

THE WAR IN IRAQ

BRIEFS
NEWS

AP PHOTO

Guy Watson speaks at a rally in downtown Albuquerque, N.M., on Thursday to oppose sending more troops to Iraq.

WASHINGTON

Poll: Americans against sending more troops

Seventy percent of Americans oppose sending more troops to Iraq, according to a new poll that provides a devastatingly blunt response to President Bush's plan to bolster military forces there.

All sides in the Iraq debate are keenly aware of mounting public dissatisfaction with the situation: Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said Thursday it's one thing on which all Americans, including administration officials, are united.

Yet The Associated Press-Ipsos poll found widespread disagreement with the Bush administration over its proposed solution and growing skepticism that the United States made the right decision in going to war in the first place.

Just as 70 percent of Americans oppose sending more troops to Iraq, a like number don't think such an increase would help stabilize the situation there, the poll suggested. When asked to name the most important problem facing the country, 38 percent of those polled volunteered war, up significantly from 24 percent three months ago.

BAGHDAD, Iraq

U.S.-led forces detain six Iranians in northern Iraq

U.S.-led forces detained six Iranians on Thursday at a government office flying an Iranian flag, Iraqi officials and witnesses said, as President Bush vowed to isolate Iran and Syria as part of a new strategy to quell violence in Iraq.

The arrests in the northern city of Irbil, the second targeting of Iranians in less than a month, drew condemnation from the regional Kurdish government and concern from Iraqi officials in Baghdad, who are trying to maintain close ties with both Iran and the United States despite the hostility between the two.

Top U.S. officials repeated long-standing accusations that Iran is encouraging the violence in Iraq by supplying money and weapons.

DAMASCUS, Syria

Plan snubs proposals for dialogue with Syria

President Bush's new strategy on Iraq rejects proposals to enlist Syria's aid in ending Iraq's raging violence, a move Damascus calls a mistake that wrecks an opportunity to benefit both sides.

In announcing plans to send 21,000 more troops to Iraq, Bush slammed Syria and its ally Iran, accusing both of supporting Iraqi militants and vowing that the U.S. military will break their lines of support.

Bush also called on U.S. Arab allies Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, which have rocky relations with Syria, to support Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad. The call was seen in the Mideast as a bid to further isolate Damascus and Tehran.

"It's an escalation devoid of any signs of peace," Syrian lawmaker Suleiman Hadad said Thursday of Bush's speech the night before. State-run newspapers predicted the new U.S. plan would fail and bring more violence to Iraq.



AP PHOTO

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice discusses policy in Iraq while testifying on Capitol Hill on Thursday before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Senators of both parties grilled Rice on the administration's Iraq policy.

Members of both parties confront administration

President's plan for troop buildup draws intense criticism

By TOM RAUM

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON

The day after President Bush unveiled his plan to send 21,500 more U.S. troops to Iraq, the president was robustly applauded and cheered. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Defense Secretary Robert Gates were grilled.

Bush went to Fort Benning, Ga., and was surrounded with soldiers in camouflage shouting "hoah, hoah." Rice and Gates went to Capitol Hill to defend Bush's decision and encountered stinging criticism from Democrats and Republicans alike.

The president's strategy for a troop buildup, which polls show is deeply unpopular among Americans, was "the most dangerous foreign policy blunder in this country since Vietnam," Republican Chuck Hagel of Nebraska told Rice.

Rep. Ellen Tauscher, D-Calif., told Gates the administration's plan was "just absolutely ridiculous, after the colossal and catastrophic failures of your predecessor," Donald Rumsfeld.

Rice testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in the morning, then the House Foreign Affairs Committee in the afternoon. Gates, joined by Gen. Peter Pace, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, appeared before the House Armed Services Committee.

And while Gates, only on the job three weeks, was treated a bit more gently than Rice, the reception they received underscored the degree of congressional opposition to Bush's plan.

Gates said that the administration might abandon the increase if the Iraqi government didn't do its part, but he provided no timetable. "I think most of us, in

RHETORIC VS. REALITY

Some of the president's statements Wednesday night obscured the facts of the situation in Iraq, according to Associated Press research.

Bush declared "al-Qaida is still active in Iraq" and a failed U.S. mission would give such terrorists a safe haven from which to plot attacks against Americans.

Although few quarrel with that appraisal now, it is also the case that Iraq, contrary to assertions at the time, was not a magnet for al-Qaida before the U.S. invasion.

Bush proposed \$414 million to double the number of U.S. civilian workers who help coordinate local reconstruction projects. He also proposed \$400 million to do local reconstruction and rebuilding projects.

The special inspector general for Iraq said in an October report that continued violence and the lack of security seriously impeded reconstruction. Workers have been prevented from traveling to project sites and the lives of contractors at rebuilding sites are in danger.

Bush said that across the Middle East, people are asking: "Will America withdraw and yield the future of that country to the extremists or will we stand with the Iraqis who have made the choice for freedom?"

In Saudi Arabia, the religious establishment, rooted in the hard-line Wahhabi stream of Sunni Islam, has stepped up its anti-Shiite rhetoric. Last month, about 30 clerics called on Sunnis around the Middle East to support their brethren in Iraq against Shiites and praised the insurgency.

