



WASHINGTON UPDATE

A MONTHLY NEWSLETTER



Vol. 20 No. 5

Published by the Association of the United States Army

May 2008

Petraeus calls for 45-day period of consolidation, assessment in July. The commander of the Multinational Force-Iraq has recommended to the president that as the last of the six brigade combat teams sent to stabilize Baghdad and Sunni areas to the west and north of the capital leave there should be a "45-day period of consolidation and assessment" before any other U.S. forces withdraw. Testifying before the Senate Armed Service Committee April 8, Gen. David Petraeus said this recommendation "does not allow a set withdrawal timetable." He said in making the recommendation he took into account the stress it was putting on soldiers and marines and their families, the possibility of having to respond to crises in other parts of the world, continuing operations in Afghanistan and the long-term effects of the surge's 15-month deployments upon the Army.

The recommendation sends the wrong message to the Iraqi government, Sen. Carl Levin, D-Mich., and committee chairman, said because "it is a clear open-ended pause." He said it was time "to shift responsibility from our troops and our taxpayers to the Iraqi government." As at earlier hearings with Petraeus, Levin asked again whether the Iraqi government had taken the necessary steps to achieve political reconciliation and rebuild the country. "An intransigent Shi'ite government is the greatest threat" to achieving the security, political and economic goals the surge was designed to provide time for. Quoting Lt. Gen. Raymond Odierno at his confirmation hearing to be the Army's next vice chief of staff, "We are being drawn deeper ... into a communal sectarian struggle."

Ambassador Ryan Crocker told the committee "Progress is uneven" but the Iraqi parliament has passed laws restoring pensions to former Ba'ath party officials, limiting the deBa'athification program to senior leaders in Saddam Hussein's regime, passing an oil-revenue sharing bill and setting the groundwork for provincial elections in the fall. "The laws are not perfect ... but are important steps."

He and Petraeus warned about the influence of Shi'ite extremist regime in Iran in training and equipping militia forces and trying to de-stabilize a largely Shi'ite Arab Iraq. Crocker called the effort the "Lebanonization" of Iraq. "We should all watch Iran's actions in the next few months ... to see how it will relate to its neighbor," Petraeus said. As to why al Qaeda chose to fight in Iraq, "They came to establish a base in the heart of the Arab world," Petraeus said.

Vice chief expresses concern over strategic depth. "Our readiness is being consumed as quickly as we can produce it," the vice chief of staff of the Army testified before Senate Armed Services Readiness Subcommittee April 1, and this has left the service "out of balance." Gen. Richard Cody added, "When this surge went, the fifth surge of this war, it took all the stroke out of the shock absorbers" because it meant sending five additional brigade combat teams and additional engineering, aviation and military police units to Iraq to support the effort there. "It also forced us to issue all our pre-positioned stock in the area" to support some of the units coming in.

In other cases, the units coming in fell on left-behind equipment. Cody said that means units about to be deployed are "not where they should be" in terms of equipment and training on that equipment.

He said the five Army depots "are doing unbelievable work," about 3 ½ times more than two years ago, in resetting tanks, humvees, Bradleys, radios, Blue Force trackers, rifles, machine guns, etc., much of it paid for out of emergency spending bills. "It will take three years, maybe four to reset and buy new equipment" that was identified as being required in a 2006 Army review, Cody said.

"I have never seen our lack of strategic depth as it is today." Adding, the nation needs an airborne brigade, a heavy brigade, a Stryker brigade and a light brigade ready for a range of operations, "we don't have that today." He said that infantry units can be relatively quickly brought back to high levels of readiness for the spectrum of military operations. Others, such as artillery units who deployed as military police or infantry, "will take longer to come back." He told the panel that the Army's goal is to restore balance by 2011 and a key ingredient in doing that was growing the Army to 76 brigade combat teams and 227 sustainment brigades.

Repeated deployments with little time at home "put the All-Volunteer Force at risk." Cody said, "It may take us 15 months to get to 12 months boots on the ground and 18 months dwell time." The Army's force generation model has a goal of two years at home before a year of deployment for the active force and five years at home before a year of deployment for the Army National Guard and the Army Reserve.

