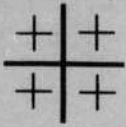


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Commander of U.S. forces wants more troops in Iraq

Two more brigades of troops have been requested to help put an end to the bloodiest episode since Baghdad fell

By Matthew Schofield and Drew Brown

Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

BAGHDAD, Iraq — The commander of U.S. forces in the Middle East said Monday that he'd requested two more brigades of troops, perhaps as many as 14,000 soldiers, to help quell the worst outbreak of fighting in Iraq since the American-led occupation began more than a year ago.

Evidence showing that coalition forces were losing control of the roads in Iraq mounted Monday as another supply convoy was set ablaze and officials announced that nine more Americans were missing.

U.S. Army Brig. Gen. Mark Kimmitt said that 70 coalition personnel and roughly 700 Iraqis had died since April 1, making the past 12 days the deadliest since Baghdad fell a year ago. The military reported Monday that three Marines near Fallujah and a soldier in Samarra, 60 miles north of Baghdad, were killed Sunday, even as a cease-fire in the embattled city generally held.

In an e-mail, a defense contractor who asked not to be named said the situation was getting worse, and that while the coalition controlled pockets within Iraq, the rebels "own the roads."

Gen. John Abizaid, head of U.S. Central Command, which handles operations in the Middle East, refused to say in a teleconference Monday how many more troops would be needed in Iraq or how long they would stay. He said that he was requesting "a strong,

mobile combat-arms capability" of "two brigades worth of combat power, if not more." A mechanized combat brigade generally numbers anywhere from 5,000 to 7,000 troops.

It wasn't immediately clear whether the two additional brigades would come from fresh units in the United States or forces already in Iraq and Kuwait but scheduled to come home, senior defense officials said. Abizaid said that he was working out the details of the request with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and he refused to say which units were under consideration.

Seven American contract workers and two American soldiers were missing after their convoy came under attack Friday. Seven Chinese were released Monday after a day of captivity followed their entry into the country from Jordan. Three Japanese hostages captured Thursday weren't released, contrary to a Japanese news report Sunday, and their fate remained uncertain throughout the day.

The latest kidnappings raised totals to more than 40 people from 12 different countries taken in the past week.

Contractor Kellogg, Brown & Root, a Halliburton subsidiary, confirmed that seven of its employees were missing, including Thomas Hamill, 42, who's known to be kidnapped. The company said that it was continuing to send several hundred employees per week to Kuwait and Iraq.

Also on Monday, an Iraqi police car in Baqouba hit a homemade bomb. An internal coalition security memo noted that an Apache helicopter shot down Sunday was the seventh aircraft shot down or sustaining "effective small-arms fire in the last four days," including five in Baghdad. Eight convoy trucks have been destroyed since Sunday in the capital on the road to

Baghdad International Airport.

Kimmitt noted that the situation in Iraq wasn't "business as usual."

"There are people out there taking hostages, kidnapping people," he said. "But we are restoring a tremendous amount of order."

He added that the number of coalition engagements with the enemy last week was two or three times above normal and that the coalition was concerned about the enemy's ability to strike convoys.

Still, President Bush said in a news conference in Texas that the situation in Iraq was improving, "after a bad week."

The cease-fire in Fallujah, the site of much of the most intense fighting last week, seemed to hold for a third day. The Marines added another battalion of infantry Sunday, and Monday there were 2,000 Marines in and around the city, taking occasional drive-by fire.

Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, commander of American forces in Iraq, said in the teleconference that U.S. forces had retaken Kut and Nasiriyah in southern Iraq. He acknowledged that Shiite Muslim cleric Muqtada al Sadr's militia still controlled Najaf and parts of Karbala — both Shiite spiritual centers — though he said that coalition forces had cordoned off both cities in preparation for moving against Sadr, who is believed to be in Najaf.

"The mission of the U.S. forces is to kill or capture Muqtada al Sadr. That's our mission," he said.

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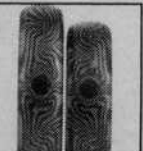
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Ban on Ephedra now in effect

A request for a restraining order was rejected outright by a federal judge Monday

By Michael O'keeffe
New York Daily News (KRT)

NEW YORK — The nationwide ban on ephedra went into effect Monday after a federal judge in Newark refused to grant a temporary restraining order requested by two supplement companies.

NVE Pharmaceuticals of New Jersey and the Alabama-based National Institute for Clinical Weight Loss argued that the FDA has not provided sufficient evidence that ephedra poses unreasonable health risks to consumers. The companies also said that the FDA violated federal regulations and their due process rights by banning the amphetamine-like product used to boost energy and lose weight.

But U.S. District Judge Joel Pisano

said that the companies failed to meet several legal requirements for the restraining order. The companies failed to prove that they are likely to win a court challenge to the ban and that they would suffer irreparable harm if the ban took effect.

The Food and Drug Administration took its first steps toward banning the herbal stimulant in March 2003, shortly after Baltimore Orioles pitcher Steve Bechler died. His death — and at least 154 others — has been linked to ephedra. The FDA announced in December that it would ban the stimulant.

"Steve Bechler's death was the turning point," said anti-ephedra activist Barb Michal, whose petition to intervene in the case was denied by Pisano.

Ephedra is the first dietary supplement banned by the FDA. The Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act of 1994 allows manufacturers to sell supplements without testing them first

for safety. Consumer advocates say that the law must be revised because the FDA can't remove a product from retail shelves unless it can prove that it is dangerous. Bitter orange, an ingredient in many ephedra-free weight loss products, has been linked to seven deaths.

Ephedra sales have already plummeted because of publicity about the risks, especially after Bechler's death. Many companies stopped selling the product because of skyrocketing insurance costs, lawsuits and increased government regulation. Three states — New York, Illinois and California — already prohibit the stimulant. The Illinois ban was prompted in part by the death of Sean Riggins, a Lincoln, Ill. high school student whose death was linked by a medical examiner to Yellow Jacket, an ephedra product sold by NVE Pharmaceuticals.

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