

Britain to boost troop amounts in Afghanistan

Levels will increase by at least 4,000

By Ed Johnson
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

LONDON
Britain will send about 4,000 troops, four times its current deployment, to Afghanistan in coming months as a NATO mission expands into a dangerous region rife with Taliban and al-Qaida insurgents, the government said Thursday.

Britain now has about 1,000 troops in Afghanistan. That would peak at about 5,700 but drop to less than 4,700 after engineers complete building a base for troops by July, Defense Secretary John Reid said.

He told the House of Commons that the mission in southern Afghanistan was dangerous, and warlords and drug trafficking gangs were active in the region.

"Those risks are as nothing compared to the dangers to our country and our people of allowing Afghanistan to fall back into the hands of the Taliban and the terrorists," he said.

The deployment would not lead to a withdrawal of troops in Iraq, where Britain has an 8,500-strong force, he said.

The Afghanistan deployment comes as NATO expands its peacekeeping mission there from 9,000 to about 16,000 troops. The alliance will be responsible for security in about three-quarters of the country, while the separate U.S.-led combat force hunts down Taliban insurgents.

In May, Britain takes control of NATO's International Security Assistance Force based in the capital, Kabul. As the alliance pushes south, it will command a forward support base in the southern city of Kandahar.

Britain's defense ministry said some 3,300 troops would form a reconstruction team in Helmand, a volatile southern province and an important center of Afghan opium production.

"We are working to ensure we provide the Afghans with a seamless package of democratic, politi-



AP PHOTO
Defense Secretary John Reid, seen in London on Thursday, told the House of Commons that more British troops need to be sent to Afghanistan.

cal and military assistance in Helmand," Reid said.

The military will be doing "all that is necessary to ensure that international terrorism never again has a base in Afghanistan," he said.

This year has been the deadliest in Afghanistan since U.S.-led forces ousted the Taliban in 2001 for harboring Osama bin Laden. The fighting has killed more than 1,500 people as militants belonging to the Taliban, al-Qaida and other groups have stepped up attacks.

Reid said the NATO mission would be multinational, including troops from Canada, Australia and Denmark. The Netherlands is supposed to play a major role, but the Dutch government is waiting for backing from a divided parliament before it can approve the plan.

President Bush this month said he plans to cut U.S. troops in Afghanistan from 19,000 to 16,500 over 2006 as the NATO force expands.



AP PHOTO
U.S. troops Sgt. Eric Olsen, Staff Sgt. Jason Depp and Staff Sgt. Craig Harmon patrol in Mosul, Iraq, on Friday. On Thursday, U.S. Gen. George Casey said that U.S. forces have been stretched by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan but that the soldiers can accomplish their missions.

General: Troops stretched thin

President says commanders will have enough to win in Iraq

By Nick Wadhams
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DIWANIYAH, Iraq

The top U.S. general in Iraq acknowledged Thursday that American forces are stretched but said troop withdrawals will be dictated by war strategy and not the strain faced by the soldiers.

Gen. George Casey's remarks contrasted with statements made on Wednesday by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who disputed findings of an unreleased study conducted for the Pentagon that said the Army is overextended because of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. President Bush shrugged off the report Thursday.

"The forces are stretched ... and I don't think there's any question of that," Casey said of U.S. military, which has about 155,000 troops in Afghanistan and Iraq. "But the Army has

OTHER NEWS

The U.S. military released five Iraqi women detainees Thursday, a move demanded by the kidnappers of American reporter Jill Carroll to spare her life, but an official said the release was coincidental.
The women were freed from U.S. custody and delivered to the home of a senior Sunni Arab politician in Baghdad, where they were returned to their families.

Two U.S. soldiers were killed in separate attacks Wednesday. One was killed and another wounded by a roadside bomb blast south of Baghdad, while a soldier assigned to U.S. Marines operating in western Iraq died from wounds sustained by a rocket attack on his vehicle near Ramadi.

been for the last several years going through a modernization strategy that will produce more units and more ready units."

Casey spoke after attending a ceremony in which Polish troops transferred leadership of the south-central region of Iraq they control to Iraqi forces, the first such large-scale handover since the Iraq war began in 2003.

The transfer of authority for

the Multinational Division-Center South, which includes about 25 percent of the country, was part of a larger U.S.-led coalition strategy to build up the Iraqi army and give it greater control ahead of a future withdrawal.

Casey told reporters he had discussed whether troops were stretched too thin with Gen. Peter J. Schoomaker on Wednesday and that the Army

chief of staff believes he can still sustain missions around the world. Casey, too, was adamant that the troops, including more than 130,000 in Iraq, were getting the job done.

"So, yep, folks are stretched here, but they certainly accomplish their mission, and the forces that you've seen on the ground are absolutely magnificent," Casey told reporters outside the hall where the transfer ceremony took place.

U.S. officials in Iraq said Casey was referring to strains within the Army worldwide and not specifically in Iraq.

Bush was asked about the subject at a news conference Thursday.

"If the question is whether or not we can win victory in Iraq, our commanders will have the troops necessary to do that. If the question is: Can we help keep the peace in a place like the Far East? Absolutely," Bush said.

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