

Rebels threaten U.S. forces in Diyala

LAUREN FRAYER
Associated Press

BAQOUBA, Iraq - Sunni insurgents have been streaming out of Baghdad to escape the security crackdown, carrying the fight to neighboring Diyala province where direct fire attacks on Americans have nearly doubled since last summer, U.S. soldiers say.

That has led to sharp fighting only 35 miles north of the capital in a province known as "Little Iraq" because of its near-equal mix of Sunni and Shiite Arabs as well as Kurds - the country's three major groups. At stake is a strategic region that extends from the northeastern gates of Baghdad to the border with Iran.

"I was here in 2004 and I don't remember them ever attacking tanks in open daylight, but now that's exactly what they're doing," said Capt. Paul Carlock, a company commander in the Army's 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry Regiment.

"There's a big Sunni influx here, and in the last month or so it's been pretty violent," said Carlock, 31, of Chattanooga, Tenn. "They're getting more aggressive and changing tactics."

Some U.S. officers suspect the advance publicity for the Baghdad security plan may have encouraged extremists - both Sunnis and Shiites - to flee the capital for surrounding provinces, including Diyala, where fewer U.S. troops are stationed.

Even before President Bush announced last month that he was sending in 21,500 more soldiers, mostly to Baghdad, violence had been steadily increasing in Diyala, among the most religiously mixed of Iraq's 18 provinces.

Al-Qaida in Iraq leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was killed in a U.S. airstrike in Diyala last June.

On Thursday, a rooftop sniper fired on members of the 12th Cavalry as they patrolled a suburb of Baqouba with Iraqi soldiers. Shots rang out through abandoned streets for about 15 minutes until a Bradley fighting vehicle rumbled in, firing a 25 mm machine gun that thundered through the neighborhood and drove off the attackers.

It is unclear how many insurgents have entered the province over the last month. But U.S. officers believe the numbers must be substantial because of the sharp spike in violence.

Last July, U.S. soldiers came under 90 direct fire attacks - meaning weapons aimed straight at them. Last month the number of such attacks was up about 70 percent, to 157 attacks, according to Col. David W. Sutherland, commander of the 1st Cavalry Division's 3rd Brigade.

Meanwhile, the number of weapons caches seized more than doubled in that time period, from eight in July to 21 last month. That suggests more weapons are also flowing into the province.

"We know one thing for certain: The resistance and fight in Diyala has gotten tougher over the past couple weeks," said Maj. Gen. Benjamin Mixon, commander of Multinational Division-North, which includes Diyala.

Lt. Col. Morris Goins, 41, a battalion commander, said the surge in attacks was also a result of more aggressive combat operations by the Americans. Last year, U.S. officers believed they could take a lower profile in Diyala and hand more responsibility over to the Iraqis.

"Part of it is this influx, and part of it is the nature of our operations - we're more aggressive. The more you're out there, the more contact you have," said Goins, whose battalion is responsible for security in the provincial capital of Baqouba.

"You've got more than 20,000 more American troops piling into Baghdad, so these insurgents are going to go somewhere," Goins said. His battalion has lost 17 soldiers since it arrived in Iraq in October.

Nine of those soldiers were killed in the past 11 days.

"That wears on you. The violence has definitely increased to a baseline where we have contact every single day," said Goins, of Southern Pines, N.C.

U.S. soldiers are not the only targets.

Between nine and 30 violent acts - murders, kidnappings, small arms fire, mortar attacks, roadside bombs - occur in Diyala province each day, Sutherland said.

At least three mayors of Muqdadiyah, the province's second-largest city, have been killed since 2003. This week, a former Iraqi police lieutenant was beheaded in broad daylight in a public park.

All this has been disappointing for the U.S. command, which had great hopes for Diyala a year ago.

In December 2005, U.S. officials said overall attacks had dropped substantially in the province - a trend they attributed to economic development projects including 180 new or refurbished schools, new water treatment plants and electricity substations.

Now, American officers are questioning whether they can give control of the province to the Iraqis by the end of the year. The U.S. goal is to hand over all 18 provinces to Iraqi control by December.

"Given the pressure on them in Baghdad, they're flooding Diyala, and that means it'll take longer for us to transfer control to Iraqis here," said Capt. Christopher Conley, 30, of Sunderland, Mass., who trains Iraqi soldiers.

Diyala's religious and ethnic mix have made it a fertile ground for Sunni militants.

The province's 1.6 million people include Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds. Unemployment is estimated at about 70 percent, and U.S. officials acknowledge that the local police force is riddled with corruption.

U.S. military officials say many members of Saddam Hussein's Baath party fled north to Diyala after the 2003 U.S.-led invasion, and helped rouse the Sunni insurgency here by funding and organizing attacks on coalition troops.

"Abu Musab al-Zarqawi called Baqouba the capital of the caliphate," Sutherland said. "That drew thousands of people into here," he said.

Sutherland, of Toledo, Ohio, said there was little U.S. forces could have done to stop the influx of insurgents.

"I couldn't stop the traffic coming in, because if I do that I upset people and freeze commerce. So what I have to do is identify the problems once they get here," Sutherland said.