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Postwar Window Closing in Iraq, Study Says

More Funds, International Force Recommended to Improve Security Situation

By Vernon Loeb
Washington Post Staff Writer
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A team of outside experts dispatched by the Pentagon to assess security and reconstruction operations in Iraq reported yesterday that the window of opportunity for achieving postwar success is closing and requires immediate and dramatic action by U.S. military and civilian personnel.

The team concluded that the U.S.-led Coalition Provisional Authority in charge of reconstruction efforts is isolated and underfunded, and it recommended that U.S. officials move immediately to internationalize the daunting task of rebuilding Iraq, particularly in light of "rising anti-Americanism in parts of the country."

Amid escalating guerrilla attacks against U.S. forces and mounting criticism of the Bush administration by Democrats for poor postwar planning in Iraq, the report represents a comprehensive, independent assessment of conditions there, both in terms of security and reconstruction.

"The 'hearts and minds' of key segments of the Sunni and Shi'a communities are in play and can be won, but only if the Coalition Provisional Authority and new Iraqi authorities deliver in short order," the experts said in 10-page report to Pentagon officials, which they released at a news conference.

The report noted "significant progress" but said "the next 12 months will be decisive."

The team, organized by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington think tank, traveled to Iraq at Pentagon expense between June 27 and July 7. It was led by John Hamre, who served as deputy defense secretary in the Clinton administration and is now CSIS president.

Bryan G. Whitman, a Pentagon spokesman, said defense officials "agree with the assessment that there has been enormous progress in Iraq since the removal of [Saddam Hussein's] regime and that significant challenges lie ahead."

"We look forward to working through the report in a systematic fashion to determine how we might put into practice the elements and findings, as appropriate," Whitman said.

While measured in tone and focused on 32 recommendations for rapidly improving conditions in Iraq, the report represents, in many respects, a critical assessment of the Bush administration's postwar plan.

It implicitly faulted the administration for failing to adequately involve the international community and the United Nations in reconstruction activities. "The scope of the challenges, the financial requirements, and rising anti-Americanism in parts of Iraq argue for a new coalition that includes countries and organizations beyond the original war fighting coalition," the report said.

The report also noted that the administration, by vesting virtually all reconstruction authority in the Pentagon, chose a new model for postwar management that cut out many agencies more experienced in the field and relied on the Defense Department's "relatively untested capacities."

The study did not weigh in on the much-debated question of whether the Pentagon lacked forces on the ground when the war ended to secure Iraq's cities, prevent looting and forcefully demonstrate that U.S. forces were in control.

But the experts singled out security as Iraq's primary problem and said "volatile" conditions must be dealt with over the next three months to prevent the window of opportunity for success from closing.

The U.S. military, despite the presence of 148,000 troops in Iraq, the report said, is not visible enough at the street level, particularly in Baghdad, and must reassess its force composition and tactics in response to a "steady deterioration in the security situation."

Frederick Barton, a team member and CSIS official, said that while there probably were not enough troops on the ground when the war ended in April, increasing the U.S. military force in the country now would be problematic, given the growing resentment of its presence.

Thousands of forces guarding military bases and Iraqi installations, he said, should be redeployed to increase their visibility and augmented by private security contractors and Iraqi police. But the job of rooting out remnants of Saddam Hussein's Baath Party now waging a guerrilla war, he said, must remain primarily with U.S. forces.

Barton said he now believes the Iraqi insurgency is more sophisticated than the military initially appreciated. "We came to the conclusion while we were there that thousands of [Baathist fighters] just don't go missing as an accident -- that it probably was a coordinated effort," Barton said. "It's really not hard to travel around the country, and it's not hard to [communicate by] word of mouth."

Another team member, Bathsheba Crocker, a former State Department attorney, said officials she met with in the southern city of Basra now believe the looting there was orchestrated by Hussein's regime. "This wasn't just the result of overexcitement or venting or whatever it was we thought it was at the beginning," she said. "The devastation is unbelievable."

Beyond security, the report said, the Coalition Provisional Authority, the agency in charge of reconstruction headed by L. Paul Bremer, must improve communications with the Iraqi people and decentralize its structure by opening 18 regional offices.

The authority will soon be in desperate need of funds and must be freed of bureaucratic restrictions so that it can rapidly commit money for essential improvements, the report says, particularly those related to the country's water and power systems.

Hamre, in a foreword to the report, wrote that "the enormity of this undertaking cannot be overstated; there are huge challenges ahead."

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