Odierno: 15-month deployment was ‘one of the hardest recommendations I had to make.’ Calling it “one of the hardest recommendations I had to make” to extend deployments from 12 months to 15 months to improve security in and around Baghdad, Lt. Gen. Raymond Odierno told the Senate Armed Services Committee April 3: “Our goal is to get down to 12-month tours as fast as we can.” Until that can be done and time at home increases above a year for soldiers returning from deployment, he said the Army is out of balance and “there is stress on the force,” especially on the soldiers and their families who are not yet deployed. Odierno said morale among American forces in Iraq remains high. “Over the last 12 months, they’ve seen some visible progress.”

Testifying at his confirmation hearing to be the Army’s next vice chief of staff, Odierno, who recently served as commanding general of III Corps in Iraq, said, “The Middle East is an important place for ... the security of the United States.” He said that stepped up American efforts, including sending an additional six brigade combat teams to Iraq, has improved security in that country but important political and economic decisions still need to be made by its government. “Provincial elections are one of the most important things” in the immediate future of Iraq, he said. In earlier elections the Sunnis staged a boycott and some Shi’ia chose not to vote. “It’s important to meet that date” of Oct. 1 for the new elections. He attributed the improved security outside of Baghdad to the Sunni movement away from “passive” support of al Qaeda in Iraq to one of “wanting to be part of the process of going after al Qaeda.”

Deployments to drop to 12 months. President George W. Bush announced that Army deployment lengths will be reduced from 15 months to 12 beginning Aug. 1, but the change does not affect dwell time of 12 months at home.

In a press release, Gen. George Casey, chief of staff said, “This announcement is another step in our effort to restore balance to our Army. Returning to our 12-month policy—combined with the growth in our force—will allow us to gradually reduce the stress on the force and prepare for the full-range of missions.”

At the White House briefing announcing the change in tour length, Bush said Gen. David Petraeus, commander of Multinational Force—Iraq, will have as much time as he needs to evaluate the situation on the ground and determine whether and when there would be withdrawals beyond the six brigade combat teams deployed in the surge.

In a series of hearings, Petraeus told Congress that he would use 45 days to analyze the situation before recommending any change in the American presence. By July, American forces are expected to number 140,000 or 15 brigade combat teams.

Resurgent Taliban, narco-trafficking are growing concerns. The resurgence of the Taliban, some countries in NATO’s failure to meet the alliance’s commitment to stabilizing Afghanistan and the continued growth in narcotics trafficking were the topics that dominated the confirmation hearing of Gen. David McKiernan to command the International Security Force in Afghanistan.

“The history of Afghanistan is local autonomy, not strong federal government,” he said during his April 3 confirmation hearing. “Part of the challenge is developing institutions” to overcome the insurgency, corruption and criminal activity.

The overall security in the country “depends on geography where we have U.S. forces.” Events there are moving forward, but to the south “Kandahar and Helmand is in question.” These provinces are largely Pashtun and border the tribal regions of Pakistan. “There can be no successful outcome in Afghanistan without dealing with sanctuaries over the border.”

About NATO’s commitment, the present commander of U.S. forces in Europe said, “There is a question of will” and that the future of the alliance could rest on how the member nations meet that challenge. More than three thousand U.S. Marines have been sent to Afghanistan in March to fill in the gap left by NATO’s failure to meet its obligations. He said that continued high operating tempo of the Army also has an impact on operations in Afghanistan. “It will continue to be a challenge” if American force levels in Iraq remain at about 140,000.

McKiernan said that he intends to assess the narcotics situation in Afghanistan with an especially critical look at destroying drug laboratories.

Sen. John Warner, R-Va., suggested that one way to break the link between small farmers raising poppies for sale to traffickers would be “to retire the land,” and pay the farmers not to grow anything on it, as is done in former tobacco-producing regions in the United States.

For the latest developments on Capitol Hill, check out the AUSA website: www.ausa.org. For AUSA’s electronic legislative newsletter, e-mail Bill Loper at: bloper@ausa.org.

WASHINGTON UPDATE is published monthly by the Association of the United States Army to highlight current events of significance to the Army and Defense Department from the Washington perspective. Reproduction and distribution of this newsletter is encouraged.

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AUSA presents testimony to joint VA hearing.

