government is likely to run on the improved security and a raft of crude deals signed with oil majors that could turn Iraq into a top three global hydrocarbons producer, from 11th currently.

But the security situation in Iraq remains tenuous. Coordinated bombings of government buildings and hotels over the last six months have killed hundreds of people.

On Monday, a suicide bomber killed at least 41 Shi'ite pilgrims when she blew herself up at a tent serving food to Iraqis on an arduous religious trek.

Maliki's competitors are likely to point to the attacks to criticise his leadership and to highlight slow progress in other fields, such as the electricity sector.

His main rival is the Iraqi National Alliance (INA), led by a powerful Shi'ite political movement, though both his slate and the INA have projected themselves as nationalists and include other sects and groups.

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