

General urges care in dealing with militia

By Brian Knowlton

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WASHINGTON: The top U.S. commander in Iraq on Thursday urged a "very, very sensitive approach" in dealing with the Shiite militias loyal to the radical cleric Moktada al-Sadr, as the Baghdad government unwinds a military operation against Sadr followers and other armed groups in southern Iraq.

The commander, General David Petraeus, also said that after two days and some 20 hours of testimony before four congressional committees this week, he understood lawmakers' impatience for faster progress in Iraq, and their mounting concerns about the war's rising costs.

"We certainly share the frustration," he said in a 90-minute news conference held along with Ambassador Ryan Crocker, at the glittering Newseum, a new museum on Washington's Pennsylvania Avenue dedicated to the history of the news. "It's less reassuring to folks than some want to hear, but it is the reality on the ground."

After their extensive congressional testimony, the two men offered no revelations on Thursday, but they did elaborate on the delicate U.S. relationship with the Sadrist militia, with which Iraqi government troops recently battled in the southern port city of Basra.

When a reporter asked whether the Sadrists were considered an enemy of the United States, both officials answered cautiously, almost deferentially.

Petraeus referred to the Sadrist militia as "a movement that has to be not just acknowledged but addressed, acknowledged, reached out to by the government of Iraq." Crocker was more direct, saying, "No, I would not consider it our enemy." At the same time, he said that if Sadrists attacked American forces, those forces would respond in kind.

The general has acknowledged that the cease-fire unilaterally declared by Sadr in August for his Mahdi Army has contributed to an overall decline in violence in the past year, coinciding with the increase in U.S. troops.

Violence could flare sharply if the Sadrists completely abandoned the cease-fire, making the American position delicate. Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki said recently that Sadr's political movement would be banned from coming provincial elections unless he disbanded its armed wing.

"Clearly we are concerned that the cease-fire could fray," the general said. "That's in no one's interests, and there is a lot of intensive discussion ongoing right now. I think there has to be a very, very sensitive approach, as this goes forward, to make sure folks don't feel like they're been backed into a corner from which there is no alternative."

The general also said that recent events, including what U.S. spokesmen say is increasing evidence of Iranian involvement in attacks on the Green Zone in Baghdad, had helped to underscore "the level of Iranian activity and to show the hand much more visibly than has been the case before."

He and Crocker said the U.S. side remained open to further security talks involving Iranian and Iraqi officials, and said the Americans' concerns about the latest violence would be made perfectly clear.

The ambassador said that it was not only the Americans who were affected. "These Iranian-provided rockets are coming down on their seat of federal government as well as some of our facilities," he said, referring to the attacks on the Green Zone.

He added, "What we're looking at here are some clear limits at how far the Iranians can press in Iraq before they get a significant backlash from the Iraqis themselves."

He told lawmakers this week that he favors a 45-day period of reflection, once a drawdown to around 140,000 troops is completed in July, before considering further reductions.