

Bush was unrealistic about war: McCain

20 killed in Iraqi violence

AP, AFP, Rock Hill/ Baghdad

Republican presidential candidate John McCain said Saturday that voters are frustrated with the war in Iraq because of the Bush administration's unrealistic projections early in the conflict.

The Arizona senator told reporters he was pleased with Gen. David Petraeus' testimony before Congress this past week because it "did not present this totally rosy scenario. That's why Americans are frustrated today."

He blamed "different administration officials" for that. "It's all the president's responsibility," McCain said, but those reporting to him were also responsible.

Earlier in the day, McCain was critical of former Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, saying his failings "frustrated and saddened" the American people.

McCain was in the midst of the South Carolina leg of his "No Surrender" tour, a trip that took him from Rock Hill in the Upstate to Little River along the coast near Myrtle

Beach. At each of four speeches, he urged voters to pressure Congress to stay the course in Iraq. And he told reporters that Democrats are heading down a "blatantly unconstitutional" path on the war.

He drew crowds of 200 or better at each stop as he urged people to write lawmakers, including wavering Republicans, and "stand up for these young men and women" in uniform.

Between stops, McCain told reporters that Democrats, including presidential candidate Sen Joe Biden of Delaware, plan to overstep the role of Congress by trying to specify how long troops should stay in action.

"Where in the Constitution of the United States does it say that the Congress decides how long people spend on tours of duty and how long they would spend back in the United States? It's blatantly unconstitutional," McCain said.

McCain showed the crowds a copy of a newspaper advertisement, bought by the group MoveOn.org, that charged Iraq war

commander Petraeus with "cooking the books" on the Iraq war. It also played on his name by asking, "General Petraeus or General Betray Us?" "My friends, that is a disgraceful thing," McCain said at a packed Veterans of Foreign Wars post in Rock Hill.

McCain appeared with his wife, Cindy, who was on crutches and wearing a knee brace. She said she fell while grocery shopping and will have surgery to correct damaged ligaments.

Meanwhile, at least 20 people were killed in bombings and gunbattles in Iraq yesterday as the death toll rose to 49 from violence since the start of Ramadan, which al-Qaeda warned would be a bloody month.

In Baghdad, the relative calm which had prevailed since the Muslim holy month began on Thursday was shattered when a car bomb ripped through crowds outside an electrical goods shopping mall, killing two people and wounding seven, security and medical officials said.

US calls Korean nuke talks positive

AP, Seoul

Recent talks between a US-led team of nuclear experts and North Korea were "businesslike" and "positive," an official said Saturday, raising hopes for a deal soon on how to disable the North's nuclear facilities.

Lim Sung-nam, South Korea's No. 2 nuclear negotiator, made the remark after receiving a briefing from the American team of experts who returned to Seoul earlier in the day after a five-day survey of the North's main atomic facilities.

"The talks between the US and the North this time were conducted in a businesslike manner in a very positive atmosphere," Lim told reporters. "Additional consultations and a decision are expected at next week's six-party talks."

The remarks strongly suggest that the upcoming nuclear disarmament talks in Beijing are expected to produce an agreement with the North on how to disable the communist nation's nuclear facilities by year's end, so they cannot produce material for bombs.

The nuclear negotiations, aimed at ridding North Korea of its nuclear weapons and programs, bring together China, Japan, the two Koreas, Russia and the United States.



PHOTO: AFP

Anti-war protesters demonstrate in front of the US Capitol during a march from the White House to the Capitol demanding an end to the war in Iraq, the return of US troops and the impeachment of US President George W Bush in Washington, DC, Saturday.

Democrats plot new anti-war assault

AFP, Washington

Anti-war Democrats this week launch a new search for 60 Senate votes, the magic and so far elusive threshold needed to challenge President George W Bush's strategy to prolong the Iraq war.

Despite grabbing control of Congress last November, Democrats have repeatedly failed in their attempts to accept binding deadlines for the withdrawal of most combat troops in the war-torn nation.

Now, they have to regroup, after being outmanoeuvred in August and early September by the White House, and war commander General David Petraeus's judgement last week that the current troop escalation strategy was a success.

Democratic leaders appear to have dropped their attempt to force the president to accept binding Iraq troop withdrawal deadlines next year.

Instead, they may specify merely a "goal" of withdrawing troops by sometime early next year -- or just leave the final departure date open, Senate sources said.

Some Democrats, notably 2008 presidential hopeful Senator Barack Obama, and liberal Senator Russ Feingold, have vowed to fight

on for binding troop withdrawal timetables -- signalling a fierce inter-party battle.

In various plans being discussed behind closed doors on Capitol Hill, according to Congressional sources, Democrats are plotting a backdoor attack on Bush's war fighting powers.

By the Democratic script, September was supposed to have been the month, when constant pressure on wavering Republican senators broke the back of Bush's support for the war in Congress.

But a savvy public relations campaign by the White House, and testimony by Petraeus and US ambassador to Baghdad Ryan Crocker last week allowed the administration to claim progress in the war and shore up Republican support.

It now looks unlikely that Democrats are anywhere near persuading the eight or nine Republican senators they need to reach 60 votes in the Senate to overcome Republican obstruction tactics -- much less the two-thirds majority needed to override a presidential veto.

Veteran Democratic Senator Joseph Biden told reporters Friday Democrats would embark on a three-pronged anti-war strategy next week.

Arctic ice melting opens Northwest Passage

AP, Paris

Arctic ice has shrunk to the lowest level on record, new satellite images show, raising the possibility that the Northwest Passage that eluded famous explorers will become an open shipping lane.

The European Space Agency said nearly 200 satellite photos this month taken together showed an ice-free passage along northern Canada, Alaska and Greenland, and ice retreating to its lowest level since such images were first taken in 1978.

The waters are exposing unexplored resources, and vessels could trim thousands of miles from Europe to Asia by bypassing the Panama Canal. The seasonal ebb and flow of ice levels has already opened up a slim summer window for ships.

Leif Toudal Pedersen, of the Danish National Space Centre, said that Arctic ice has shrunk to some 1 million square miles. The previous low was 1.5 million square miles, in 2005.

"The strong reduction in just one year certainly raises flags

that the ice (in summer) may disappear much sooner than expected," Pedersen said in an ESA statement posted on its Web site Friday.

Pedersen said the extreme retreat this year suggested the passage could fully open sooner than expected but ESA did not say when that might be. Efforts to contact ESA officials in Paris and Noordwijk, the Netherlands, were unsuccessful Saturday.

A UN panel on climate change has predicted that polar regions could be virtually free of ice by the summer of 2070 because of rising temperatures and sea ice decline, ESA noted.

Russia, Norway, Denmark, Canada and the United States are among countries in a race to secure rights to the Arctic that heated up last month when Russia sent two small submarines to plant its national flag under the North Pole. A US study has suggested as much as 25 percent of the world's undiscovered oil and gas could be hidden in the area.