

U.S. troops continue to battle insurgents in Iraq

As fighting goes on, Spain announces it plans to pull its troops out within 15 days

By Matthew Schofield and Soraya Sarhaddi Nelson
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BAGHDAD — As the fighting in Iraq widened and the death toll continued to mount on Sunday, Spain's new prime minister said he's ordered his country's troops out of Iraq as soon as possible and the top U.S. civilian administrator conceded that Iraqi police and security forces aren't ready to protect the country from insurgents.

A dozen American soldiers died on Saturday, 10 of them in action and two in accidents, bringing the number of American soldiers killed in action in Iraq so far this month to 98, more than died from enemy fire during the U.S.-led invasion a year ago.

Facing a self-imposed June 30 deadline to return sovereignty to an interim Iraqi government that still

hasn't been chosen, the Bush administration is now fighting to keep roads and supply lines open, battling insurgents virtually nationwide and trying to hold together an international coalition strained by killings, kidnappings and now by Spain's withdrawal.

An Egyptian news agency on Sunday quoted Spain's new foreign minister, Miguel Angel Moratinos, as saying that Spain plans to withdraw its 1,300 troops from Iraq within 15 days.

The White House said it had expected the move, which new Socialist Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero had promised, but Sen. John Warner, R-Va., the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, on Sunday called it "troublesome," saying: "It will put pressure on the other coalition nations that have joined in this, I'm sure."

Sen. John Kerry, the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, charged Sunday that the Bush administration has been "stunningly ineffective" on Iraq and said it will take a new president to build a broader international coalition there.

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The U.S.-led coalition is facing separate Sunni and Shiite Muslim uprisings, and the fighting widened on Saturday when five Marines were killed after they were ambushed on the Syrian border. That prompted Air Force Gen. Richard Myers, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to demand that Syria do more to prevent foreign fighters from crossing into Iraq.

Iraqi security forces will not be ready to safeguard the nation against militants by the June 30 power transfer, U.S. civilian administrator L. Paul Bremer said Sunday.

Another Marine died in al Anbar province, home to both Fallujah and Ramadi, in the Sunni Triangle that's

been a hotbed of resistance to the U.S.-led occupation.

Three soldiers died south of Baghdad when their convoy was ambushed near Ad Diwaniyah. Another died in the southern part of Baghdad after a roadside bomb exploded. Two more died in apparent accidents, one when his Abrams tank rolled over in the northern part of the capital and another when he was electrocuted while working on a generator in Tikrit.

Roadside bombs and ambushes continue to bedevil U.S. and allied troops, and coalition forces kept the major highways out of Baghdad closed on Sunday. The road west to Jordan has been closed since fighting intensified earlier this month in Fallujah.

Despite an announcement that some convoys are moving again, soldiers in Baghdad have complained that they're afraid they'll be back on Meals Ready to Eat — prepackaged, long-storing "foods" — because not enough fresh supplies are coming from Kuwait and Jordan.

In Fallujah and Ramadi, a shaky peace continued to hold on Sunday,

and sites were designated in the city for guerrillas to surrender weapons such as missiles, mortars and rocket-propelled grenades.

Talks were scheduled to continue on Tuesday in Baghdad between community leaders and coalition representatives. More than 2,000 Marines remain dug in around the mostly Sunni Muslim town, and coalition officials have said they're prepared to resume offensive operations if talks fail to produce progress.

The other flashpoint in Iraq remains Najaf, where 2,500 American soldiers have joined a Spanish contingent in an attempt to shut down outlawed Shiite cleric Moqtada al Sadr.

Attempts to negotiate a compromise over al Sadr with the Americans remained at a standstill, spokesman Qais al Khazali said on Sunday.

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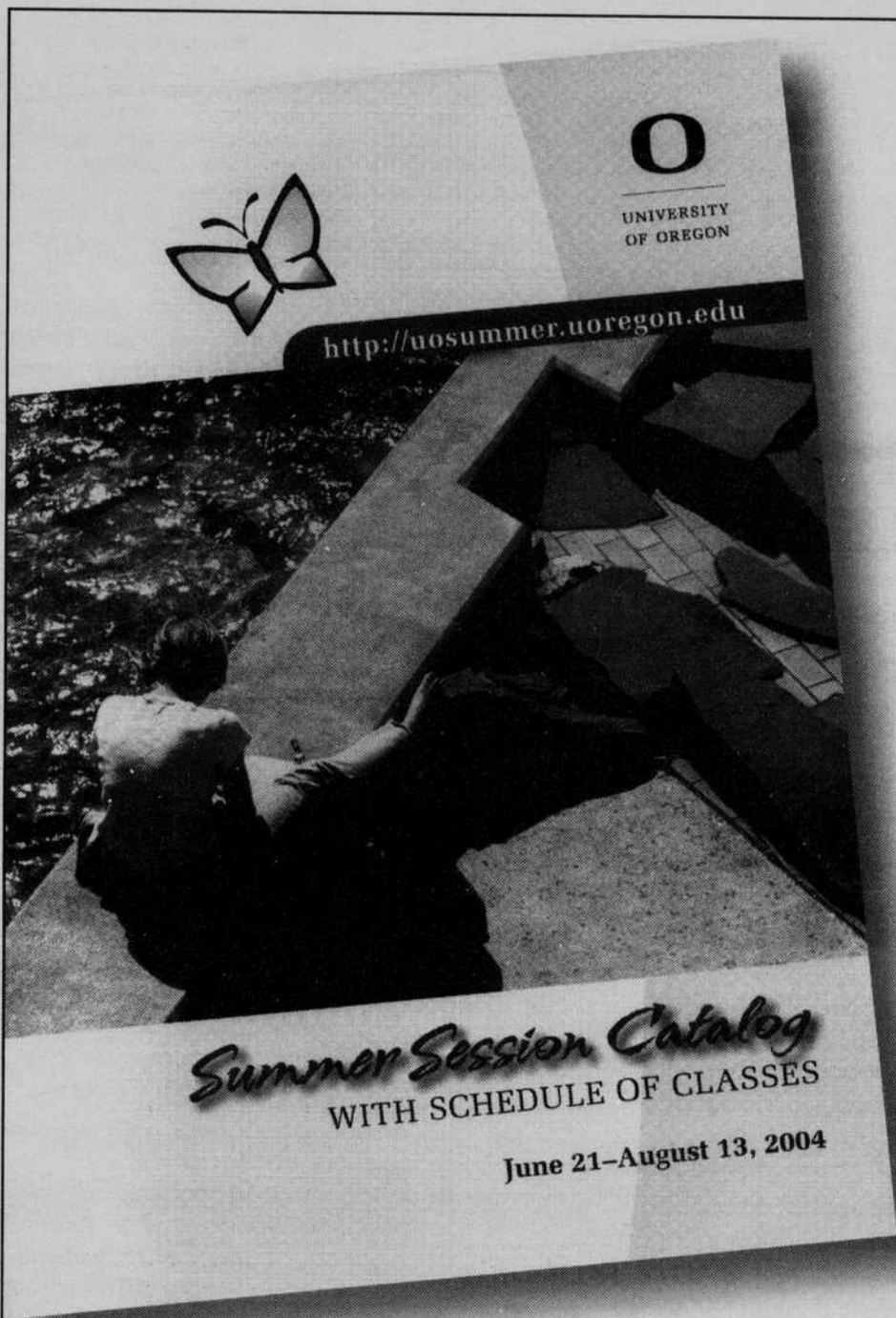
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