The president declared the need to address Iran's and Syria's support for insurgents.

He did not acknowledge his refusal to engage either country diplomatically, as many U.S. allies and the Iraq Study Group proposed.

our minds, are thinking of it as a matter of months, not 18 months or two years," he testified.

Bush and top members of his national security team sought to rally support for the troop buildup a day after he unveiled his plan for turning around a conflict that has lasted nearly four years and cost more than 3,000 American military lives.

Instead, Gates and Rice found themselves embroiled in the first pitched exchanges in a battle likely to dominate Congress for months or longer and is already shaping the 2008 presidential election.

It was the administration's first defense of its war strategy before the newly Democratic-controlled Congress.

A new AP-Ipsos poll found approval for Bush's handling of Iraq hovering near a record low: 29 percent of Americans approve, and 68 percent disapprove.

In Fort Benning, Bush cautioned that the troop increase "is not going to yield immediate results. It's going to take a while."

His plan, outlined in a prime-time address to the nation Wednesday, would raise troop levels in Iraq by 21,500, from 132,000 to 153,500, at a cost of \$5.6 billion. It also calls for the Iraqi government to increase its own forces and to do more to quell sectarian violence.

"American patience is limited, and obviously if the Iraqis fail to maintain their commitments, we'll have to revisit our strategy," Gates said.

Gates, in testimony to the committee and earlier at a news conference, said he was requesting increasing the size of the Army and Marine Corps by 92,000 troops over the next five years.

He also said the Pentagon would recall to duty sooner than planned some National Guard and Reserve troops who have served yearlong tours in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Experts: Cost of failure steep

Analysts predict catastrophe if Bush's latest strategy stalls

By STEVEN R. HURST

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BAGHDAD, Iraq

Even the most enthusiastic supporters of President Bush's new plan to pacify Baghdad were using phrases such as "If it succeeds" and "If the Iraqi government lives up to promises."

Analysts were predicting extreme bloodshed and a catastrophe if the strategy fails.

There were signs of conflict over the new approach almost immediately as the Iraqi government spokesman promptly asserted Baghdad's right to demand changes in the plan laid out by the American leader.

In contrast to hedged assessments Thursday by Bush administration officials, earlier American thrusts to cleanse the capital of Sunni insurgents and Shiite militiamen were launched with ambitious predictions of success. All failed to bring about lasting change.

"The progress will be steady toward a goal that has clearly been defined," Bush predicted in June a day before the announcement of Operation Together Forward, the highly touted crackdown that was to have included tens of thousands of Iraqi and American forces.

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, then one month in office, declared his forces would show no mercy to terrorists.

"The terrorists cannot face such power," Iraqi army Brig. Jilil Khalaf said at the time.

Four months later, Maj. Gen. William B. Caldwell, the main U.S. military spokesman in Iraq, said the drive against sectarian violence had not delivered the desired results.

"Operation Together Forward has made a difference in the focus areas but has not met our overall expectations in sustaining a reduction in the level of violence," Caldwell said, declaring that "the violence is indeed disheartening."

With that difficult admission of failure fresh in mind, administration officials did not even give a name to the new U.S.-Iraqi bid to scour Baghdad neighborhoods clean of Sunni insurgents and Shiite militiamen.

And they spoke with extreme caution of a plan that will see an additional 21,500 American troops sent to Iraq.

Success hangs on Iraqi leader's uncertain cooperation

By ANNE GEARAN

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON

President Bush's new approach to the Iraq war depends for success on another new approach, from an Iraqi leader who has failed U.S. expectations at every turn.

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has failed to deliver the unified government or additional



AL-MALIKI

ANALYSIS

troops he promised. And he's protected his own political footing at the expense of his American sponsors' goals.

Bush announced plans Wednesday to increase U.S. forces and expand a war that most Americans oppose or want to see end quickly. Although Bush acknowledged failure or disappointment on several fronts in Iraq, he pointed no fingers directly at al-Maliki.

Instead, Bush outlined what he

said is an Iraqi commitment to deploy new troops and commanders across Baghdad to boost security and build trust.

On Thursday, Defense Secretary Robert Gates said the United States would be bullish in letting the Iraqis know where and when they're failing.

"If we see them falling short, we will make sure they know that and how strongly we feel about it," he said.

Justifying the addition of 21,500 U.S. troops, Bush also acknowledged the extent to which he needs al-Maliki and

the other way around.

Stepping back now would force a collapse of the Iraqi government and could mean U.S. troops staying even longer, he said.

Selling the strategy to openly skeptical Republicans and Democrats on Thursday, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice acknowledged there is good reason to doubt al-Maliki's resolve.

"There have been times when they haven't performed in the past," Rice said. She said she is confident that al-Maliki now knows the stakes and will hold up his end. Bush and his advisers have said

much the same thing for months, with little to show for it.

Despite pledges from al-Maliki's Shiite-led government for greater cooperation, al-Maliki has stumbled politically while the country fell deeper into chaos and distrust. And he failed to provide promised Iraqi troops last summer as part of a security crackdown in Baghdad that has produced few results.

This time, Bush is apparently banking on al-Maliki's personal assurances, including in a lengthy private conversation last week.

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