

## U.S. troops' death rate rising in Iraq

### Experts predict an extended war

#### ANALYSIS

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With the latest spike in violence in Baghdad, more U.S. troops have died since the turnover of power to an interim Iraqi government at the end of June than were killed during the U.S.-led invasion of the country in the spring of 2003.

A total of 148 U.S. military personnel have been killed since the partial transfer of sovereignty on June 28, compared with 138 who died in March and April of 2003, Pentagon figures show.

That trend is a grim indication that, 18 months after the invasion, the fighting appears to be intensifying rather than waning. While attention has been focused largely on standoffs in Najaf and other well-publicized hotspots, an analysis of the figures shows the U.S. military has taken more casualties elsewhere, including the deaths of about 44 troops in the western province of Anbar and 10 others in the city of Samarra.

The wide geographic dispersion of the violence reflects the strength of a resurgent opposition and also frames the challenge U.S. commanders face in the coming months as the United States seeks to hold an election to establish a new Iraqi government, said military officers and defense analysts.

"The 'peace' has been bloodier than the war," said Capt. Russell Burgos, an Army reservist who recently returned from a tour of duty with an aviation regiment in Balad, Iraq. In his view, the U.S. experience in Iraq is coming to resemble Israel's painful 18-year occupation of parts of southern Lebanon.

Before the war, predictions by even the most skeptical Bush administration critics did not include scenarios of escalating violence this long after the invasion, or of the U.S. military issuing a news release such as the one it sent out Tuesday morning, headlined "Fighting Continues in Eastern Baghdad." In addition, several cities near Baghdad have slipped from U.S. control in recent months and have become "no-go zones" for U.S. troops.

#### 'Tough, difficult business'

"No one that I know of, to include the most pessimistic experts, predicted a full-scale insurgency would break out within a couple of months of the overthrow of the old regime," said Steven Metz, a guerrilla warfare expert at the Army War College.

Now, Metz said, "the current situation may be sustained for a very long time."

On Tuesday, as the U.S. military crossed the symbolic 1,000-casualty mark in Iraq, Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld delivered a similarly somber assessment. "It's a tough, difficult business," he said at a Pentagon news conference, predicting more violence in coming months. But he also expressed confidence in the outcome, saying that "the offense [is] being effectively waged."

The recent surge in violence has been especially surprising because in the weeks after the transfer of power there was a phase that, for Iraq, felt to some almost like a lull.

"July was significantly slower" than the violence of the spring, said Maj. Richard Gullick, an Army

neurosurgeon in Baghdad. Then August roared back with 65 deaths and more than 1,000 U.S. troops wounded. The pace has worsened this month, with 25 fatalities so far.

The nature of the fighting also has changed. In July, most of the combat losses with identifiable causes were inflicted by planted explosives -- roadside bombs and land mines. But in August, deaths by gunfire and by suicide bombings also became a major cause, indicating that there were more direct confrontations with enemy fighters. "On a gut level, I'd probably agree that IEDs have played less of a role lately with respect to U.S. casualties," Gullick said, referring to improvised explosive devices, or bombs planted along roads.

More than a third of U.S. casualties last month were in Anbar province, in Iraq's western desert, where the Marine Corps is posted. Underscoring the intensity of the engagements there, the Marines lost more people last month -- 32 -- than the Army did, only the second time that has occurred since the spring 2003 invasion. The nature of the Marine deaths is harder to analyze because the Marines generally do not release information about the specific causes.

Air Force Gen. Richard B. Myers, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, on Tuesday summarized the fighting by noting that there has been a "spike in the casualties" not only of U.S. and Iraqi government forces but also of the insurgents, even as their opposition becomes more sophisticated. "The more aggressive the tactics of the insurgency, the greater their loss of human life," he said. Rumsfeld elaborated on that point, estimating that as many as 2,500 insurgents and criminals were killed in August.

### **Iraqi security forces hard hit**

Rumsfeld also said this week that casualties among Iraqi security forces allied with the United States are even heavier than the United States has suffered. "They've lost more Iraqi security people, killed or wounded, in the last two months than the coalition has lost people," Rumsfeld said in an interview with WDAY-AM radio in Fargo, N.D., according to a transcript released by the Pentagon.

Military experts said the latest round of combat is a sign that the U.S. military is engaged in what promises to be a protracted war. But they drew sharply different conclusions about what it means.

"Sadly, the 1,000th military death is but a bookmark on a longer and more painful road," said retired Army Lt. Col. Carlo D'Este, a historian specializing in World War II. As in the Vietnam War, he said, "there is no visible light at the end of the tunnel, nor has the Bush administration articulated a viable exit strategy, without which the war will continue indefinitely -- that is, years."

But retired Army Brig. Gen. David Grange drew a different conclusion. "We are fighting a counter-insurgency," he said, in which there is "no short-term fix." So, he said, the key to victory will be "maintaining the will of the American people."

Spec. Joseph Roche, a 1st Armored Division soldier who recently returned from more than a year in Baghdad, said that the U.S. military's morale in Iraq is high and that troops are performing well. His main worry is whether the American people will stick by the mission as they see more casualties. "My concern, honestly, is the impact this is having on the American people and our ability to be strong in this war."

*Researchers Madonna Lebling and Rob Thomason contributed to this report.*

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