

Iraq 'not ready' for US pullout

BBC ONLINE

Iraq's top army officer has criticised as premature the planned US troop withdrawal by the end of next year.

Lt Gen Babaker Zebari warned that the Iraqi military might not be ready to take control for another decade.

The US says it is on target to end combat operations by the end of August and meet its deadline for removing all troops by the end of 2011.

It has 64,000 soldiers in Iraq. About 50,000 will remain until 2011 to train Iraqi forces and protect US interests.

Gen Zebari's warning echoes the remark by Saddam Hussein's former Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz last week that the Americans were "leaving Iraq to the wolves".

But the White House says President Barack Obama is satisfied with the progress made in Iraq, which will allow US troops to transfer security to local forces as planned.

Gen Zebari is particularly concerned about securing Iraq's borders against infiltration by insurgents.

He was reacting to an event on Wednesday, when eight soldiers were killed after being lured into a house wired with explosives in a town north of Baghdad where al-Qaeda is active.

The general's remarks echo a warning from Saddam Hussein's former Minister Tariq Aziz, who said the US would be "leaving Iraq to the wolves" - meaning al-Qaeda in Iraq and their ex-Saddamist allies.

The "wolves" are certainly active. Al-Qaeda is believed to have been responsible for a triple bombing in a market in Basra on Saturday.

And it's thought to be al-Qaeda men going around Baghdad shooting traffic policemen. The previously unarmed traffic police now have armed guards.

Gen Zebari told a defence conference in Baghdad that the Iraqi army would not be able to ensure the country's security until 2020 and that the US should keep its troops in Iraq until then.

"At this point, the withdrawal [of US forces] is going well, because they are still here, but the problem will start after 2011," he said.

"The politicians must find other ways to fill the void after 2011... If I were asked about the withdrawal, I would say to politicians: the US army must stay until the Iraqi army is fully ready in 2020."

Violence in Iraq has fallen since the peak of sectarian warfare in 2006-2007, but the number of civilian deaths from daily bombings, shootings and other attacks rose sharply in July.

The general's remarks contradict government policy - which is to stick to the State of Forces Agreement (Sofa) which set the timetable for the US withdrawal, says the BBC's Hugh Sykes in Baghdad.

There is a lot of anxiety in Iraq that the Americans are rushing away because the Democrats are afraid of losing votes in mid-term elections in November, our correspondent adds.



Hotel staff line the grand cantilever staircase under the hotel's iconic red dome as the Taj Mahal Palace and Tower hotel reopens in Mumbai yesterday. Eighteen months after it was stormed by Islamist militants, the 107-year old heritage wing of the luxury seafront hotel is set to receive guests from Indian Independence Day August 15 onwards for the first time since it was badly damaged by fire, smoke and explosions in the deadly 60-hour siege.

Iran TV airs 'confession' from woman facing stoning

BBC ONLINE

Iranian state TV yesterday aired what it says is a confession by a woman under threat of being stoned to death for adultery.

In the interview shown on Wednesday, Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani purportedly admits conspiring to murder her husband in 2005 and denounces her lawyer.

After an international outcry, Iranian officials temporarily halted her stoning sentence last month, but there are fears she will now be hanged.

The 43-year-old had said she was forced to confess to the charges of adultery.

In May 2006, a criminal court in East Azerbaijan province found Ms Ashtiani guilty of having had an "illicit relationship" with two men following the death of her husband. She was given 99 lashes.

But that September, during the trial of a man accused of murdering her husband, another court reopened an adultery case based on events that allegedly took place before her husband died.

Despite retracting a confession she said she had been forced to make under duress, Ms Ashtiani was convicted of "adultery



Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani

while being married" and sentenced to death by stoning.

AFP adds, her lawyer told a British newspaper that she was tortured for two days before confessing on state TV to being an accomplice to her husband's death.

The lawyer told the Guardian yesterday that his client was forced to give the interview, which was recorded in Tabriz prison where she has been held for the past four years.

"She was severely beaten up and tortured until she accepted to appear in front of camera. Her 22-year-old son Sajad and her 17-year-old daughter Saedehe are completely traumatised by watching this programme," lawyer Houtan Kian said on the newspaper's website.

The woman's alleged confession to complicity in her husband's murder, which was made in Azeri and dubbed into Persian, was aired on one of the main state-run television

channels.

There was no mention of the stoning sentence and the focus of the interview was moved away from the allegation of adultery.

The woman, whose face was pixelated, admitted her part in the 2005 killing, despite Ms Ashtiani having earlier told Western media that she had been acquitted of the charge.

Australian opposition vows uranium for India

AFP, Sydney

Australia's opposition yesterday vowed to sell uranium to nuclear power India if elected this month and cautioned against over-reliance on China, the country's top trading partner.

Foreign Minister Stephen Smith and his conservative, opposition rival Julie Bishop debated foreign policy for the first time ahead of knife-edge August 21 elections, laying out contrasting visions.

Smith touted his government's record since taking office in 2007, saying Labor had restored "neglected" ties with the United Nations and key countries in the Pacific, including Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands.

Rains bring new misery to China mudslide victims

AFP, Zhouqu

Heavy rains yesterday compounded the misery of a Chinese town devastated by mudslides that have killed 1,117 people, with new floods hampering relief efforts and the stench of death pervasive.

