

Pentagon orders 300 returned troops back to Iraq

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In a further indication of the US military's desperation in the face of the deepening debacle in Iraq, the Pentagon this week ordered some 300 soldiers who had returned just weeks before from a year of duty back to the US-occupied country.

The troops are members of the US Army's 172nd Stryker Brigade, based near Fairbanks Alaska. They were sent as an advance party of the 3,900-member unit and had been back in the US for between three and five weeks. Another 300 troops were about to board US-bound planes in Kuwait when Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld issued the order to suddenly extend their tours by at least another four months.

The brigade, which had been deployed in the northern city of Mosul, is being sent into Baghdad as part of a strategy to flood the Iraqi capital with US and Iraqi troops in an attempt to suppress resistance to the US occupation and quell a spiraling sectarian civil war. A combined US-Iraqi force of up to 50,000 is being used to conduct raids and police the streets. Already, US operations have touched off bitter clashes with residents of the predominantly Shia slums of Sadr City.

This redeployment into Baghdad, supposedly the center of the power of the US occupation and the American-backed government, is testimony to the abject failure of Washington's strategy of turning over security operations to Iraqi military and police forces. Many of these units have either participated directly in the sectarian violence or turned a blind eye to non-government militias and death squads.

According to a report published in the *New York Times* Wednesday, last month was the deadliest since the US invaded Iraq in 2003, with a total of 3,438 civilian deaths reported, an average of over 110 a day. As the newspaper noted, "The rising numbers indicate that sectarian violence is spiraling out of control, and seemed to bolster an assertion many senior Iraqi officials and American military analysts have been making in recent months: That the country is already embroiled in a civil war, not just slipping into one..."

This sectarian violence is itself a byproduct of the US invasion and occupation, fueled in large part by Washington's initial strategy of divide and conquer, utilizing predominantly Shia and Kurdish units to suppress resistance within the Sunni population. This strategy has proven woefully ineffective in halting insurgent attacks, which have increased more than five-fold, from an average of 16 a day three years ago to 90 attacks daily in June of this year.

Now, with the raids on Sadr City, the US occupation authorities

are attempting to rein in the Shia militias, under conditions in which Washington is increasingly concerned about their ties to Iran, which appears to be the next likely target for a US attack.

The sudden recall of troops already sent home from Iraq is unprecedented in the three-and-a-half-year war and occupation. By all accounts, its impact upon the morale of the 172nd Stryker Brigade and their families has been devastating.

An indication of this reaction can be found on a web site set up for families of the troops: <http://www.bringhome172nd.org/stryker/>

Many of them have posted comments that detail not only their own outrage over Rumsfeld's order, but also the impact it has had upon the troops themselves.

"My world came crashing down," wrote the wife of one soldier. "I sat down and cried. I didn't know what else to do. How was I going to keep going by myself? I had already spent a year away from my best friend, my husband, and now they want to keep him longer. My family is all the way on the other side of the country. I am alone. All I have is my kids. Ohhh, how am I going to tell my kids?"

"President Bush said the soldiers have to stay in Iraq, but he didn't have to feel my heart breaking. He didn't have to look into my kids' eyes and tell them that their daddy isn't coming home. He doesn't have to live on edge constantly and fear every time the phone rings."

The mother of a brigade member, who is also married to member of the US Army, wrote: "To wait just days before they were due to be home is an outrage to them and their families. I am angry and upset and feel like I am going to have a nervous breakdown because of all this. Like most of you, I have been numb for days now. I can only imagine how our soldiers feel."

"My husband, who proudly serves, also feels like this is a slap in the face to our soldiers. He trains soldiers from different units all over the United States to prepare them for what they will face in Iraq, Afghanistan, etc. He feels like this has been an injustice to our military and their families... President Bush, Donald Rumsfeld, and the Pentagon.... SHAME ON ALL OF YOU!! Bring our TROOPS HOME NOW."

The wife of another soldier wrote of her phone conversation with him: "He says all of the soldiers he sees walking around are dazed and detached. He himself is more depressed and listless than I have ever heard him be before. It's not the extension, it's that our government led us all to believe they were coming home without a

doubt. They got them ready, even sat them on their planes, and then ‘whoops! We were short-sighted, you guys gotta pay for that now. Let’s go to Baghdad!’... [T]hey worked their butts off to come home for roughly 365 days. They have to think, ‘Now I have another chance to die for Iraq, a country I want nothing more to do with.’”

