



U.S TROOPS FACE DEADLIST MONTH IN IRAQ AND LONGER TOURS OF DUTY

April 19, 2004

Following a month of fierce fighting between U.S. soldiers and anti-American insurgents in Iraq, U.S. officials have requested additional troops and some have questioned whether Iraqi security forces will be ready by the June 30th date the United States plans to hand over control to an Iraqi government.

An uprising by Shiite Muslims in mostly southern Iraqi cities and violent clashes between U.S. troops and anti-American forces around the country have made April the deadliest month in Iraq for American soldiers. The violence has also forced the top U.S. administrator in Iraq Paul Bremer to say coalition forces may have to stay in the country longer than expected.

"Events of the past two weeks show that Iraq still faces security threats and needs outside help to deal with them," Bremer said in a statement.

"It is clear that Iraqi forces will not be able, on their own, to deal with these threats by June 30 when an Iraqi government assumes sovereignty," he added.

Troop stays extended

The United States and its allies are looking to hand over control of Iraq to an interim government by June 30 and had hoped to reduce the number of soldiers in the country around that same time. The interim government would be responsible for writing a new constitution and holding democratic elections for a new president and permanent government.

But, according to Bremer, the latest violence may mean that United States and other countries will keep their troops in Iraq longer than originally planned. President Bush and others have pledged to remain in Iraq until they can ensure security in the country.

The violence, called an insurgency by coalition forces, has also prompted the Pentagon to order 21,000 troops to stay in Iraq at least three months longer than had been planned. Many of the soldiers, who help make up the 137,000 U.S. troops in the country, have been in Iraq for a year already and some were scheduled to return home this month.

The announcement upset the families of many soldiers, who had been told their tours of duty in Iraq would not exceed one year.

"I don't think it was ever set for one year," Lisa Williams, the wife of Commander Joseph Williams, told the Financial Times. "Until you see the whites of their eyes, you just shouldn't trust they're coming home."

Williams was among the 2,800 U.S. Army troops in the 2nd Armored Cavalry regiment who learned they would have to stay and help subdue the uprisings.

International support

As the violence continued in Iraq over the weekend, Spain's new Prime Minister, Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, said he would withdraw his country's soldiers from the troubled nation.

Zapatero, who had campaigned on a promise to withdraw Spanish troops from Iraq, was elected following a deadly terrorist bombing in Madrid that killed nearly 200. Islamic militants were blamed for the attack and Zapatero's surprise victory caused some to worry that the terrorists had affected the election and sparked the Spanish withdrawal.

After taking office from former Spanish Prime Minister and U.S. ally Jose Maria Aznar Saturday, Zapatero ordered Spain's 1,300 troops to come home over the next two to four weeks.

Zapatero, who originally said he would pull troops out unless the United Nations took over "political and military" control of Iraq by June 30, said he sped up his decision because of the increased risk to Spanish troops, CNN reported.

Other countries may follow in Zapatero's footsteps, according to U.S. National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice.

"We know that there are others who are going to have to assess how they see the risk," Rice said on ABC's This Week. "We have 34 countries with forces on the ground. I think there are going to be some changes."

Shiite radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, whom U.S. troops have pledged to capture, praised Spain's decision. Al-Sadr's militia has been fighting coalition troops since the coalition arrested one of its members and closed its newspaper on March 28.

By Kristina Nwazota, Online NewsHour

© 2004 MacNeil/Lehrer Productions