



PRESIDENT REMAINS COMMITTED TO NEW IRAQ PLAN DESPITE CRITICS

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President Bush remained steadfast in his plan to send more U.S. troops to Iraq, even though his new strategy received harsh criticism from many Democrats and some Republicans.

President Bush unveiled a revised plan for Iraq in a live televised address Jan. 10.

One of the elements of his plan was to send 21,000 new troops to help secure the capital Baghdad, where armed militias have killed thousands of civilians.

U.S. troops also will work to provide security in the southern part of the country, called the Anbarm province.

"Our troops will have a well-defined mission: to help Iraqis clear and secure neighborhoods, to help them protect the local population, and to help ensure that the Iraqi forces left behind are capable of providing the security that Baghdad needs," President Bush said in his address.

To accomplish these goals, the president said he has the support of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

The Iraqi leader said troops will have permission to enter areas previously off-limits to them due to political and sectarian constraints.

Sectarian violence

Much of the fighting in Iraq is between the different religious sects Shiite and Sunni.

During the reign of Saddam Hussein, Sunnis were in control and life in many ways was easier for them.

The Iraqi government has gone after Sunni militias, but there are also Shiite groups accused of murdering hundreds of civilians.

Critics of Iraqi Prime Minister al-Maliki, a Shiite, say he has been unwilling to go after the Shiite militia group known as the Mahdi Army, which is led by al-Maliki's political ally, cleric Muqtada al-Sadr.

The cleric's influence on Iraqi politics has hindered past U.S. attempts to secure some areas of Baghdad, including the Shiite neighborhood of Sadr City.

Democratic reaction split

The president's plan, including the temporary increase in troops referred to by many as a "surge," has been criticized by many congressional leaders, especially Democrats.

"Escalation of this war is not the change the American people called for in the last election," Illinois Senator Richard Durbin said in the official Democratic response aired after the president's address.

"Instead of a new direction, the president's plan moves the American commitment in Iraq in the wrong direction."

Some Democrats, like Representative John Murtha from Pennsylvania, a strong opponent of the war in Iraq, have threatened to cut off military funding as a way of bringing troops home.

Other Democrats have suggested "softer" alternatives such as forcing lawmakers to face voter wrath by going on the record as supporting the surge in Iraq or not.

Republican objections

Prominent Republicans, such as Arizona's John McCain, a possible 2008 presidential contender, have called a troop surge our "last chance."

"What is the option? It's catastrophe. ... The bloodletting will increase, which means, to me, that we will be back in there, only under far more difficult circumstances, at some point," he said on CBS News Sunday.

While most Republicans have publicly supported the president's new plan, there were several vocal critics.

Kansas Senator Sam Brownback, also seen as a likely presidential candidate in 2008, met with the Iraqi prime minister last week in Baghdad.

"I came away from these meetings convinced that the United States should not increase its involvement until Sunnis and Shia are more willing to cooperate with each other instead of shooting at each other," Brownback said in a statement, CNN reported.

Another, Nebraska Senator Chuck Hagel, called the additional troops a "dangerously wrong-headed strategy that will drive America deeper into an unwinnable swamp at a great cost."

Response to critics

But President Bush does have the public support of his military leaders in Iraq.

"As with any plan, there are no guarantees of success, and it's not going to happen overnight. But with sustained political support and the concentrated efforts on all sides, I believe that this plan can work," said General George Casey, commander of the multi-national force in Iraq.

And despite Democratic opposition, the administration has vowed to move forward with the new plan.

"We have money in the '07 budget, which has been appropriated by the Congress, to move these troops to Iraq, and the president will be doing that," national security adviser Stephen Hadley said on ABC's "This Week."

-- Compiled by Annie Schleicher for NewsHour Extra

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