

U.S.: Troop buildup in Afghanistan will extend into 2008

By ROBERT BURNS
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

RAMSTEIN AIR BASE, Germany

The Pentagon plans to extend its buildup of several thousand combat troops in Afghanistan, initially announced as lasting until late spring, well into next

year, a senior U.S. military official said Friday.

The move comes as U.S. and allied commanders anticipate a renewed offensive this spring by the Taliban, and as they seek additional reinforcements from NATO countries. The effort to bolster forces there so far has brought only limited success,

with a few nations promising handfuls of additional troops and equipment.

The extension of the U.S. buildup means American troop levels in Afghanistan, which increased this month to about 26,000, the highest of the war, will remain roughly the same until at least spring 2008. Until now, a

level of 22,000 to 23,000 had prevailed through much of last year.

The decision, expected to be announced in Washington as early as next week, entails sending an Army combat brigade to replace the 3rd Brigade of the 10th Mountain Division when it leaves this spring.

Without replacing that brigade,

the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan would have receded to the lower level. That is because the United States has had extra troops in the country since earlier this month, when a brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division arrived.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because the

decision has not been announced, declined to identify the replacement brigade.

There are about 3,500 soldiers in a brigade.

The move comes as the United States is also adding 21,500 troops to its forces in Iraq, which totaled around 130,000 before that buildup started.

THE WAR IN IRAQ

U.S. airstrike mistakenly kills at least 5 Kurds



British Army vehicles block a road near Basra, Iraq, about 340 miles southeast of Baghdad on Friday after a British convoy was hit by a roadside bomb. One British soldier was killed and three were injured, the British military said. More than 100 Brits have been killed in the war.

Roadside bomb in southern Iraq kills British soldier

By KIM GAMEL
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BAGHDAD, Iraq

U.S. helicopters targeting insurgents mistakenly killed at least five allied Kurdish militiamen in the northern city of Mosul early Friday. The military also reported three more American soldiers killed in combat, pushing the U.S. death toll to 33 in the first eight days of the month.

Officials said the Kurds were killed about midnight as they guarded a branch of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, a political party led by Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, a key supporter of U.S. efforts in Iraq.

The U.S. military said the strike was launched after American ground forces spotted armed men in a bunker near a building they thought was being used to

make bombs for al-Qaida in Iraq. The troops called out in Arabic and Kurdish telling the men to put down their weapons and also fired warning shots before the helicopters opened fire.

Five men later determined to be Kurdish police officers were killed and nine others were detained, the U.S. military said, offering condolences to the families of those who died. Kurdish officials put the casualty toll at eight killed and six wounded.

Kurdish lawmaker Mahmoud Othman denounced the airstrike.

"This is not a good sign for the new security plan that they (U.S. forces) have started," he said.

However, a spokesman for the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, Azad Jundiyan, said the party realized the airstrike was a mistake.

"We are allied with the coalition; it

was a friendly fire incident, not an intentionally hostile act," he said.

Jundiyan identified the dead as peshmerga: Kurdish militiamen who once battled Saddam Hussein's regime. Many peshmerga have been incorporated into the Iraqi army since the U.S.-led invasion. U.S. and British forces also face mounting casualties as they step up their presence to shore up Iraqi forces.

Three more American soldiers died Thursday in fighting in Anbar province, the U.S. military said Friday.

In southern Iraq, a roadside bomb killed a British soldier, raising the number of British combat deaths since the war started to 101. Three Britons also were wounded.

Among the Americans killed this month were seven who died when a CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter crashed in Anbar on Wednesday.

Gates: U.S. has evidence of Iranian involvement in aiding Iraqi insurgents

By LOLITA C. BALDOR
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

MUNICH, Germany

Serial numbers and other markings on bombs suggest that Iranians are linked to deadly explosives used by Iraqi militants, Defense Secretary Robert Gates said Friday in some of the administration's first public assertions on evidence the military has collected.

While the Bush administration and military officials have repeatedly said Iranians have been tied to terrorist bombings in Iraq, they have said little about evidence to bolster such claims, including any documents and other items collected in recent raids in Iraq.

The assertions have been met with

skepticism by some lawmakers still fuming over intelligence reports used by the administration to propel the country to war with Iraq in 2003. Gates' comments came as a new Pentagon inspector general's report criticized prewar Defense Department assertions of al-Qaida connections to Iraq.

Gates told reporters Friday that markings on explosives provide "pretty good" evidence that Iranians are supplying either weapons or technology for Iraqi extremists.

"I think there's some serial numbers, there may be some markings on some of

the projectile fragments that we found" that point to Iran, he said.

