US army extends Iraq tours of Guard and Reserve troops

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In a sign that the United States military is being stretched to the limit to sustain is open-ended occupation of Iraq, the US Army last Friday ordered about 20,000 National Guard and Army Reserve troops in Iraq and surrounding countries to extend their tours of duty to a year, months longer than most had anticipated.

Since September 11, 2001, military officials have had the authority to activate Guard and Reserve troops for two years, but most have been called up for one year of total service, including weeks or months of training in the US before being shipped to Iraq and debriefings upon their return. The new directive will extend most troops' original year-long mobilizations by anywhere from one to six months.

Army officials leaked details of the new deployment order to the *Washington Post* late Friday—a time likely to receive minimal press coverage—and have yet to make a formal announcement of the change. President Bush also made no mention of the directive in his nationally televised address Sunday evening, despite calling on Americans to "sacrifice" and bear the burden of the continuing military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In keeping with the Bush administration's "war on terror," those being asked to sacrifice are working men and women whose extended military deployment threatens not only the disruption of their personal and financial situation, but their very lives.

National Guard and Reserve troops in Iraq—who only learned of their extended deployment from press reports—responded angrily. One soldier interviewed by ABC News said that any comments he had would have to be "bleeped out." A spokesman for the Army Reserve at Fort McPherson, Ga., told the *Post* that most Guard and Reserve forces in Iraq and Kuwait would not be "pleasantly surprised" by the news.

The move will place increased hardship on the tens of thousands of men and women in the Army Reserve and National Guard who are already deployed overseas. Signing up for service with the expectation that they would serve on weekends and for annual training, more than 128,000 have now been assigned to active military duty both overseas and in the US.

The majority of reservists and guardsmen hold down civilian jobs and many support families. Their ranks also include students and retirees. Prolonged tours of duty will not only place strains on family life, but will threaten the jobs and small businesses left behind by deployed troops.

The army directive will also undoubtedly result in increased casualties among this segment of the military. Since the US invaded Iraq in March, 289 US troops have been killed, including 19 National Guard troops and 12 Army Reservists. One of these casualties, 21-year-old Darryl T. Dent, was buried at Arlington National Cemetery in Washington DC on Tuesday. He was killed by a detonated explosive as he rode with about 20 members of the DC Army Guard's 547th Transportation Company in a convoy providing security for a mail run in the northern Iraqi city of Al Adsad.

Darryl Dent's story is similar to those of many men and women who signed up for the Guard or Reserves and found themselves in war-torn Iraq or Afghanistan, facing a population increasingly hostile to US military occupation. He joined the National Guard in 1999 and, before being deployed overseas in April, worked as a security guard in a mall in Arlington, Virginia.

According to Vernon Dent, the young man's father, Darryl dreamed of attending medical school and had no plans to make a career out of military service. The

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senior Dent reacted bitterly to his son's death and the news that other young men and women would be kept overseas longer. "What they need to do," he told the *Washington Post*, "is bring them home."

According to National Guard spokesmen, there are presently about 30,500 National Guard troops stationed in Iraq and Kuwait—or about 18 percent of the total 166,000 US forces. This is the largest National Guard battlefield presence since the Korean War. By comparison, only about 7,000 National Guard troops served in Vietnam.

The US occupation of Iraq relies heavily on Guard and Reserve troops in such specialized areas as engineering, military police, civil affairs and psychological operations. A rotation plan announced by the Army in July to sustain a 120,000-troop force in Iraq through the end of 2004 includes two National Guard brigades. US military commanders fear that news of the 12-month deployments will undermine recruitment and retention of guard troops and reservists, as more prospective volunteers see economic and personal hardship—as well as death or maiming—as the increasingly likely outcome of joining up.

The US Army's decision to extend National Guard and Army Reserve deployments is indicative of the general personnel crisis currently facing the US military. Almost six months since the US launched the war on Iraq, about half of the army's combat forces are still deployed in the country. By early next year, eight of the 10 active-duty army divisions will have served in either Iraq or Afghanistan. The thousands of guard and reserve troops deployed are in addition to these forces.

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