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U.S. Is Creating an Iraqi Militia to Relieve G.I.'s

By ERIC SCHMITT

BAGHDAD, Iraq, July 20 — The United States is creating a new Iraqi civil defense force within the next 45 days that is intended to free up thousands of American troops for antiguerrilla missions and to put an Iraqi face on the occupation's postwar security efforts, two top American generals said today.

The immediate goal is to field about 7,000 American-trained militiamen to protect supply convoys and replace American troops now guarding power plants and ammunition depots.

The new Iraqi Governing Council has strongly supported creating an Iraqi militia, which appears to go well beyond a proposal under consideration at the Pentagon to hire private contractors to provide security at sites around the country.

"Over time, it'll free up an awful lot of American forces," said Gen. John P. Abizaid, who is making his first visit to Iraq as the new head of the United States Central Command.

The persistent violence, two months after President Bush declared an end to major combat, was underscored today when two soldiers were killed and one was wounded in an ambush near Mosul in the north. Also today, an Iraqi driver for a United Nations agency died when his convoy was attacked near Baghdad.

In the southern city of Najaf, United States marines found themselves in a standoff with more than 10,000 mainly Shiite demonstrators, angered by rumors that American troops had harassed a cleric who had condemned the United States-led occupation.

Armed resistance to the American-led occupation is coming from a small number of "professional killers" drawn from "remnants of the old regime regrouping in squad-level attacks," said the United States administrator for Iraq, L. Paul Bremer III, on "Fox News Sunday."

The attacks pose "no strategic threat to us," Mr. Bremer said, in a guardedly upbeat assessment of conditions in Iraq. He cited as signs of progress the restoration of basic services, economic reforms and the recent establishment of the Governing Council, and he said it was "quite possible" that a constitutional conference, probably to open in September, could write a constitution that would lead to elections and a new government within a year.

Eventually, General Abizaid said, the Iraqi militia may also join American soldiers in joint raids against guerrilla fighters, who he said were waging increasingly sophisticated attacks against American troops.

The plan to establish an Iraqi civil defense force, first reported in The Washington Post, reflects the Pentagon's urgent priority to quell the mounting attacks against American troops and to use an interim

Iraqi force to help do that until a larger Iraqi national army is formed in the coming months and years.

Deputy Defense Secretary Paul D. Wolfowitz, who is nearing the end of a five-day mission in Iraq, has heard repeatedly from tribal and civic leaders that the occupation authority must give Iraqis a greater role in governing and securing their country in order for the American-led effort to have credibility with the Iraqi public.

Today, Mr. Wolfowitz said that recruiting Iraqis for security and intelligence tasks was essential for the rebuilding of Iraq to succeed. Small numbers of Iraqis and Iraqi-Americans have already served as interpreters and scouts for American commandos and regular forces. "We need more of these people," Mr. Wolfowitz said.

Establishing the militia as an interim Iraqi force is an acknowledgment that training and mobilizing an Iraqi national army will take years to accomplish. Bush administration officials in Washington and American commanders here say they cannot afford to wait that long.

Under the American plan, eight battalions with about 850 Iraqi militiamen each will train under and then work with army divisions in various regions around the country, said Lt. Gen. Ricardo S. Sanchez, the commander of allied forces in Iraq. After 45 days, the second group of eight battalions, or nearly 7,000 more militiamen, could be recruited and trained, General Sanchez said.

The makeup of each unit would mirror the demographics of that particular region and would probably include both men and women. Previous military service would not be required but any officer who served in the Iraqi Army above the rank of lieutenant colonel would be barred. Local leaders would help identify militia recruits, who would receive basic training in human rights, weapons handling and patrol techniques.

"Probably the most important contribution they will bring will be putting an Iraqi face on the security problems of the country and ensuring that wherever our soldiers are, Iraqis are contributing to that security," General Sanchez said.

Many details still need to be worked out. General Sanchez and his boss, General Abizaid, focused on different aspects of the program.

General Sanchez said the forces would focus on basic duties like convoy protection, at least initially. "These are not forces intended to conduct offensive operations," General Sanchez told reporters during a lunch interview. "They will be on patrol with us. They will be on fixed sites."

Cautioning that he was not necessarily contradicting his subordinate, General Abizaid said the militia could eventually take on more challenging offensive missions but he did not say when that might happen.

"Over time, as confidence increases in working with these guys, we will ask them to do more and more complicated things," General Abizaid said at the lunch. "And it's important we do."

Some allied commanders have on their own already starting training Iraqi civil defense forces. The Army's 101st Airborne Division has trained one company of Iraqi militiamen in Mosul to guard an ammunition depot and is preparing to graduate three more companies. British forces in Basra, in the south, have organized a new Iraqi patrol force. General Abizaid said the American military needed to change its cultural mindset when it came to dealing with indigenous forces, adding that the United

States needed to "train them and have them be prepared to conduct a full range of operations with us."

Recruiting for Iraq's new national army started recently, but American officials have said it will take a year to form an initial force of 12,000 soldiers and three years to create a 40,000-soldier force. The new militia could eventually be folded into the army, officials said.

"The important thing about the new Iraqi army is not the number of divisions or the type of equipment they have, but whether or not the officer corps respects the people they protect and serve the government," General Abizaid said.

Even as Mr. Wolfowitz has fielded Iraqi complaints for more security, he has telephoned his boss in Washington, Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld, at least twice in two days to try to agree on a workable militia plan, aides said.

The Pentagon is hoping that new Iraqi security forces and some 30,000 allied forces that will be arriving this summer will allow the United States to begin sending home many of the nearly 150,000 forces it has here now.

General Abizaid said the size and makeup of the American forces was likely to remain the same for the next few months, but he said he was planning to replace heavy armored forces that were needed in the war with lighter, more mobile troops that could patrol more efficiently in cities and respond quickly to fresh tips on the location of guerrilla fighters.

"A lot of people say if you just throw more troops at it, you're going to solve the problems," General Abizaid said. "But it's not a matter of boots per square meter. It's a matter of focused intelligence, and then troops that are agile enough to carry out missions in a manner that can cause surprise and take down the targets precisely."