



## U.S. General Cites Signs of Progress in Iraq

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Washington -- U.S. troops continue surging into Baghdad, Iraq, where hundreds of Iraqi families are returning to their homes, a senior U.S. military official says, adding that coalition forces in Afghanistan are preparing for Taliban attacks against Central Asian New Year's celebrations beginning March 21.

"In Iraq, our top priority continues to be reducing violence and providing security in Baghdad to give Iraqi leaders the breathing room they need to make political progress," Major General Michael Barbaro said March 20 at a Pentagon briefing. Barbaro, who has served in Iraq, is deputy director of regional operations for the Pentagon's Joint Staff.

In January, President Bush announced a "surge" strategy for Iraq that involves deploying more than 21,500 additional U.S. troops -- five Army brigades -- to support an Iraqi government campaign to reduce violence in Baghdad and Anbar province. Two of the five Army brigades are already in place, and a third is just starting to travel to Baghdad from staging areas in Kuwait, Barbaro said. A fourth and fifth brigade are scheduled to deploy from the United States in April and May, and they will spend a month training in Kuwait before heading into Iraq.

Barbaro stressed that the surge strategy "will require sustained action over a period of months." But, he added, "We have already seen some positive indicators."

Local Iraqis are providing more information to coalition forces about possible attacks, which Barbaro said is an indicator of local support for the campaign against insurgents. "In February, since the start of this operation, we've had the highest number of tips from the Iraqi population in Baghdad than we've ever had," Barbaro said.

U.S. troops and Iraqi security forces now are operating in every neighborhood in Baghdad, Barbaro said. "We go and ... establish a presence and maintain that presence to get a foothold and live and work in these neighborhoods," he said.

Barbaro said he has read initial reports saying that hundreds of Iraqi families that previously fled the violence, appeared to be moving back to their Baghdad homes.

Overall violence has declined in Baghdad, but insurgents continue targeting coalition forces and continue high-profile attacks such as car bombs and suicide bombs.

"Violence directed at Iraqi civilians has dropped by about a third of the averages before mid-February," Barbaro said. "Murders and executions against civilians ... have decreased significantly, somewhere in the area of about a 50 percent decrease."

He said that insurgents have exploded six truck bombs filled with chlorine. He also described a recent attack that used children inside a car bomb to reduce suspicion. "We saw a vehicle with two small children in the back seat come up to one of our checkpoints," Barbaro said. "Children in the back seat lower suspicion. We let it move through. They parked the vehicle." The adults then ran out and exploded the vehicle "with the children in the back," Barbaro said.

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Washington File