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# Mullen Addresses Meaning of Sadr's Basra Violence

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POPE AIR FORCE BASE, N.C., April 1, 2008 – The spike of violence in Basra and southern Baghdad proves the contention of military leaders that there are still going to be tough days ahead in Iraq, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said here yesterday.

Navy Adm. Mike Mullen told soldiers and airmen here that the fighting in the two cities is an indication that “we are very much tied to conditions on the ground, and conditions on the ground are going to continue to evolve.”

Mullen said this does not mean the redeployment of the surge brigades will stop. U.S. forces in Iraq are still set to draw down to 15 brigade combat teams by the end of July.

Mullen spoke to servicemembers from Pope and neighboring Fort Bragg and took their questions. He said their questions, comments and observations help him as he advises the president, the defense secretary and the rest of the National Security Council.

A week ago, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki ordered Iraqi forces to clamp down on illegal militias, criminals and thugs in the southern oil and port city of Basra. Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's Jaysh al-Mahdi organization contested the Iraqi security forces, and fighting spread north to Baghdad and other Shia cities in the south.

Mullen said he does not know what Sadr's intentions are in battling the government, and he praised Maliki's decision to go into Basra.

“I think what happened in respect to Basra, where the prime minister is taking some significant steps, internal to his sovereign country, with his own forces – have been positive,” Mullen said to the troops. “This is their country, and taking steps in this direction is positive. Will we learn some lessons from this? Absolutely.”

He said one aspect that is very clear to him is that any solution must be political. “It's not going to happen militarily,” the chairman said. Mullen would not predict what Sadr will do in the future.

Soldiers asked the chairman about decisions being made on deployment lengths and periods of “dwell time” at home stations between deployments. Mullen has been vocal in saying the Army needs to reduce its 15-month deployment length to the U.S. Central Command area of operations. “Fifteen months is too long,” he said.

Soldiers now deploy for 15 months and return to their home station for a year before shipping back to the combat zone. “This goes back to the exceptional men and women who serve today, and the level at which you execute is something I’ve never seen,” he said. “But I think it has a finite aspect to it.”

The force is not in imminent danger of breaking, but there has to be a balance, the chairman said. “My goal is to come down from 15-month deployments as rapidly as we can,” he said. “When that will be, I just don’t know.”

Another goal is to increase dwell time. Ultimately, soldiers and Marines will go to a 2-to-1 ratio, meaning they will be home twice as long as they are deployed. Part of getting to this state is increasing the size of the Army and Marine Corps, which is under way, and part is redeploying troops out of Iraq, the chairman said. Making more tours to South Korea accompanied, he added, may also be part of the solution.

“We also have to pay attention to the people in the units,” Mullen said. The services manage deployments by units, but soldiers and Marines move among units. They may return from one deployment, transfer and suddenly end up deploying again in short order.

“We’ve got to make sure we give our people enough breathing room, so they can have a life and spend some time with their spouse and children or meet someone so they can start a family,” Mullen said. “That’s hard to do when we’re coming and going so fast. We’ve got very tough missions, very demanding missions, and we’ve got to provide the forces to succeed in that.”

Mullen said he spends much of his time on the situation in Iraq and Afghanistan, but that he has extended that concern to the greater Middle East.

“I think it is the most important region in the world right now because of the instability there,” he said. “How we address it strategically from the military perspective is something I’ve spent a lot of time on since I took over as chairman.”

As chairman, Mullen said, he also has a broader, global focus. “Balancing our forces, balancing our capabilities, balancing our engagements around the world” is complex, he said. “We build risk in some areas because we just can’t be there right now because we’ve got so many of our forces in the Central Command (area of operations),” he said.

Mullen will visit Marines at Camp Lejeune, N.C., today.