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Gates, Mullen optimistic about continuing withdrawals. Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Adm. Michael Mullen were optimistic that American forces could continue to withdraw from Iraq through the summer and that Iraqi forces continued to show progress in securing their nation.

At Fort Lewis, Wash., July 8, Gates said the process of having Iraqis in the lead was well under way and he expected that change to continue. "However long [the turnover] will depend on the situation on the ground. ... Things are going very well at this point."

Mullen, who was in Baghdad, said a day earlier that violence in the Iraqi capital was continuing to subside to levels four years ago. His visit coincided with a new push by Iraqi and American forces to remove militants from strongholds, such as the Sadr City neighborhood of Baghdad. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said, "A few months ago no one could go into Sadr City. I was able to walk openly down a street that until recently was extremely unsafe, and I'm encouraged by that." The eight-mile square neighborhood has about 2 million residents. "From all I see, security conditions are holding." He was speaking as the last of an additional 30,000 American soldiers sent earlier this year were leaving the country. Their withdrawal would put American force levels in Iraq at about 140,000.

Gen. David Petraeus, who will shortly assume command of Central Command, told Congress this spring that he and Ambassador Ryan Crocker wanted another 45 days to assess the security situation after the "surge" forces leave and decide whether more cuts could be made.

Mullen declined to give an opinion on the permanence of security gains in Iraq. "I really need to spend more time with the commanders here to get their current assessment of where we are. I don't think there's going to be a clear milepost that says, 'Hey, we're there.'"

As to whether there should be a certain date to withdraw all American forces, Lt. Gen. James Dubik, who until recently was the senior U.S. officer in charge of training Iraqi security forces, told the House Armed Services Committee July 10, "My professional military advice remains as it had been, that precise, firm, fixed timetables are less helpful than periodic assessments and condition-based reviews."

Iraqi prime minister suggests pullout timetable. Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki said for the first time that a future memorandum of understanding between his government and the United States could include putting "a timetable on [U.S. forces'] withdrawal." The statement released July 7 while he was visiting the United Arab Emirates and meeting with ambassadors from a number of Arab nations added, "In all cases the basis for any agreement will be respect for the full sovereignty of Iraq."

A U.N. mandate authorizing the presence of U.S. forces in Iraq expires Dec. 31. The United States had hoped to reach an agreement by the end of July.

Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman said that while the State Department was handling the negotiations there was a need to examine conditions in Iraq rather than set a strict timetable. "Timelines tend to be artificial in nature. ... In a situation where things are as dynamic as they are in Iraq, I would tell you that it's usually best to look at these things as they are on the ground."

Negotiations began in March over two potential agreements. The first covers the status of forces and would define legal protections and responsibilities of U.S. troops. The second is a strategic framework to cover the two nations' political and military relationship, including basing, what happens if Iraq calls for military assistance to counter future internal and external threats and how much, if any control, Iraqis should have over U.S. operations. It also would address whether private contractors would be subject to Iraqi law and whether U.S. forces can detain Iraqi citizens.

The second potential agreement had drawn Senate Democrats' attention who said this may need Senate approval before it can be enacted.

Earlier, Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari said any agreement would likely be for a year or two and subject to Iraqi parliamentary oversight.

Al-Maliki's insistence on Iraqi sovereignty has shown results in recent weeks in Arab capitals. His Shi'ite-led government has won forgiveness of its \$7 billion debt to the primarily Sunni UAE and a restoration of diplomatic relations. Jordan and Bahrain also announced plans to restore diplomatic relations with Iraq.

Iraqi security forces showing progress. The senior American officer in charge of building Iraqi security forces told the House Armed Services Committee that the Iraqis could assume primary combat responsibilities by mid-2009. Testifying July 9, Lt. Gen. James Dubik said the ground forces would largely be ready by then. “Their divisions, brigades and battalions are on a good timeline.” He told the committee that Iraqi security forces have grown from 444,000 in June 2007 to 566,000 in May.

