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# Lengthy, Repetitive Deployments Risk Forces, Mullen Says

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MARINE CORPS AIR STATION NEW RIVER, N.C., April 1, 2008 – The military has to reduce stress on the Army and Marine Corps or risk crossing “an invisible red line” that will place too much strain on the force, Navy Adm. Mike Mullen said during an interview here today.

The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff spoke to reporters traveling with him after visits to Fort Bragg and Camp Lejeune. The Army post and Marine base have shipped thousands of servicemembers to operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Mullen said the mission must come first, but added that leaders have to be cognizant of the pace of operations and pressures placed on troops and their families.

Leaders are working to balance mission demands against the stressors of lengthy and repetitive deployments. “One of the reasons I made this trip to Fort Bragg and Camp Lejeune is to get a feel for that, and remembering that our No. 1 priority is accomplishing the mission,” the chairman said.

On the Army side, the chairman said he is convinced that the service has to get deployments down from 15 months to 12 “as fast as possible.”

The service also must increase “dwell time” -- the time soldiers spend at home following deployments, Mullen said. Currently, soldiers deploy for 15 months and have a dwell time of 12 months. The service must get that to 12 months deployed and 12 months home and ultimately to 12 months deployed, 24 months at home, he said. “We’ve been (deploying soldiers at an increased rate) since 2003, ... and repetitive deployments are really taking a strain,” he said.

The Joints Chiefs of Staff continually assess all the information on the level of strain on the forces they can get their eyes on, Mullen said. The most well-known numbers are for recruiting and retention, but others also indicate strain on troops. “We’re all concerned about the increased number of suicides in the Army,” Mullen said.

However, recruiting is still good, the chairman said. "We're struggling in a few areas with a few jobs, but we're hitting our numbers," he said.

Other numbers he is looking at include promotion rates. The Army is promoting captains to major at eight years on average rather than at nine or 10 years, as in the recent past. Part of this is that the service is growing and needs more majors. But part could be that people are punching out early, he said.

But all these are "lagging indicators" -- meaning they show a problem after it is serious enough to be visible statistically, Mullen said. "That gets to the discussion of this invisible red line that (Army Chief of Staff General George W. Casey Jr.) has talked about," he said.

"Right now we're doing okay," he continued. "The force has been remarkably resilient; they are accomplishing the mission and executing at a very high level."

But at some point, the pressures and stressors will be too much and servicemembers may elect to separate rather than stay in: that's the red line, he said. "We don't want to cross it, and we don't know exactly where it is," he said.

The chairman said that for the military to sustain the force for the long term, the services are going to have to move away from that red line. They are going to have to reduce the stress on the land forces, in particular. "I think we're close to (the red line) now," he said.