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Army chief: Soldiers home more between deployments

By AUDREY McAVOY (AP) – Feb 26, 2010

SCHOFIELD BARRACKS, Hawaii — Soldiers are getting to spend more time at home between combat deployments as the U.S. military draws down in Iraq and the Army grows in size, the service's chief of staff said Friday.

Gen. George Casey told reporters during a visit to Hawaii's largest Army post that soldiers are able to recover better from their deployments when they spend more time at home in between missions in war zones.

It allows them to spend time with their families and has the added benefit of giving soldiers time to train for a variety of missions — not just for the counterinsurgency demands of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Soldiers are currently getting an average of 14 to 15 months at home between deployments, and more are getting 17 to 18 months.

That's more than the year that had been the norm until recently. It's still short of the Army's two-year goal, but an improvement over 12 months, Casey said.

"With the drawdown in Iraq and the growth that we've completed, we're starting to see it stretch out and that's only going to help us," Casey said.

The Army began adding 65,000 troops to its ranks several years ago to cope with the increased demands of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The additional soldiers are allowing the Army to give its forces more time at home between rotations. So is the U.S. decision to reduce its presence in Iraq and to leave entirely by December 2011.

Casey said soldiers are getting more time at home even as the military sends more troops to Afghanistan to fight the Taliban.

A few years ago Casey had said the deployment demands were putting the Army "out of balance." Now he says the service was closer to getting back to normal.

"We're still not where we need to be but we have made great progress over the last two and a half, three years putting ourselves in a position of balance," Casey said.

The general lamented that Army efforts to reduce soldier suicides didn't "stem the tide," adding he didn't know what was causing so many soldiers to take their lives.

Casey suspects the additional stress of deployments is making it harder for some soldiers to cope with existing problems. To alleviate the situation, the Army is trying help soldiers develop more skills to cope with challenges in their lives.

A \$50 million, five-year study the Army is conducting with the National Institute of Mental Health will give commanders a better idea of the problems, the general said.

Suicide rates have increased in all military branches since the start of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Army had a record number of suicides last year.

Casey was in Hawaii to attend memorial services for one of his predecessors, Gen. Frederick C. Weyand, who died earlier this month at the age of 93.

Weyand was the last commander of U.S. military operations in Vietnam. He also served as Army chief of staff.

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