



## Australian Troops Ready to Head to Iraq

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Canberra (AAP) -- The second contingent of Australian troops to head to Iraq will be farewelled from Darwin on Sunday.

Australia is sending a further 450 troops to take over from 1,400 Dutch soldiers who had provided security for Japanese military engineers in the southern province of Al Muthanna.

The first wave of soldiers will leave Darwin aboard HMAS Tobruk on Sunday morning for the 19-day journey to the Middle East.

The vessel will be loaded with a cargo of 20 Australian light armoured vehicles (ASLAVS), stores, equipment and almost 200 crew.

The remaining Darwin-based 1st Brigade soldiers and ASLAVS are due to follow by sea and commercial air in late April, early May, according to a defence spokesman.

"AMTG is progressively deploying over the coming days and weeks using a variety of means," the spokesman said.

In February, Prime Minister John Howard made the shock announcement Australia would virtually double its troop numbers, breaking an election promise.

Mr Howard admitted then the \$300 million decision would be an unpopular one.

Mr Howard will be in Darwin on Sunday, but his office would not confirm if he was farewelling the troops.

HMAS Tobruk will undertake training operations while still in Australian waters, army officer Captain Keith Wilkinson said.

"They will drive out into the harbour, into open water and cruise around and participate in training activities in preparation for the Iraq voyage," Capt Wilkinson said.

He said the department is not revealing the exact departure dates due to security, but said the ship will unload the equipment and personnel into a safe port in the Middle East.

The Tobruk has previously provided sea transport and logistic support to the army during operations in East Timor, Bougainville and Somalia.

This is the Tobruk's first deployment to the Middle East in support of Operation Catalyst, the Australian Defence Force's contribution to the rehabilitation and stabilisation of Iraq.

Only one Australian has lost their life while serving in Iraq. Flight Lieutenant Paul Pardoel, a 35-year-old former RAAF officer, was killed along with nine British servicemen on January 30 while serving with the Royal Air Force.

After the prime minister's February announcement, Opposition Leader Kim Beazley said Mr Howard had misled voters and demanded he explain what had changed to justify the decision to send the extra troops to the war-torn nation.

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