

## **Must unite soon, Gates tells Iraqis**

### **DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE PRESS SERVICES**

FALLUJAH, Iraq — Defense Secretary Robert Gates, on an unannounced trip to Iraq, delivered a sharp message to the country's political leaders Thursday: The U.S. military's commitment to the war is not open-ended.

"The clock is ticking," Gates told reporters, saying he will warn Iraqi officials that they must move faster on political reconciliation. "I know it's difficult, and clearly the attack on the council of representatives has made people nervous, but I think that it's very important that they bend every effort to getting this legislation done as quickly as possible."

A suicide bomber infiltrated the parliament building in the heavily fortified Green Zone a week ago, dealing a blow to the U.S.-led effort to pacify the capital's streets.

On Thursday, police said, a suicide car bomber slipped past security barriers to kill 12 people in central Baghdad only hours before Gates arrived.

The attacker blew himself up next to a fuel tanker within 500 yards of Iraqi President Jalal Talabani's home in the Karradah district. Talabani, a Kurd, was not believed to have been the target. Two Iraqi soldiers were among the dead, and 34 people were wounded, police said.

At least 46 Iraqis were killed or found dead nationwide Thursday.

The U.S. announced three more troop deaths — two soldiers killed Wednesday by a roadside bomb north of the capital, and another soldier killed the same day in a small-arms-fire attack in southwest Baghdad.

Two British soldiers were killed and three others were wounded Thursday by an explosion in southeastern Iraq. The attack occurred in Maysan province a day after British troops transferred control of the area to Iraqi forces.

To help stem the violence, a U.S. military brigade is constructing a 3-mile-long concrete wall to cut off one of the capital's most restive Sunni Arab districts from the Shiite Muslim neighborhoods that surround it, raising concern about the further Balkanization of Iraq's most populous and violent city.

U.S. commanders in northern Baghdad say the 12-foot-high barrier will make it more difficult for suicide bombers, death squads and militia fighters from sectarian factions to attack one another and slip back to their home turf. Construction began last week and is expected to be completed by the end of the month.

Some residents complained about the project.

"Are they trying to divide us into different sectarian cantons?" said a Sunni drugstore owner in Adhamiya, who identified himself as Abu Ahmed, 44. "This will deepen the sectarian strife and only serve to abort efforts aimed at reconciliation."

### **LINCOLN AT ODDS WITH BUSH**

As Gates visited Iraq, Bush told a crowd in Tipp City, Ohio, that Democratic lawmakers' efforts to end the war in Iraq is futile and will only undermine the military.

The president took particular aim at setting deadlines for the end of the war, as the Democrats have been trying to do.

"If you're a young commander on the ground, or an Iraqi soldier, and you've been tasked with a mission to help provide security for a city, and an enemy hears that you're leaving soon, it affects your capacity to do your job," Bush said at Tippecanoe High School.

"I think it's a mistake for Congress to tell the military how to do its job," he said.

On the Senate floor Thursday, Democratic Sen. Blanche Lincoln of Arkansas challenged Bush's assertion that setting a date for withdrawal from Iraq would hand victory to the forces contesting the United States' occupation.

"I would argue that the constantly shifting objectives of this war make it difficult to imagine an end to the U.S. commitment," Lincoln said. "Americans are exhausted with it, and the president's justification for staying in Iraq becomes harder to stomach each day."

She also argued that "the president's high-risk surge strategy ... comes at a time when the U.S. intelligence community reports that al-Qaida has become an increased threat to our national security because we have devoted so much manpower, resources and attention solely on Iraq."

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid said Thursday that the war in Iraq is "lost," triggering an angry backlash by Republicans who said the top Democrat had turned his back on the troops.

The bleak assessment — the most pointed yet from Reid — came as the House voted 215-199 to uphold legislation ordering troops out of Iraq next year.

The House voted mostly along party lines to insist congressional negotiators trying to reconcile the House and Senate war-funding bills retain a firm timetable set by the House.

Reid said he told Bush on Wednesday that he thought the war could not be won through military force and only through political, economic and diplomatic means.

"I believe myself that the secretary of state, secretary of defense and — you have to make your own decisions as to what the president knows — [know] this war is lost and the surge is not accomplishing anything as indicated by the extreme violence in Iraq yesterday," said Reid, D-Nev.

Republicans pounced on the comment as evidence, they said, that Democrats do not support the troops.

"I can't begin to imagine how our troops in the field, who are risking their lives every day, are going to react when they get back to base and hear that the Democrat leader of the United States Senate has declared the war is lost," said Senate GOP leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky.

## **GATES MEETS WITH BRASS**

Gates, traveling to Iraq for the third time in four months, took a decidedly stronger tone this time, reflecting U.S. frustration and the political tumult in Washington.

Gates said the Iraqis must, as quickly as possible, push through legislation on political reconciliation and the sharing of oil revenue among the Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds.

"It's not that these laws are going to change the situation immediately, but I think ... the ability to get them done communicates a willingness to work together," he said.

Those efforts, Gates said, would, in turn, create an environment in which violence could be reduced. But he acknowledged, "I'm sympathetic with some of the challenges that they face."

Shortly after landing in Baghdad, Gates boarded a helicopter to Camp Fallujah, about 35 miles west of the capital city. There, he met with top military commanders, including Joint Chiefs Chairman Gen. Peter Pace, and the top U.S. commander in Iraq, Army Gen. David Petraeus.

Gates' visit comes on the heels of Iraq's bloodiest day since the U.S. troop buildup ordered by

Bush began nine weeks ago. On Wednesday, 230 people were killed or found dead nationwide, including 183 killed in four bombings.

"Yesterday was a bad day, there's no two ways about it," said Petraeus.

"And a day like that can have a real psychological impact, and it came at a time where frankly ... [we] felt like we were getting a bit of traction."

Petraeus added that while the changes are almost imperceptible at times, there had been slow progress both in Anbar province, which has been a stronghold for Sunni insurgents, and with the Baghdad security plan.

"Clearly these sensational attacks can't be anything other than viewed as setbacks and challenges," said Petraeus. But he said that after meeting with Iraqi leaders Wednesday and Thursday, he believes they are determined to calm their people and press on.

Commanders also expressed little support for withdrawing troops in the coming months. Brig. Gen. Mark Gurganus, commander of ground forces in Anbar province, said he has seen progress in western Iraq, including a decrease in attacks and an increase in recruitment of Iraqi police and army soldiers.

Reducing his forces, he said, could erase the gains they've made. "Would it have an adverse impact? Absolutely," he said.

Lt. Col. Christopher Garver, a U.S. military spokesman, said the American military strategy was two-pronged: raiding carbomb factories on the outskirts of Baghdad, and clearing weapons stashes in densely populated areas in the capital.

But he said the strategy would not be fully implemented until June 1.

"We don't have all the troops for the surge — we're only at three of five brigades so far. It's not fully in place," Garver said. "Still, I can't say if we had those two brigades, yesterday wouldn't have happened. This enemy is adaptive."

## **20 SLAIN ON VIDEO**

Meanwhile, a Sunni insurgent coalition posted Web videos on Thursday naming the head of al-Qaida in Iraq as "minister of war" and showing the executions of 20 men it said were members of the Iraqi military and security forces.

The announcement unveiling an "Islamic Cabinet" for Iraq appeared to have multiple aims. One was to present the Islamic State of Iraq coalition as a "legitimate" alternative to the U.S.-backed, Shiite-led government — and to demonstrate that it was growing in power despite the U.S. military push against insurgents. It also likely sought to establish the coalition's dominance among insurgents after an embarrassing public dispute with other Iraqi Sunni militants.

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