The Association of the United States Army's vice president for education, Lt. Gen. Theodore G. Stroup, Jr., USA, Ret., presented testimony to a joint hearing held by the Senate and House Veterans' Affairs Committees April 3 on AUSA's legislative priorities.

Stroup's testimony touched on many issues including the need to:

- Pass S. 22 (amended), a bi-partisan bill, introduced by Sen. James Webb, D-Va., that would create a new GI Bill for the 21st century. The bill would allow a veteran to enroll as a full-time student and to focus solely on education—as it funds tuition at an amount equal to the highest in-state tuition rate charged by a public college in a state, as well as providing stipends for housing and for books and other educational costs. Further, the bill would allow reserve component troops to accrue credit for their multiple tours toward GI Bill entitlement, creating an incentive for further service.
- Raise education benefits for National Guard and reserve service members under Chapter 1606 of Title 10.
- Revisit the need to dock volunteer force recruits \$1,200 of their first year's pay for the privilege of serving their country on active duty.
- Allow all participants of MGIB's predecessor, the Veteran's Education Assistance Program (VEAP), as well as those service members who were on active duty but did not enroll in VEAP, to receive MGIB educational benefits.
- Support giving MGIB participants who serve a full military career the option of transferring their benefits to dependents as a career retention initiative.
- Support full concurrent receipt for those with disabilities of 49 percent and below.
- Allow members who were forced to retire short of 20 years of service because of a combat disability be "vested" in the service-earned share of retired pay at the same 2.5 percent per year of service rate as members with 20-plus years of service.
- Allow terminally ill veterans who hold National Service Life Insurance and U.S. Government Life Insurance to receive benefits before death, as can holders of Servicemembers Group Life Insurance and Veterans Group Life Insurance.
- Develop and deploy an interoperable, bi-directional and standards-based electronic medical record; a "one-stop" separation physical supported by an electronic separation document (DD-214); benefits determination before discharge; sharing of information on occupational exposures from military operations and related initiatives.

AUSA strongly recommends accelerated efforts to realize the goal of "seamless transition" plans and programs.

Special BNCOC class offered at Walter Reed.

Staff Sgt. Warren C. Finch will be leaving the Army soon, medically retired after nine years of service, but was a member of a pilot Basic Noncommissioned Officer Class (BNCOC) at Walter Reed Army Medical Center that mixes cadre and recovering warriors in a different approach to healing and understanding through professional military education.

"I've been here since '05" after being seriously wounded in an improvised explosive device attack on the Stryker he was riding in, Finch said, and he had grown accustomed to a certain routine at the medical center.

He also had his doubts about what would be the value of his participation in the first Warrior Transition Unit class when it began in February. "At first I was skeptical about this class because I am going to be out of the military soon. For me it wasn't so much about NCO professional development because that phase of my life is pretty much over with. For me, it was getting the gears going again" overcoming the complacency that sets in as a recovering patient. He plans to do private security contract work when he leaves the Army in late spring. "This set me up to be successful" in that career.

Staff Sgt. Billy Brashears, a member of the cadre assigned to the Warrior Transition Brigade at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, has been in Washington for a year following a tour in Iraq. About the class, he said, "We went through what every phase one class goes through, drill and ceremonies, conducting PT, a lot of bookwork."

Staff Sgt. Shad L. Lorenz, also a member of the cadre, has been at Walter Reed for almost a year, and before that he was assigned for five years to the 101st Airborne Division at Fort Campbell, Ky. He said, "I thought this was a very good experience. There might have been a perception that this was just a sort of check-the-block like thing, but it was a very good, informative class. We need to go out and spread that through the force. 'Here, the standards are completely upheld.' It is a very good experience."

Joseph DeVille, husband of Staff Sgt. Renee A. DeVille, has been coming to the class to assist his wife since November. She was injured in an attack near Mosul about 18 months earlier. "I am helping her in the writing and taking notes." As an outsider looking in, DeVille said the class was very helpful to all of the soldiers. "It teaches them to be leaders. It also helps bring them together as a team. That's what it is all about ... and getting the mission accomplished."

Staff Sgt. Dorothea Hooper also is recovering from wounds she received in a mortar attack on the Forward Operating Base she was in near Mosul and has been at Walter Reed for about a year. "There were a lot of leadership issues that we had to discuss and will help me when I go back into the force," she said.