Thousands of soldiers and rescuers were battling to clean up roads blocked by cascades of mud and sludge unleashed by storms overnight, complicating the task of getting food, water and medicine to those in desperate need.

Another 627 residents are still missing after the disaster in Zhouqu, a remote town in the mountains of Gansu province in China's northwest, and three more disappeared overnight in the new downpours, state media said.

"The rain has had an impact on rescue work. It's hindering the distribution of drinking water," Han Huiping, a 25-year-old firefighter from a nearby town working on the relief effort, told AFP. "We're worried."

Heavy rains fell for about four hours overnight, turning one of the main streets in Zhouqu into a small river and flooding army tents on the roadside leading into the disaster zone.

At temporary shelters at two schools in Zhouqu, rain soaked straw mats and carpets,

leading survivors to spend the night in the hallways, the official Xinhua news agency reported.

As rain fell intermittently Thursday, workers used diggers to clear the massive avalanche of mud and rocks that split the town in two at the weekend. The peaks surrounding the town were shrouded in dark clouds.

The shortest route into Zhouqu from the provincial capital Lanzhou, mainly being used by relief crews, was blocked, Xinhua said.

Some shops in town had run out of drinking water before noon, but new supplies appeared to be trickling in, an AFP correspondent witnessed.

"We're really worried, but there is nothing much we can do," said one villager who asked not to be named.

The bad weather was expected to continue at least through Friday.

The Bailong river, which cuts through Zhouqu, was running higher on Thursday than the day before, and flowing more quickly, the AFP correspondent saw. State media said the level had risen by three metres (10 feet).

Troops were using excavators and explosives to clear blockages in the river and drain a barrier lake created by the rubble that, if it were to burst, could bring further destruction to areas already levelled by the torrent of mud.



Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, right, meets with his Palestinian counterpart Mahmoud Abbas in Cairo yesterday.

Abbas meets Mubarak amid pressure for Israel talks

AFP, Cairo

Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas met Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak in Cairo yesterday at a time of heightened pressure for the Palestinians to resume direct peace negotiations with Israel.

Abbas made no statement after the encounter but an Egyptian presidential source raised the possibility of a meeting later the same day between the Palestinian leader and Jordan's King Abdullah II, who is also visiting Cairo.

The visits come two days after Abbas met US Middle East envoy George Mitchell, whose administration is pressuring the Palestinians to resume direct negotiations with Israel.

Lanka panel warns of 'conflict threat' Tamil 'refugee' ship nears Canada

BBC ONLINE

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

A panel looking into the final years of the Sri Lankan war has heard that the threat of conflict remains.

The disclosure came on the second day of public hearings by the panel, whose formation and remit has been criticised by the US and human rights groups.

They argue that an international inquiry into the Sri Lankan conflict is needed, a proposal that has been roundly rejected by Colombo. The army defeated Tamil Tiger rebels after intense fighting in May 2009.

In two days of hearings, the panel has taken detailed testimony from four expert witnesses. There have been some quite strong political messages for the government, though little challenge to them on human rights.

A ship carrying Tamil asylum seekers from Sri Lanka is approaching Canada, with as many as 500 people on board.

The MV Sun Sea cargo ship has already entered Canadian-claimed waters within 320km from the Pacific coast of Vancouver Island, in the province of British Columbia, Canadian authorities said late on Wednesday.

A Canadian naval ship is preparing to intercept the ship should it come closer to shore. Authorities have expressed concern that both human smuggling and trafficking, and the movement of Tamil Tiger fighters - a group Canada considers an illegal terrorist organisation - may be taking place on the vessel.

The Tamil Tigers, or Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), fought a nearly three-decades' long civil war against the Sri Lankan government for an independent ethnic homeland for Tamils in the north and east of Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka's military defeated the LTTE last year, but accusations of rights abuses against civilian Tamils have continued.

Vic Toews, Canada's public safety minister, told CTV News: "We have been watching this boat for two and a half months or perhaps even longer, and we have some idea of who is on board."

"We are quite aware of potential issues that might arise when this boat enters our territorial waters," he said.

The Foreign Affairs Department said: "Those responsible for migrant smuggling will be pursued, investigated and prosecuted to the full extent of Canadian law and in accordance with the provisions of international conventions and protocols."

However, the Canadian government has asked local lawyers to act as legal aid for the Tamils.

Nagendra Katpana, the British Columbia representative of the Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam, which works for the independence of areas in the north and east of Sri Lanka, told Al Jazeera from Vancouver: "From our information we know there are close to 200+ Tamils onboard and these are a combination of men, women and children."

Regarding whether any of the passengers were members of the LTTE, Katpana said: "At this time we can't confirm such information. We hope that when they arrive the immigration authorities will determine their eligibility to enter Canada."

"This is propaganda ... in Sri Lanka these people are facing human rights violations ... Since May last year these people have been facing extreme hardship."

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For More Information: North South University, Office of the Dept. of Public Health (SAC, 8th floor), Plot # 15, Block - B, Bashundhara, Dhaka -1229. Cell: 01670023192, 01715622850, 01924732939, 01914444604, 01819022642, 01814756154, 01712279681, 01196248446. Phone: 880-2-8852000 Ext: 1914, 1905, 1913 & 1901. E-mail: dr.arif@northsouth.edu; nakhan@northsouth.edu; dr_salim2777@yahoo.com; Web: www.northsouth.edu