

As May death toll of US soldiers hits 124

Bush administration calls for permanent US military presence in Iraq

Jerry White
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Bush administration officials said this week that US military presence in Iraq could last decades, drawing an analogy with South Korea, where US troops have been stationed for more than half a century. Comments by the White House, the defense secretary and the chief US military commander in Iraq were made as the death toll of US soldiers reached 124 in May—the third highest monthly total since the war began in March 2003.

Speaking at press briefing Wednesday, White House spokesman Tony Snow said President Bush believed the situation in Iraq and the “larger war on terror” were going to “take a long time” and that a long-term US presence in the Middle Eastern country would be required. Even after the Iraqis took over the major security functions, he said, the president believed the US would have to maintain an “over-the-horizon support role” to “react quickly to major challenges or crises.”

Snow said this would be comparable to the US presence in South Korea, “where for many years there have been American forces stationed there as a way of maintaining stability and assurance on the part of the South Korean people against a North Korean neighbor that is a menace.” Saying he wasn’t comparing North Korea to “Iraq’s neighbors”—a clear reference to Iran—Snow said the chief role of US troops would be to provide internal, not external, security in Iraq.

Pretending that the American-occupied country exercised national sovereignty, Snow said US troops would remain “as long as seems reasonable to the Iraqi people who are, after all, your hosts and the ones making the invitations.” Asked if US troops would remain in the Middle Eastern country for 50 years, as they have in South Korea, the White House spokesman said it was impossible to say. “I don’t know,” he said. “It is an unanswerable question. But I’m not making that suggestion ... The war on terror is a long war.”

Defense Secretary Robert Gates echoed these remarks Thursday, saying some level of American troops would remain in Iraq for a “protracted period of time.” Gates said such a long-term presence would assure allies in the Middle East and others that the US would not withdraw from Iraq as it did from Vietnam, “lock, stock and barrel.” The “idea is more a model of a mutually agreed arrangement whereby we have an

enduring presence, but one that is by consent of both parties, and under certain conditions,” he said.

Gates and Adm. Timothy J. Keating, commander of the US Pacific Command, spoke to reporters at Camp Smith in Hawaii ahead of a trip to Singapore for the Shangri-La Dialogue, a three-day regional security conference. Gates said one of the central messages for the upcoming conference was that “while we are fighting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and a global war on terror, we have no intention of neglecting Asia.” The latter remark, chilling for the Asian people, was a reference in particular to China, whose military buildup, the defense secretary said, was of great concern to the US.

The reestablishment of permanent US military bases in the Middle East—particularly after popular opposition led to the withdrawal of US troops from Saudi Arabia four years ago—has been one of the major goals of the US, which sees Iraq as a launching pad for interventions throughout the oil-rich region. The analogy to South Korea is also significant for what it says about the US “bringing democracy” to Iraq. US military forces intervened in the Korean Peninsula in 1950 to crush the anti-colonial struggle and the presence of US troops helped prop up a military dictatorship that ruled South Korea for decades.

Lt. General Raymond Odierno, who oversees daily military operations in Iraq, said he backed a South Korean-style arrangement to maintain US forces in Iraq for years. “That would be nothing but helping the Iraqi security forces and the government to stabilize itself, and to continue to set itself up for success for years to come, if we were able to do that,” Odierno told Pentagon reporters in a videoconference from Baghdad.

The general took the opportunity to say that September would be too soon to judge the success of the military surge ordered by President Bush last January because the full buildup of US troops would not be completed until mid-June, when 8,000 more soldiers arrived in Baghdad and Anbar province. The US Congress had mandated military commanders to report on the progress of the surge by late summer and Odierno said he would deliver his evaluation by that time. Odierno’s comments only demonstrate the farce of the Democratic majority’s claims to be holding the Bush administration “accountable.”

