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RELEASE NEWS

THE PUBLIC AFFAIRS SECTION/EMBASSY OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

ELECTIONS IN IRAQ

Op-Ed by Ambassador Reno Harnish

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On January 30th, one year and ten months after Iraqis were liberated from the tyranny of Saddam Hussein, they will go to the polls to take the first decisive step toward building the free, democratic society that the vast majority of Iraqi's desire. In polling stations across Iraq and around the world, Iraqi citizens will be able to cast their ballots and make their individual contributions to Iraq's democratization. Finally, after a 30-year nightmare of repression, torture and murder, the people of Iraq will begin taking charge of their own lives and future.

From start to finish, these elections are being run by Iraqis, for Iraqis. The Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq has certified approximately 111 parties, coalitions and individuals who will compete for 275 seats on the Transitional National Assembly. This Assembly will in turn choose a president and two vice presidents, who will then select a Prime Minister. The Transitional National Assembly will also draft a constitution, which will be put to a public referendum in October 2005. By December 2005, Iraqis will return to the polls to elect a new national government under the auspices of their newly enacted constitution.

In the January 30 election, Iraqis will also vote for representatives to Iraq's 18 provincial councils, and to the Kurdistan National Assembly, thereby spreading and instilling democracy even deeper into the fabric of Iraqi society.

The stakes are high and clearly understood by everyone. While surveys show that the vast majority of Iraqis want to vote in these elections, the enemies of a free, stable and prosperous Iraq believe they have no stake in a future of freedom. The evidence of their fury is all too evident in the form of car bombs, assassinations, kidnappings and intimidation. As the election draws near, unfortunately, this violence is likely to intensify. Every individual Iraqi of voting age, regardless of religious or ethnic affiliation, must make a choice and a decision whether they will vote to move their country forward towards the path of freedom, or yield to the threats and oppression of those who seek to undermine Iraq's future.

Now, as Iraq approaches the elections, people everywhere can take heart in the courage shown each day by ordinary Iraqis. The true Iraqi patriots are the people who continue to

get up and go to work for a better future. They are the people who stand in line to become police officers and national guardsmen, despite the fact that their colleagues have been abducted and murdered. They are the people who drive to their offices, past the same checkpoints at which suicide bombers struck and killed innocent victims the day before. They are the Iraqis who care for orphaned children, rebuild sewers and electrical stations, lay new roads, teach in schools, and work for a brighter future. As they seek to realize their hopes and aspirations for a better Iraq through elections, they deserve the world's respect and full support.

Building the democracy desired by a large majority of Iraqis will require persistence and patience. It will require firmness in the face of those who advocate postponement of the elections. Postponement at this stage will only encourage the forces of destruction and despair. Successful elections, on the other hand, will land a serious blow on these forces. If the Iraqi people have the courage to move forward and cast their ballots for a democratic Iraq, then we, too, must show the same resolve, supporting their effort as they take on this next challenge in their transition to democracy.