Mental health care: Before, during and after deployment. The director of the Defense Department Center of Excellence for psychological health and traumatic brain injury told several hundred mental health providers March 30: “It is more than academic interest” that led her to a career in the Army and psychiatry, “It’s profoundly personal.”

Speaking in Washington at a conference of the National Alliance for Research on Schizophrenia and Depression, Col. (P) Loree Sutton said as commander of Fort Hood’s Darnall Army Community Hospital she had “no more poignant experience than being with these families” as their soldiers in the 4th Infantry Division and 1st Armored Division again deployed to Iraq.

“One out of three days, they would learn that their warrior was not coming back; and every day, telling a family that their warrior would not be coming back as he left.”

Dr. Robert Ursano, a professor of psychiatry and neuroscience at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences in Bethesda, Md., said, “Combat is sudden, intense and life threatening” and “no soldier knows how he will perform” in combat. He said that 5 million Americans—in the Army and their families primarily—are living with the consequences of that exposure to combat. Not all of them are living on military installations where they could share their experiences.

Sutton said about half of the 1.6 million service members who have served in Afghanistan and/or Iraq are now out of uniform and have returned to their hometowns.

“Most important is returning home” to the installation at the completion of their deployment or to their community, Ursano said, and learning “how to become a couple again” and reintegrate with a society that is not in combat. The stressors are significantly different between the two environments.

Ursano said historically the most important finding in mental health studies of veterans from earlier war has been: “The more severe the trauma, the higher the mental health casualties,” and “death is a component of war.” “Nearly 50 percent of those killed in Iraq came from IEDs [improvised explosive devices], he added. “Driving anywhere exposes you to danger.”

“We have effective treatments for post traumatic stress disorder” through counseling and medication. Ursano said there still is a stigma attached to seeking mental health care in the military and civilian communities. “Sixty-six percent of [civilian] men believe they do not need help” even when diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder and the same percentage believe that care will not help.

Balance, communication needed to keep Army families strong. “It takes balance to make Army families strong,” Sheila Casey, the wife of the Army chief of staff, told attendees at the AAAA conference in suburban Washington April 9. “We’ve never had to sustain families for so long,” and that it was important “to develop a strong network of friends, especially now with all the deployments.”

Mrs. Casey, the chief operating officer of a newspaper covering Capitol Hill, said, “The choices you and your spouse make may not be same as other couples.” Adding, “I needed to work.” Recalling a deployment Gen. George Casey made to Egypt, she said, “I made the decision not to go to allow the kids to finish school, and I had a job I liked,” but over time she changed her mind. “There is no easy answer,” Mrs. Casey said, “You need to find time every day to really communicate with your spouse.”

In an earlier interview with the Fort Leavenworth, Kan., Lamp, she said, “One issue I’m particularly concerned about is our children because we do not know yet what the cumulative effects of the deployments are on our children. That is something that we have to watch very, very closely and making sure that there is help and support for them.”

She said that the Army will announce its Army Community Covenant this spring, recognizing the connection between Army families and a host of civic organizations. “Our nation is grateful for what soldiers and our families do.”

Among the ways the Army is helping families is paying for readiness workers down to the battalion level; requesting \$300 million more—\$1.7 billion total—for family programs in the coming fiscal year; building 35 family assistance centers, expanding child care, allowing the transfer of Montgomery GI Bill benefits to spouses and children and establishing the spousal employment preference program.

“Congress right now is very family friendly.”

Mrs. Casey said that the Army Medical Action Plan is having an impact and cited the creation of three dozen Warrior Transition Units, commanded by a lieutenant colonel, as helping these soldiers and families through difficult times. She also cited the recognition of Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome and Traumatic Brain Injury as being real conditions requiring treatment as a positive step forward.

Brig. Gen Alberto Jimenez, chief of Army National Guard Aviation, said the reserve components learned important lessons regarding families since the terrorist attacks of 9/11. “We are trying to put into our constructs we know about families,” especially educating the family “continuously on what the Army is, what the Army does.” It is an education program for Army leaders as well, recognizing that “they are citizen soldiers with families and jobs” in the civilian sector.