She continued: “I used to support this administration completely, now I just can’t believe it. Ever since my husband was first deployed, I would listen to Bush talk about caring for our soldiers and just laugh, a very sad laugh. I knew then and I, without a doubt, know now that if he knew the pain and suffering he has caused for his agenda, he wouldn’t be smiling... I feel like we’re in a nightmare, and that our country is turning into the very thing we created it against. I feel like soon we should be taking up arms against it.”

Asked by the media about the impact of his order on the morale of the troops, Rumsfeld dismissed the vocal complaints. “We have in our force all volunteers, all people who put up their hands and said I want to serve the country,” he said. “And that’s a very different thing from a conscript force, a drafted force, and folks are so proud of what they’re doing and so convinced what they’re doing is right that morale has been uniformly very good.”

There is ample evidence that reaches far beyond the immediate outrage over the redeployment of the Stryker brigade that morale is anything but “good.” Many units are already into their third deployment to Iraq in as many years, with some already beginning a fourth.

Mental health experts, both within and outside the military, are expressing growing concerns about the impact of these back-to-back deployments in a country where there is overwhelming hostility to the US occupation. A report that is expected to be released later this month by the US Army on the mental health of American soldiers in Iraq points to a spike in suicides last year, according to United Press International (UPI). The news agency says that the Army’s report cites a doubling of the suicide rate among troops deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan between 2004 and last year.

“What’s causing this increase, most importantly, is operational tempo, folks going back for a third and fourth tour,” Paul Rieckhoff, executive director of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America told UPI. “It causes breakdowns on the individual and institutional level. Imagine being at your job with no vacations or weekends. It starts to wear on you, and compounded with increase in attack frequency, the insurgency continues to be an issue, divorce rates are up—all these factors go into a complex cauldron to increase the likelihood of suicide.”

The military’s increasing crisis has also found expression in a report issued this week by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) citing military recruiters’ use of aggressive methods and even criminal activity in their drive to lure young people into the Army.

According to the GAO, substantiated accusations of wrongdoing by recruiters increased by more than one third between 2004 and 2005, while criminal cases, including those involving sexual harassment and falsification of records, more than doubled.

USA Today reports that Congress is preparing to cut in half

funding for research and treatment of brain injuries caused by bomb blasts, one of the most prevalent wounds suffered by troops deployed in Iraq. Both the House and Senate versions of the 2007 Pentagon appropriations bill provide only \$7 million for the Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center, just half of the funding provided last year and little more than a third of what the center had requested.

“I find it basically unpardonable that Congress is not going to provide funds to take care of our soldiers and sailors who put their lives on the line for their country,” Martin Foil, a member of the center’s board of directors, told the newspaper. “It blows my imagination.”

The *USA Today* report refers to a clash with the Pentagon’s civilian leadership over a proposal by the center to identify and monitor troops who have suffered less serious brain injuries from explosions. Its initial research suggests that up to 20 percent of the soldiers assigned to front-line units have experienced such concussions, which can cause permanent brain damage.

Undoubtedly, the Pentagon chiefs are reluctant to initiate any program that could result in further diminishing the ranks of troops that can be sent back into the Iraqi occupation, or make the government liable for future disability retirements.

Asked about the cut in the center’s funding, a spokeswoman for the Senate Appropriations Committee told *USA Today*, “Honestly, they would have loved to have funded it, but there were just so many priorities.” Among the top priorities for the Senate leadership is the still stymied attempt to slash estate taxes for the super-rich.

Such abuse and disdain toward rank-and-file soldiers by the ruling elite and its government—behind all the “support our troops” rhetoric—must inevitably drag down both recruitment and reenlistment under conditions in which the military is already hard-pressed to maintain the permanent occupation of Iraq. Its continuation and the threats to launch even wider military adventures carry with them the likelihood that Washington will once again resort to the draft, dragooning young people into serving as cannon fodder in the drive to assert US hegemony over the region’s oil wealth.



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