



Suicide vest Qaeda 'weapon of choice'

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BAGHDAD: The explosive vest has become the weapon of choice for Al Qaeda in Iraq, with most jihadists nowadays wearing the lethal garment and the number of suicide attacks rising, the US military said yesterday.

"There has been an increase over time in the use of suicide vest bombers," US military spokesman Rear Admiral Gregory Smith told a news conference in Baghdad's fortified Green Zone.

"Late in 2007 there were about eight or 10 a month; in the month of February, there were 18. There is an increase," he said.

Military operations by Iraqi and US forces had put the jihadists to flight, leaving them less capable of carrying out car and roadside bombings.

"We are also seeing that average Al Qaeda fighters are wearing suicide vests and before they are captured they are often blowing themselves up," Smith told reporters.

"That is something we have not seen earlier. We used to see just the most senior leadership of Al Qaeda wearing suicide vests."

The US military in Iraq had also tracked an increase in requests by Al Qaeda leaders for foreign fighters to become human bombs, Smith said.

"They believe that a suicide bomber wearing a vest can become a useful tool for them to take part in the violence, so we expect them to try to increase the numbers of foreign fighters coming into the country for that purpose."



A resident gives bread to a US soldier during a joint patrol with the Iraqi army ,south of Baghdad ,in Yousifiya yesterday

However, he added, measures by countries such as Saudi Arabia and Syria to stop foreign fighters slipping across the border into Iraq has reduced the number of available recruits.

Whereas a year ago around 100 foreign fighters a month were sneaking into Iraq, this number had been reduced to 40 to 50 a month, Smith said. He said interrogation of 48 jihadists captured in the past four months had revealed a profile of a typical foreign fighter entering Iraq.

“He is a single male with an average age of 22,” Smith said. “Most of these terrorists have had no military experience. They were primarily engaged in low wage occupations. They were taxi drivers and construction workers.

“Their families are lower and lower-middle income classes. Most of the terrorists are from large families. Most of these young men wanted to make an impression but paradoxically did not tell their families they were going off to Iraq to fight for Al Qaeda for fear of disapproval,” the spokesman said.

“They were lonely, impressionable young men who wanted to find recognition and substance. Al Qaeda recruiters were trained to prey upon such people.”

The recruiter begins by engaging in “seemingly harmless conversation about Islam ... before then beginning to bring up the twisted interpretation of Islam”, Smith said. “Often they are approached by a recruiter at a local mosque ... or at the workplace.

The process of indoctrination begins. They are shown heavily edited videos of Americans supposedly abusing Iraqis.”

According to Smith, most of the captured jihadists said they had flown to Damascus airport then went overland to Iraq through the assistance of a facilitator. Once in Iraq, he claimed, they quickly became disillusioned.

“Al Qaeda Iraqi members were deeply suspicious of the foreign fighters - they look down on the imported terrorists and treat them very harshly,” he said.

“They told us they were lured here with the promise they would be killing Americans but they were disappointed. Most of the violence that they saw was directed at the Iraqi people.

“They felt misled. Eventually they felt discouraged and just wanted to go home. But their cell (leaders) had taken their passports and all their money. They felt trapped and hopeless. They were heavily pressured to become suicide bombers.

“They told us they were relieved to be captured. Some of them cried tears of relief during the initial interrogation.”—AFP