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U.S. Troops Look To Turn The Tide On Rising Attacks

More-sophisticated assaults on American forces have prompted additional search operations

By Stephen J. Hedges, Tribune correspondent

U.S. forces in Iraq have begun increasing patrols and raids on Iraqi homes in an effort to stem the rising level of attacks against U.S. troops, convoys and installations, U.S. military officials say.

The new measures were prompted by the increasing number and sophistication of attacks, the officials said. Since President Bush announced the end of major combat in Iraq on May 1, 104 U.S. soldiers have been killed by hostile fire.

"For us, the war has not ended," said Maj. Michele Bredenkemp, an intelligence officer assigned to the Army's 82nd Airborne Division headquarters in Ar Ramadi, about 70 miles west of Baghdad. "This is still an ongoing combat operation."

Officials acknowledge that the increasing pace of search and raid operations could expose U.S. forces to further attacks. They say they also are aware that the accelerated operations could increase anti-American sentiments among the civilian populace, especially in the Sunni Triangle region where supporters of deposed dictator Saddam Hussein are concentrated.

But the officials argue that there is little alternative in the face of the assaults.

"We could raise emotions," said Lt. Col. Greg Reilly, the commander of the 1st Squadron of the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment, stationed in Al Qaim. "First of all, they [Iraqis] didn't like their own army being here. And then you've got raids and detentions. Yes, we're going to raise emotions."

The American raids have resulted in the detention of more than 300 people in Al Anbar province in the last three weeks, according to officers of the 82nd Airborne. The large province stretches from the city of Fallujah west to the Syrian border.

About half of those detained, officers say, are released when their names do not show up on lists of anti-coalition suspects.

Hostility toward Americans

But Iraqi leaders in Al Anbar say the new tactics will likely backfire, and that the best solution to the growing incidents against troops would be to turn the cities over to local control as soon as possible.

"We want the Americans out of the cities," said Sheik Naji Khalifa, a tribal leader who is a member of a 51-sheik council formed in Al Anbar with the help of American forces. "We want them to patrol the

countryside only and the borders. We can control the cities."

U.S. units throughout Iraq continue to experience near daily assaults by an enemy that employs four primary weapons: improvised explosive devices, or IEDs, that are remotely detonated along roadsides; rocket-propelled grenades; mortars; and assault rifles.

The remote explosive devices are usually made from leftover Iraqi tank or artillery rounds and are triggered as a vehicle passes by. Triggers are made from circuit boards and devices such as doorbell switches, garage door openers and pagers.

The bombs are usually concealed in roadside litter, a piece of junk metal or dead animals. Troops have recently uncovered a series of devices strung together with detonating chord to form a "daisy chain" of explosives along a roadway.

"We're definitely seeing a greater level of sophistication," said another 82nd Airborne officer, who asked not to be identified. "We're seeing more combined attacks, IEDs and mortar, or IEDs and gunfire. They are getting better."

Daily attacks on rise

The numbers of daily attacks in a remote place such as Al Qaim--there were nine in a 48-hour period ending Tuesday in the town near the border with Syria--illustrate how dangerous parts of the country still are for U.S. troops.

Third Armored convoys moving to and from the Al Qaim area have been attacked three times in the last two weeks, leading to three U.S. injuries. Soldiers killed two of the attackers.

Last week, gunmen killed the police chief in nearby Husaybah. A band of 20 masked men then stormed the station and held it for seven hours. Police officers inside were told they would be killed if they did not quit the force.

The gunmen later left, and U.S. forces are patrolling the area. Out of fear, policemen have refused to leave the station, and U.S. troops have nicknamed it "the Alamo." It has since been attacked with rocket-propelled grenades, mortars and rifle fire four to six times each day, military officials said.

"So far, no one has really been hurt bad," said Capt. Steve Smith, who was in command of the station Tuesday. "But they need to just get lucky once with an RPG into this courtyard."

The nearby border control point, where U.S. forces are training Iraqi border guards, is also attacked several times a day, soldiers there say. Usually the assailants use rocket-propelled grenades that are lofted at the facility, they said.

One exploded at the checkpoint early Tuesday morning. No one was injured.

In the last two weeks, troops in Al Qaim, about 200 miles northwest of the capital, have detained 200 people and confiscated a continuous stream of assault rifles and RPG launchers, said Lt. Col. Antonio Aguto, the 3rd Cavalry's executive officer.

Iraqis also at risk

The police chief's murder, Aguto said, "came out of a sense of frustration that he was cooperating with Americans." But that will not change the regiment's plan to increase the pressure in the town, he said.

Last month, gunmen also killed the police chief in Khaldiya, about 45 miles northwest of Baghdad. U.S. field commanders say the town harbors Hussein loyalists and Muslim extremists who have conducted attacks along Highway 10.

A series of early morning raids by troops of the 82nd Airborne in Khaldiya last weekend led to the detention of 21 people, including two former Iraqi Army generals, and the confiscation of electrical circuits that could be used in bombs and weapons.