Defense Secretary Gates—whose nomination was confirmed with the support of the Democrats—responded by saying he did not mind Odierno’s request for more time and did not think the general was seeking to change the timeline. “I don’t think that the goalposts have changed really at all,” Gates said. “I think he basically was saying that the report can go a number of different ways, one of which is: ‘I need a little more time.’ In my opinion,” Gates added, “our military commanders should not have to worry about the Washington clock.”

Meanwhile, in order to show the supposed progress of the surge, Odierno broke with protocol and released body count figures reminiscent of the Vietnam War period. He said US forces had killed 3,184 enemy combatants, including 837 in Baghdad, and wounded another 1,016, since the February 13 start of the troop increase. Another 18,000 people had been detained, according to military data, while security barriers had been built in a dozen locations.

In coming weeks, Odierno said the US military forces would confront insurgents in the outskirts of Baghdad, especially in the south and east in Diyala province. This week US forces, backed by helicopter gunships, waged a two-day battle in the Amariyah district in western Baghdad, according to a councilman and other residents of the Sunni district.

US commanders continue to warn of increased American casualties as troops leave well-fortified areas and engage in street-by-street fighting and man local security stations. The death toll in May of 124 US soldiers in Iraq was reported by Iraq Coalition Casualties, a web site that monitors official death confirmations from the US Department of Defense. The only higher months were in 2004, during the April and November sieges of Fallujah, when 135 and 137 US troops were killed respectively.

Military officials say anti-occupation forces are becoming more sophisticated. “Everyone has to remember we are fighting a very savvy adversary that’s constantly adapting their tactics, techniques and procedures,” said, Col. Mike Galloucis. “They are making very lethal roadside bombs.” Earlier in the spring, US officials say, improvised bombs accounted for about 60 percent of American deaths. They now account for 80 percent. Over the Memorial Day weekend, insurgents shot down a US helicopter in Diyala and booby-trapped the site and the road leading there, blowing up six US soldiers in a rapid-response team.

Among the last US soldiers to be killed this week was a 20-year-old southern Kentucky soldier, Joshua Moore, whose Humvee was hit by an IED in Baghdad. Moore, from Logan County, enlisted in the Army shortly after graduating high school. Moore had returned home recently on a 15-day furlough, his father said, seeing his family for the first time in a year.

Whatever their tactical differences, both the Democrats and Republicans are committed to defending the geopolitical interests of US imperialism in the oil-rich region and

preventing a Vietnam-like outcome for the US. With the growing military debacle in Iraq, a consensus is beginning to emerge on a “post-surge” strategy, which would redeploy US troops away from urban areas and make greater use of special forces and air power to “fight terrorism” and defend US “national interests.” The aim of such a strategy would be to limit US casualties and create better political conditions in the US for a long-term occupation of Iraq and control of its vast energy resources.

In pursuit of this goal the deaths of thousands of US soldiers and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis are small potatoes. This contempt was summed up by long-time ABC News journalist Ted Koppel in a May 31 commentary titled, “Seeking perspective on the US death toll in Iraq.” Expressing concern that the rising US death toll was evoking “the sense of national urgency to get out,” Koppel argues that the US population could be persuaded to accept even higher numbers of fatalities if the Bush administration made the case that control of Middle Eastern oil was crucial to the American people.

“Where the Bush administration has failed, tragically and repeatedly, is in explaining to the American public why US forces were sent into Iraq in the first place, and why they must remain there now,” Koppel writes. Scoffing off as ridiculous official explanations such as America’s “moral obligation to deal with chaos and anarchy” in other countries, Koppel says the real reason “has to do with American interests: stability in the Persian Gulf, the world’s single largest producer and exporter of oil and natural gas ...

“That is not an easy political argument to make: Blood for oil has never been a popular slogan in America,” Koppel acknowledges. Nevertheless, he said, politicians had to tell the Americans if they wanted to keep driving their cars they had to support the war. “If you try to keep those vehicles running without Persian Gulf oil, you’ll know that a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq is nowhere in our immediate future.”



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