Dubik, who is retiring, cited the operations in the southern port city of Basra and the Sadr city neighborhood of Baghdad as demonstrating how Iraqi forces are taking the lead in providing security across the country. “Certainly, the Basra operation was off to a rough start, but equally certain, is this: that the Basra operation was tactically and strategically successful in the end, and that each of the other major operations in Mosul, Sadr City and Amarah had been progressively better.” Iraqi soldiers and police have gained confidence from those successful operations, Dubik explained, noting that each operation “cements in their minds the kinds of capabilities that they know they have to develop” to achieve further success. He added that nine of Iraq’s 18 provinces are under the central government’s control.

Dubik said that Iraqi readiness has improved as more leadership positions are filled with experienced soldiers, and he rated 12 battalions capable of independent operations and 90 others at the second highest level of readiness. There are 140 battalions in the Iraqi army. “It will take more time to flush [sectarianism] out of the system because of the horrific sectarian violence” that began in late 2006 and continued into 2007. “The Iraqi security forces are still reliant on our enablers,” Dubik said. “Their training is basic; their leader shortages still exist; and distribution of leaders is uneven. . . . The problems of rapid growth that any nation would face are evident in the Iraqi security forces.” Dubik estimated that it could take until 2012 to develop Iraq’s air force and navy and longer than that to establish secure borders.

To ensure that gains achieved by last year’s surge operations in Iraq are maintained, “continued coalition advisory and training teams, along with partnership units, is necessary, as is Iraqi security-force funding,” Dubik said. “From my standpoint, we should not underestimate the difficulty of the task remaining,” he said. “The successes of the past year-plus are significant, are dramatic, but can be reversed, and they can be stymied.” Terrorists operating in Iraq “are still very active, as recent reports have seen. . . . They are still capable, though in diminishing frequency, of conducting violent attacks against the innocent.” Al-Qaida and other terrorists want to topple the Iraqi government and reverse the security gains achieved over the past 15 months, Dubik said. The terrorists “have not given up, nor does anyone expect them to.”

Former secretaries of state call for changing War Powers Act. Two former secretaries of state called for better consultations between the executive and legislative branches before sending U.S. forces to war in their proposed overhaul of the 1973 War Powers Act. James Baker III, secretary of state under George H.W. Bush, and Warren Christopher, secretary of state under Bill Clinton, proposed the creation of a joint congressional committee and would require the president to consult with the speaker of the House, Senate majority leader, House and Senate minority leaders and chairmen and ranking members of both appropriations committee, armed services committees and intelligence committees and the House Foreign Affairs and Senate Foreign Relations committees before deploying American forces.

The 1973 law calls for consultation but does not say with whom. “This statute gives Congress a seat at the table in deciding whether or not to go to war—not just a seat at the table, but one with a permanent staff, a permanent professional staff and access to all the available intelligence,” Christopher said.

Calling the 1973 law ineffective and possibly unconstitutional, Baker said it was not surprising that “no president has ever filed reports in a way that would trigger the obligation to withdraw. We think that the rule of law, which is of course a centerpiece of American democracy, is undermined and is damaged when the main statute in this vital policy area is regularly questioned or ignored.”

It also would require Congress to vote on a resolution to authorize military action lasting more than a week within 30 days of the start of the mission. If that vote fails, it calls for an expedited vote of disapproval that would become law only with the president’s signature or over his veto.

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

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Geren salutes 35th anniversary of All-Volunteer Force.

Army Secretary Pete Geren marked the 35th anniversary of the All-Volunteer Force by reminding attendees at the Association of the United States Army's Institute for Land Warfare breakfast that the 1.1 million soldiers now serving are engaged in the third longest war in the nation's history "and the longest war ever fought" by the United States without conscription. Speaking July 10 in suburban Washington, he said, "We are succeeding in the global war on terror today, and this success has a thousand fathers and mothers." Adding, as professionals, "they have learned how to succeed in this complex security environment and they are putting that knowledge and experience to work." Geren said 64 percent of the active component have served in a combat theater. The numbers for the Army Reserve were 31 percent and for the National Guard 33 percent.

