

First days of June claim 17 more US soldiers in Iraq

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Sixteen more US soldiers died in Iraq in the first three days of June. Another who had been injured in May in a roadside bomb near Baghdad died on Friday in a military hospital in Texas. The deaths follow a bloody month for US forces in Iraq in May, when 127 US troops were killed, the third worst monthly toll since the March 2003 invasion.

One soldier was killed Friday as a US patrol approached two men near a mosque southwest of Baghdad and one of the men blew himself up. Six soldiers were killed in roadside bombings Sunday, including four in a single bombing in northwest Baghdad. Another nine were killed in a series of attacks across Iraq over the weekend.

According to official military figures, 410 US troops have died since the Baghdad “surge” operation ordered by the Bush administration began on February 14. The new casualties bring the official US death toll in Iraq to 3,496 in the more than four years of war.

Iraqi sources also reported a sharp rise in civilian deaths in May. An Iraqi Interior Ministry official reported that close to 2,000 civilians were killed last month. These deaths included a renewed increase in casualties from sectarian killings.

Not including the deaths in June, in the 10 months since US troops began more aggressive patrolling in Baghdad and the other most volatile areas there have been about 90 US soldier fatalities a month, compared to about 65 deaths per month in the previous 10 months. In Diyala Province, northeast of Baghdad, where the US troops have been fighting Sunni forces, 78 US soldiers were killed in the first five months of 2007, compared to 20 in all of last year.

The intense level of combat was also reflected in a lower ratio of wounded to killed soldiers for May, which fell to about 4.8 to 1, according to the Pentagon. This compared with an average of eight wounded to one killed for the war as a whole. In addition to the prevalence of

IEDs, or improvised explosive devices, attacks on US forces have included the use of explosively formed penetrators, or EFPs, powerful bombs able to pierce armored Humvees.

News of the rise in US troop and civilian casualties has been accompanied by comments from US officials warning of a long-term American presence in Iraq, portending more casualties and no end in sight to the brutal occupation. Ryan C. Crocker, the US ambassador in Baghdad, said that stabilizing Iraq “will take a lot longer than September.”

Appearing on “Fox News Sunday,” Crocker said, “It’s way premature to be talking in terms of victory or defeat.” He said that by September—when General David Petraeus, commander in Iraq, is supposed to report on the progress of the Baghdad “surge”—it would only be clear whether or not “the general direction is right.”

Brig. General Vincent K. Brooks, deputy commander of the First Cavalry Division, responsible for Baghdad, commented that the operation “is at a difficult point right now, to be sure.” Only about 60 percent of the Iraqi army forces pledged are participating, and there are numerous reports of Iraqi police forces—assigned to man checkpoints and conduct patrols—planting bombs targeting US forces.

Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, speaking Sunday on the ABC News program “This Week,” said the Iraqi army would not be prepared to take over security before the end of 2008, and that predicting any sooner date would be “unrealistic.” “To build an army after the collapse of a regime is not so easy,” he said.

By all yardsticks, the situation in Baghdad since the initiation of the surge has deteriorated qualitatively, both militarily and in relation to the dire consequences for the Iraqi population. Three months into the operation, US forces control fewer than one-third of the city’s neighborhoods, according to an internal military assessment provided to the *New York Times*. This review,

completed in late May, noted that US and Iraqi forces were able to “protect the population” and “maintain physical influence over” only 146 of Baghdad’s 457 neighborhoods.

In the more than 300 neighborhoods where US forces do not “maintain physical influence,” US soldiers still face strong “resistance,” according to US brigade and battalion commanders. When military planners outlined the Baghdad operation last year, they set a target of July of this year for placing the majority of Baghdad neighborhoods under US control. This timetable has been missed by a wide margin. US forces have had to enter some of these neighborhoods multiple times, with insurgents returning to these areas following the US “sweeps.” Commanders have yet to even attempt any clearing operations in all but a small portion of Shia-dominated Sadr City.

In addition, US commanders have also diverted troops outside Baghdad to Diyala Province in response to a sharp increase in violence there. They have also sent about 4,000 troops in search of three US soldiers captured in a May 12 ambush near Mahmoudiya, about 20 miles south of Baghdad. The body of one, Pfc. Joseph Anzack Jr., 20, of Torrance, Calif. was found in the Euphrates River on May 23. A video released by the Islamic State of Iraq group showed the ID papers of the remaining two and claimed they had been killed, although the US military said it would continue the massive manhunt.

According to statistics compiled by Iraq’s ministries of interior, defense and health, 1,944 civilians were killed in May, a 29 percent increase over April. An Interior Ministry office reported the figure under condition of anonymity as the Iraqi government has ceased reporting on civilian casualties.

The Bush administration claimed one of its central aims in launching the surge was to protect Baghdad’s civilian population from sectarian violence. Following three months of decline, however, sectarian murders are on the rise in the capital city. Police now routinely report about 30 such killings a day, compared to 10 a day in the first weeks of the security crackdown.

In May, 726 unidentified corpses were found in Baghdad, compared with 411 during April. Many were bound and shot in the head, with signs of execution or torture. The US military contends this increase is a “spike” and not a “trend.”

Iraqi men, women and children are perishing in large numbers as victims of car bombs, homemade bombs and mortar strikes, which are becoming more common. At

least 20 people were killed and dozens injured over the weekend in two mortar attacks on Shia and Sunni neighborhoods in Baghdad.

According to Iraqi authorities, at least 15 people were killed on Monday in eight separate bombings, shootings and other violent incidents. A least 47 bodies were discovered nationwide, including 28 bullet-ridden bodies in Baghdad, all apparent victims of sectarian executions.

Civilians also continue to die as a direct result of the occupation force’s fire. Last Friday, three children, ages 7, 9 and 11, were killed when a coalition tank’s guns were aimed at insurgents near Fallujah. Many more such incidents go unreported. The United Nations reported in January that 34,452 civilians were killed and more than 36,000 wounded in 2006, and described the situation as a “rapidly worsening humanitarian crisis.” The Iraqi government has since refused to release official figures on civilian casualties.

Into this worsening situation, the last of five American combat brigades ordered to Iraq for the Baghdad operation are now arriving, and will boost the number of US troops in the city up to around 30,000 compared to 21,000 before the operation, bringing the total number of US troops in occupied Iraq to about 150,000.

These increased troop numbers are certain to bring rising numbers of both civilian and US soldier casualties. George Bush warned of increased bloodshed when he announced plans for the surge in January, and Lt. Col. Christopher C. Garver, a US military spokesman in Baghdad underscored the same in comments on Sunday.

“This is going to get harder before it gets easier,” Garver said. “This is how we’re going to get to long-term security, through this short-term upswing in contact with the enemy.”



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