

Pentagon extends Army, Marine deployments in Iraq

By Katherine McIntire Peters | kpeters@govexec.com | October 9, 2009

Defense Secretary Robert Gates this week approved a request from U.S. combat commanders in Iraq to extend the deployment of some troops serving there by as much as two and a half months.

The extensions are intended to ensure that key capabilities remain in place after the January elections in Iraq. The units affected include the Army's 1st Cavalry Division headquarters and the II Marine Expeditionary Force, based in Texas and North Carolina, respectively. The tours of duty could be extended for an additional 23 days for the Army and 79 days for Marines.

The tour extensions are yet another sign of [how pressed military leaders are](#) right now to supply adequate numbers of ground troops for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Gates has said he would avoid prolonging tours whenever possible, especially for Army units, where tours typically run 12 months. In the Marine Corps combat tours are generally for seven months. In 2007, to support the troop surge in Iraq, military leaders extended some Army tours to 15 months, putting soldiers and their families under enormous stress.

The announcement of tour extensions coincided with the release of a new [report](#) by RAND Corp., a nonprofit research institution, that found the mounting burden of deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan is having a negative effect on re-enlistment rates in the Army. For most of the last decade, deployments have had a positive effect on re-enlistment rates.

The study, which was sponsored by the Defense Department, found that the effect on Army first- and second-term re-enlistments was positive from 1996 to 2005 (although trending downward), but decreased sharply, becoming negative in 2006.

The study reinforces the common wisdom that, "Deployments often result in personal and work-related stress due to family separation, long working hours, and uncertain schedules. Upon returning home, many service members endure mental and emotional strain as they readapt to civilian and family life."

One measure of that stress is seen in skyrocketing suicide rates. Historically, suicide rates in the Army have been much lower than those in the comparable civilian population. But in the past three years that gap has closed and soldiers now are committing suicide at a higher rate than their civilian counterparts.

According to Army data released on Thursday, from January through September there were 117 reported suicides in the active-duty Army, compared to 103 during the same period in 2008. Among Army reservists, the number of suicides between January and September was 35, down from 40 during the same period last year.

In recent months, the Army has launched an aggressive education and training campaign to address the problem and is sponsoring, in partnership with the National Institute of Mental Health, the largest-ever study of suicide and behavioral health among military personnel.

"Whether it's additional resources, improved training or ensuring those in our Army community can readily identify the warning signs of suicidal behavior, all our efforts often come down to one soldier caring enough about another soldier to step in when they see something wrong," said Brig. Gen. Colleen McGuire, director of the Army Suicide Prevention Task Force, in a statement.

Soldiers aren't the only ones affected by long deployments. In remarks at a conference sponsored by the Association of the United States Army this week in Washington, Col. Kris Peterson, the psychologist in charge of the Military Child and Adolescent Center of Excellence at Madigan Army Medical Center at Fort Lewis, Wash., told service officials and spouses that yearly mental health visits for Army children under 15 increased from 800,000 in 2003 to 1.6 million in 2008.

What's more, there is a severe shortage of mental health facilities for families, especially as behavioral health centers on Army posts are filled to capacity with soldiers.

"The long-term impacts are unclear of all this," Peterson said, as reported by the Army News Service. "We know from the literature and data on depression in adolescents that outcomes are poor in this group who are untreated [and] left dealing with depression, anxiety on their own."

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