



Iraqi Forces Can Control Restive North: US General

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MOSUL, Iraq (AFP) -- Iraqi forces are ready to take security control of the north of the war-torn country, one of the last bastions of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, US military General Tony Thomas told AFP.

"I think they are ready now, if needed," Thomas said in an interview at the Marez US base on the outskirts of the northern city of Mosul.

"If we were to disappear tomorrow, the Iraqi security forces, army and police -- 60,000 only in Nineveh province -- could keep their ground," added the general, who commands US forces in northern Iraq.

"There is no way Al-Qaeda can force them to turn tail and run, which happened in 2004 and 2005."

Thomas said US-led forces had not let up on efforts to secure sprawling Nineveh province, of which Mosul is the capital.

"We're still working to improve every day, but I have great confidence that (Iraqi forces) are strong and professional enough now to be able to win Nineveh back from the insurgency to a sovereign Iraq."

The 25,000 US troops he commands these days carry out few offensive operations in Nineveh, the general said.

"The majority of our operations are now Iraqi-led. They come up with a plan, we support them, with forces or advisors or air support, but you'd be surprised to see how independent they have become," Thomas said.

"We are just monitoring, but it's happening without us," he added.

He attributed the vast improvement in the fighting capacity of Iraqi troops and police to a decision at the beginning of this year to bring all the country's security forces under the command of a single general.

Mosul, which US commanders say is the last urban stronghold of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, has been the scene of vicious attacks on Christians, prompting more than 2,000 families from the community to flee the city in October.

While some 35,000 Iraqi police and soldiers are deployed in Mosul alone, they were unable to prevent further violence on November 12 in which two Christian sisters were slain by gunmen who broke into their home and wired it with bombs.

Following the killings, the commander of operations in Nineveh, General Riad Jalal Toufic was dismissed and replaced by General Hassan Karim from command centre in Baghdad, according to a senior Iraqi official.

Baghdad "ordered (General Toufic) transferred after Nineveh province became the theatre of violence in recent months which in particular resulted in ... attacks against Christian families which obliged the Iraqi government to send two brigades to Mosul to restore security," said the official.

On Sunday, the Iraqi cabinet approved a pact with Washington that requires all US troops to leave the country by 2011.

The deal, which governs the status of some 150,000 US soldiers stationed in the country after their current UN mandate expires on December 31, is now being debated by parliament, which is due to hold an up-or-down vote on November 24.

So far security control of 13 of Iraq's 18 provinces has been handed over by US-led forces to Baghdad amid a marked decrease in levels of violence across the country.