Gates' remarks left unclear how the U.S. knows the serial numbers are traceable to Iran and whether such weapons would have been sent to Iraq by the Iranian government or by private arms dealers.

Explosives have been a leading killer of U.S. forces in Iraq, where more than 3,000 servicemen and women have died in the nearly four-year-old war.

Last week, Gates said that U.S. military officers in Baghdad had been planning to brief reporters on what was known about Iranian involvement in Iraq but that he and other senior officials had delayed the briefing to assure the information was accurate.

Unauthorized, they did not provide the most accurate analysis of intelligence to senior decision-makers at a time when the White House was moving toward war with Iraq.

At the White House, spokesman Dana Perino said President Bush has revamped the U.S. spy community to try avoiding a repeat of flawed intelligence affecting policy decisions by creating a director of national intelligence.

Pentagon concludes some prewar intelligence work inappropriate but legal

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON

Pentagon officials undercut the intelligence community in the run-up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq by insisting in briefings to the White House that there was a clear relationship between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaida, the Defense Department's inspector general said Friday.

Acting Inspector General Thomas F. Gimble told the Senate Armed Services Committee that the office headed by former Pentagon policy chief Douglas J. Feith took "inappropriate" actions in advancing conclusions on al-Qaida connections not backed up by the nation's intelligence agencies.

Gimble said that while the actions of the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy were not illegal or



GATES

Palestinians hopeful pact ends bloodshed

By SARAH EL DEEB
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip

Palestinians in Gaza were cautiously hopeful Friday that a new power-sharing deal would end months of deadly factional violence, but a Hamas leader's defiant vow to push on with the militant group's war against Israel was a stark reminder of how difficult it will be to make the accord stick.

Not only was there concern whether both sides would hold their fire, but the muted international response left many wondering whether the agreement between Hamas and the more moderate Fatah party of President Mahmoud Abbas would be enough to end crippling sanctions on the Palestinian government.

"Our situation has become really difficult. ... We need this agreement," said Mohammed Abdel Aziz, a 55-year-old restaurant owner in Gaza's Shati refugee camp.

Tensions between Fatah and Hamas, a radical Islamic group that calls for Israel's destruction, soared after Hamas won parliamentary elections last year. The elections divided the government and sparked street battles in Gaza that have killed more than 130 people.

Negotiations for a unity government repeatedly broke down in disagreements over powerful ministries and how far the government would go toward recognizing Israel, one of three Western conditions for lifting the sanctions imposed after the elec-



From left, Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh pray in Mecca after going over the guidelines of an agreement Friday.

tions. The West also demanded that Hamas accept past agreements with Israel and renounce violence.

Late Thursday, the two sides finally reached agreement during talks in the Muslim holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia.

"We have left behind all those black days forever and started a new page on a new government and a new way in Palestine," Abbas said.

The platform says the new government pledges to "respect" previous deals, instead of "abide by" them, as Abbas initially demanded.

Gazans welcomed the deal with euphoria and celebratory gunfire, hoping it will end the internal feuding that has kept them huddled in their homes in fear.

Israeli police, Muslim rioters clash at Jerusalem holy site

By DIAA HADID
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

JERUSALEM

Anger over Israeli construction near a disputed Jerusalem holy site erupted into violence Friday as police used tear gas and stun grenades to disperse thousands of rioting Muslims. Protests spread in the Arab world, with demonstrators accusing Israel of plotting to harm Islamic shrines.

The clashes began after Friday prayers, when Muslims at the site began throwing rocks at police stationed outside, according to Jerusalem police spokesman Shmuel Ben Ruby.

About 200 riot police streamed onto the compound, known to Muslims as the Noble Sanctuary and to Jews as the Temple Mount. The officers scuffled with some of the 3,000 Muslim worshippers. Clouds of tear gas rose into the sky.

Outside the compound near Lion's Gate, hundreds of teenagers who had been barred from the Al Aqsa mosque hurled stones, iron bars, vegetables and at least one firebomb at police, authorities said. Police responded with stun grenades.

The melee slightly injured 17 protesters and 19 police officers, and 17 rioters were arrested, police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld said. Officers shut all the



A Jordanian woman shouts anti-Israeli slogans during a protest against the Israeli construction work outside the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound east of Jerusalem on Friday.

gates leading to the complex and disconnected loudspeakers that they said were used to incite worshippers.

The compound is home to the golden-capped Dome of the Rock shrine and Al Aqsa mosque and is believed to be the site where the Prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven. Jews venerate the compound as the site of their biblical temples, and one of its outer walls, known as the Western Wall, is the holiest site in Judaism.

The Israelis say the purpose of the construction project is to build a new walkway leading to the holy site. The walkway would replace a ramp that was damaged in a snowstorm three years ago.

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