

Bush orders

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commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus, that he should bring some 5,700 troops home by Christmas and a total of 21,500 combat troops out by mid-2008.

That would leave about 130,000 troops in Iraq, roughly the number in December 2006, one month before he escalated US force levels in a thus-far failed effort to give Iraq's leaders room to reach key political compromises.

Bush also bluntly acknowledged he was not satisfied with the pace of Iraqi political reforms that Washington views as critical to forging national unity and quelling sectarian violence and urged leaders in Baghdad to do more.

"The government has not met its own legislative benchmarks," said Bush, who directed a message to Iraq's people that "you must demand that your leaders make the tough choices needed to achieve reconciliation."

And he warned that "efforts by Iran and Syria to undermine that government must end," while predicting that "a free Iraq will counter the destructive ambitions of Iran," which he accuses of trying to develop nuclear weapons.

The president's plan came as the US Congress was poised to take up Democratic efforts to end the war and as presidential contenders faced tough questions on what they would do if elected in November 2008.

Democratic Senator Jack Reed, giving his party's response, said it was "time to change course" and urged support for "a plan to responsibly and rapidly begin a reduction of our troops in Iraq."

Democrats lack the votes to set a timetable for ending the war, but hope to secure Republican support to limit the US role in Iraq to battling insurgents and Islamic militants, training the Iraqi army and protecting US personnel and installations.

They also hope to ensure that troops spend as much time at home as they do deployed in the

war zone -- an apparent bid to limit the numbers of troops available for deployment.

Democrats vying to succeed Bush swiftly criticised his announcement.

"I continue to implore the president to change course, bring our troops home faster, and end this war responsibly as soon as possible," said Senator Hillary Clinton, the Democratic Party's front-runner.

Republican leaders defended the president's strategy.

"Congress is faced with a stark choice: either rally behind the proven, responsible strategy set forth by General Petraeus and bring our troops home after victory, or demand an irresponsible, precipitous withdrawal that will force our troops to leave in defeat," said House Republican minority leader John Boehner, who has just visited Iraq.

Bush's announcement came after two days of testimony by Petraeus and the US ambassador in Baghdad, Ryan Crocker, before the White House delivers to Congress a progress report on the war on Friday.

Petraeus acknowledged in testimony to lawmakers that the draw-down reflected the end of the "surge" Bush ordered in January, but White House officials have couched it as the natural response to "progress" in Iraq.

"We've got a long way to go. It's very hard. We're realistic about it," Bush spokeswoman Dana Perino said.

Bush made only a passing reference to a setback to US efforts -- the bombing that killed a top Iraqi Sunni sheikh, Sattar Abu Reesha, who spearheaded a campaign against al-Qaeda in his

respective home province of Anbar.

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