

Pentagon extends tours for US troops in Iraq and Afghanistan

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The Bush administration has announced that all members of the Army currently deployed in the Middle East, Central Asia and the Horn of Africa, will have their standard tour of duty extended from 12 months to 15 months. The decision will also affect all Army soldiers sent to these regions in the future.

About 100,000 Army soldiers in Iraq, Afghanistan and Kuwait will be affected. The decision does not apply to members of the Navy or Marines, who follow different tour schedules.

The purpose of the extension, announced by Defense Secretary Robert Gates in a press conference on Wednesday, is to allow for the long-term deployment of additional troops in Iraq, as part of the administration's "surge" policy. Gates said that the new policy of 15-month tours will "provide us with the capacity to sustain the deployed force," while upholding "our commitment to decide when to begin any drawdown of US forces in Iraq solely based on conditions on the ground."

Gates said the new tour lengths would allow the military to sustain a level of 160,000 troops in Iraq for "at least a year."

In other words, the change is necessary to implement a policy of escalating the Iraq war in an attempt to crush opposition to the US occupation. The consequence of the tour extension will be to increase the number of casualties—of Iraqis and of US soldiers. Already, nearly 3,300 US soldiers have been killed in Iraq, and tens of thousands have been injured. The number of Iraqis killed as a result of the invasion is unknown, but estimates put the figure at about 750,000.

Gates's announcement underscores the fact that escalation of the Iraq war is continuing without obstruction within the political establishment, despite the overwhelming opposition of the American people.

The Pentagon chief cynically sought to portray the decision to extend the tours as a response to the needs of US soldiers and their families. "Instead of dribbling out these notifications to these units [in the form of stop-loss orders], what we're trying to do here is provide some long-term predictability for the soldiers and their families about how long their deployments will be and how long they will be at home." He said that all soldiers will have a full year between tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, and that the schedule would now be "fair, predictable and sustainable."

Zohreh Whitaker, a member of Military Families Speak Out, an organization of over 3,000 military families opposed to the war, told the WWSW that she is "horrified, disgusted, worried and stressed" by the announcement. Her son has been in Iraq since July 2006, and the change in the length of the tour means he will be in Iraq until at least October 2007.

Responding to Gates' assertion that the new tour length would be fair, Whitaker said, "The whole thing is not fair. If the whole war is not justified, if the whole war is illegal and based on lies, nothing is fair."

"For loved ones left behind, nothing is fair," she said. "Every time the doorbell rings, every time there is a late phone call, it is the same—you worry about your loved one."

Whitaker said that she was upset by the indifference of politicians of both parties, who she said are not listening to the American people. About the war, she said, "It is all about money."

The change in the tour length involves yet another violation of the Army's own rules for tour lengths and intervals. According to Army policy, soldiers are supposed to deploy overseas for one year, followed by two years of rest and retraining. In practice, many soldiers involved in the Iraq occupation have had their

tours extended repeatedly through stop-loss orders, and most have had to return with one year or less rest between tours.

Fifteen months would represent the longest official combat tour length since World War II. There is also no guarantee that, even with the extension, soldiers will not be kept longer through the use of additional stop-loss orders.

The change follows an announcement Monday that 13,000 National Guard troops would be sent to Iraq between 2008 and 2010, in violation of rules that require National Guard soldiers to have five years rest between combat operations.

The decision is a further sign of the strains being placed on the military as a consequence of the occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan. These strains have generated concern within the ruling elite itself and sections of the military brass. General Barry McCafrey, the former head of US Southern Command, told the *National Journal* recently, “The truth is, the US Army is in serious trouble and any recovery will be years in the making and, as a result, the country is in a position of strategic peril.” He said, “The Army is unraveling, and if we don’t expend significant national energy to reverse that trend, sometime in the next two years we will break the Army just like we did during Vietnam.”

Concern over the deterioration of the US military, which has made it very difficult for the US to threaten intervention in other countries, including Iran, has in part motivated the Democrats criticism of the Bush administration’s surge policy in Iraq.

Leading Democrats repeated these concerns in response to Gates’s announcement. Senator Joseph Biden, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, declared, “The decision to extend the tours of US service members by three months is an urgent warning that the administration’s Iraq policy cannot be sustained without doing terrible long-term damage to our military.” Representative Ike Skelton, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, worried that the decision would “have a chilling effect on recruiting, retention, and readiness.”

Republican Senators John Warner and Susan Collins, both on the Senate Armed Services Committee, said that the increase in troop rotations underscored “the urgent need to increase the size of the Army and

Marine Corps.”

Democrats and some Republicans have been pushing for an expansion of the Army for years. Following the November elections, the Bush administration agreed to increase regular forces by 65,000 troops over the next five years, but this increase is only in its initial stages. The Army has also been lowering recruitment standards and increasing retention and recruitment bonuses, and the military has stepped up prosecutions for desertion in an attempt to stem the outward flow of soldiers.

The position of the Democrats has nothing to do with ending the war or opposing the attempt by the US military to seize control of the Middle East. Their concern is that the way the Iraq occupation has been carried out has done enormous damage to the interests of American imperialism, including by placing enormous strains on the military.

Leading Democratic Senators have made clear that they Congress will pass a bill that will continue to fund the war, including the recent escalation.



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