Citing George Catlett Marshall's experiences, knowledge and candor gained over a 50-year career as a soldier and statesman, he said, "Today we are asking our NCOs and juniors officers to compress into their few years all the skills" Marshall accumulated over a lifetime "and bring them to bear every day in Iraq and Afghanistan."

He recalled a conversation he had with a captain serving in Iraq. The officer told the secretary: "Every day has new challenges that require young officers to be warriors, leaders and thinkers because of the demands of the current fight" that can range from rescuing a crew of a downed helicopter from al Qaeda to providing drinking water to a village. All these challenges are tactical, but at the same time, it is taking care of your soldiers. This is done by providing them the bigger picture, ensuring they are prepared for every patrol" and recognizing that the mission is a marathon and not a sprint.

Geren said that a major told him that the value of having experienced platoon leaders lay in their not being yes men. "There were times my aggressiveness was tempered by my first sergeant and platoon leader. If that platoon was not capable of giving 100 percent on that mission, another was assigned without any repercussions. To me, that showed maturity in our platoon leaders."

He said what soldiers are accomplishing in Afghanistan and Iraq is a far cry from the warnings of former Defense Secretary Les Aspin of "asking too much" of them. "That was 20 years ago. Today we ask them ... for much more and our soldiers are making hard and quick decisions every day and delivering for America." Adding, the success of the All-Volunteer Force "has confounded its early skeptics and critics."

ICF International, an AUSA sustaining member, sponsored the breakfast.

DoD unveils uniform waiver policy for recruits.

A new enlistment waiver-reporting policy for all of the services that establishes four groupings and uses numeric coding for specific transgressions will assist the Pentagon to better gauge force quality, a senior defense official said July 2.

By dividing waiver terminology into four separate groupings and employing codes to identify transgressions, "we can keep [better] track of things, judge whether ... to allow more or fewer people in, based on whether that attribute matters to performance and retention," Bill Carr, deputy undersecretary of defense for military personnel policy, told reporters during a Pentagon news conference. Each armed service is to align its waiver-reporting procedures according to the new policy guidelines that become effective this fall, Carr said. Each service had categorized offenses differently before the change.

The policy change won't affect the high quality of recruits that join all-volunteer military, Carr said. Today's soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines, he said, are the best quality ever.

Under the new policy, waiver groupings are divided into four categories: traffic offenses, nontraffic offenses, misconduct offenses and major misconduct offenses, Carr said. Transgressions in the misconduct column are what are commonly known as misdemeanors, he said, while major misconduct transgressions are akin to felonies.

Today, about one in five recruits requires some kind of waiver to enlist, according to Pentagon statistics. About two-thirds of those waivers involve petty infractions of the law; the other third involve health concerns, low aptitude scores and other issues. Most waivers issued to recruits involve youthful misconduct, according to a Pentagon news release issued July 2. One-third of medical waivers are issued for too-high body fat, according to the release.

"Waivers have long been a part of the enlistment process, allowing communities a greater voice in identifying young persons who, despite factors such as youthful misconduct, are judged trustworthy and capable, and found fully qualified for service in the armed forces," Carr said in the news release.

The Defense Department granted more than 51,000 waivers in Fiscal Year 2008, an increase of about 6,500 in five years.

The new policy will take effect Oct. 1.

500 added to Warrior Transition Unit cadre.

The cadre serving Warrior Transition Units are growing by an additional 500 caregivers to better serve the rapidly increasing number of soldiers needing continued medical care.

At the same time, the Army announced that it is revising criteria to enter and leave the units and streamline medical and physical evaluation board.

Army Secretary “Pete” Geren and Gen. George W. Casey Jr., chief of staff, announced the changes in a message sent to commanders July 2 and gave them until July 14 to fill the positions.

Brig. Gen. Gary Cheek, assistant surgeon general for warrior care and transition, said the population in the 35 units has doubled to 12,000 in the past year. By 100 percent staffing, “that means a squad leader needs to be at the ratio of 1 to 12. A nurse case manager at a medical center has to be at a ratio of 1 to 18. At a medical activity, let’s say at a place like Fort Campbell, they have to be at a ratio of 1 to 36. And a primary care manager has to be at a ratio of 1 to 200,” Col. Jimmie Keenan, chief of staff of the warrior care and transition office told bloggers in an interview July 8. The new cadre will be trained in a variety of ways—from online, to mobile training team visits to resident courses, an Army news release said.

Keenan told the bloggers that the Army Medical Command is also looking for civilian and contract nurse—case and primary-care managers and is considering retiree recalls. “From our initial indications, there are many reserve nurse-case managers and also retiree nurses ... who are interested in still serving their country, and they are located near many of these posts, camps and stations where we have this requirement, so we think that we will be able to address that requirement,” she told Army News Service. The nurses are to be in place by Oct. 16.

Keenan said, “The entry criteria to enter the Warrior Transition Unit really has not changed significantly, but what we’ve done is we’ve empowered our senior commanders at our installations to understand that they need to be looking at the soldiers that are being assigned to the Warrior Transition Unit to ensure that they are coming in for the right reasons, that they are coming in because they require that complex case management that a soldier, a wounded, ill or injured soldier would require in the Warrior Transition Unit.” Adding, “We’ve actually established exit criteria that allows the triad of leadership [installation commander, medical commander and warrior transition unit commander], as well as the triad of care, which is your nurse case manager, your primary care manager and your squad leader, in concert with that soldier and their family, to determine when is the best time for them to start to make the transition.”

AUSA president hails selection of Dunwoody for 4 stars.

The president of the Association of the United States Army called the nomination of Lt. Gen. Ann Dunwoody to be the nation’s first female four-star general and commander of the Army Materiel Command a major step forward for the Army and women in all the military services.

Gen. Gordon R. Sullivan, USA, Ret., said, Dunwoody “has the experience, background and education for this critically important position in an Army that is engaged in military operations in two theaters.” He specifically cited her present position as AMC deputy commanding general, service on the Army staff as the G-4 and the launching of the Army’s new logistics branch to support the modular Army and as commanding general of the Army Combined Arms Support Command (CASCOM) and Fort Lee, Va., in listing her past accomplishments.

“General Dunwoody is no stranger to AUSA. Most recently, in May, she delivered a major address at our Logistics Symposium in Richmond on running the Army as an enterprise, and has contributed to our ARMY Magazine.” Sullivan also cited some of her remarks upon becoming deputy commanding general as very appropriate now. “She said, ‘AMC has established an incredible reputation throughout the Army. When folks see the AMC patch, they know they will get the help they need. Warfighters truly know and appreciate the capability AMC brings to the table. They will never go to war without us.’”

“Women continue to achieve great success and make invaluable contributions to the defense of this nation. This is an historic occasion for the Department of Defense and I am proud to nominate Lieutenant General Ann Dunwoody for a fourth star,” Defense Secretary Robert Gates said in a news release. Adding, “Her 33 years of service, highlighted by extraordinary leadership and devotion to duty, make her exceptionally qualified for this senior position.”

“Lieutenant General Dunwoody’s leadership, character and career have best prepared her to lead the Army Materiel Command,” Secretary of the Army Pete Geren said. “She will bring 33 years of experience to over 56,000 soldiers, DA civilians and their families in 40 states and 50 countries as she serves as the next commanding general of Army Materiel Command.”

“This is an important day for the Dunwoody family, the military and the nation,” Gen. George W. Casey, chief of staff of the Army, said. “Our nation will continue to benefit from Lieutenant General Dunwoody’s leadership as the Army continues to build strength from our diversity.”

The Senate must confirm the nomination.