General says US troops to remain in Iraq

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The top U.S. commander for the Middle East said that the United States will keep the current 2,500 troops in Iraq for the foreseeable future, and he warned that he expects increasing attacks on U.S. and Iraqi personnel by Iranian-backed militias determined to get American forces out.

Marine Gen. Frank McKenzie said in an interview with The Associated Press at the Pentagon that despite the shift by U.S. forces to a non-combat role in Iraq, they will still provide air support and other military aid for Iraq's fight against the Islamic State.

Noting that Iranian-backed militias want all Western forces out of Iraq, he said an ongoing uptick in violence may continue through December.

"They actually want all U.S. forces to leave, and all U.S. forces are not going to leave," he said, adding that as a result, "that may provoke a response as we get later into the end of the month."

The Iraqi government earlier this month announced the conclusion of talks on ending the U.S. combat mission against IS. U.S. forces have been largely in an advisory role for some time, so the announced transition changes little. The announcement reflects a July decision by the Biden administration to end the U.S. combat mission in Iraq by Dec. 31.

"We've drawn down from bases we didn't need, we've made it harder to get at us. But the Iraqis still want us to be there. They still want the presence, they still want the engagement," said McKenzie. "So as long as they want it, and we can mutually agree that's the case — we're going to be there."

He said he believes Islamic State militants will continue to be a threat in Iraq and that the group will "keep recreating itself, perhaps under a different name." The key, he said, will be to ensure that IS is not able to coalesce with other elements around the globe and become increasingly strong and dangerous.

America invaded Iraq in 2003, and at the peak point had more than 170,000 troops battling insurgents in the country and later working to train and advise Iraqi forces. All U.S. forces were withdrawn at the end of 2011, but just three years later, American troops were back to help Iraq beat back the Islamic State group, which had swept across the border from Syria to gain control of a large swath of the country.

The U.S. presence in Iraq has long been a flash point for Tehran, but tensions spiked after a January 2020 U.S. drone strike near the Baghdad airport killed a top Iranian general. In retaliation, Iran launched a barrage of missiles at al-Asad airbase, where U.S. troops were stationed. More than 100 service members suffered traumatic brain injuries in the blasts.

More recently, Iranian proxies are believed responsible for an assassination attempt last month on Iraq's Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi. And officials have said they believe Iran was behind the October drone attack at the military outpost in southern Syria where American troops are based. No U.S. personnel were killed or injured in the attack.

"I think an attack to kill the prime minister is a pretty significant event," McKenzie said. "I think that's a signpost of the desperation that they're under right now." Iranian officials have said Tehran and its allies had nothing to do with last month's drone attack that lightly injured the Iraqi prime minister.

McKenzie, who has headed U.S. Central Command for nearly three years and traveled extensively throughout the region, painted a picture that reflected the recent upheaval in Afghanistan, where U.S. troops departed at the end of August.

On Afghanistan, McKenzie said the al-Qaida extremist group has grown slightly since U.S. forces left and that the ruling Taliban leaders are divided about their 2020 pledge to break ties with the group. He said the departure of the U.S military and intelligence assets from the country has made it "very hard, not impossible" to ensure that neither al-Qaida nor the Islamic State group's Afghanistan affiliate can pose a threat to the United States.

Like the Taliban's long campaign to get Americans out of Afghanistan, Iran and its proxies have battled to get the U.S. out of Iraq and the broader Middle East.

"Iran still pursues a vision of ejecting us," he said. "And they see the principal battleground for that as being in Iraq. And I believe they are under the view that they can increase friction in Iraq to where we will leave."

Iran, he said, believes that campaign won't affect the nuclear negotiations that were long stalled but are now restarting. But, he said, "I think it's a dangerous position for the Iranians to maintain, because I think they're not going to be able to decouple those two things."

McKenzie said that as NATO begins to expand its presence in Iraq as planned, the U.S. will refine its force there. And the total U.S. force presence will depend on future agreements with Iraq's government.

The U.S. troops in Syria, currently numbering about 900, will continue to advise and assist Syrian rebel forces in the fight against IS, McKenzie said. He said it's not clear how much longer that will be necessary but said, "I think we are measurably closer than we were a couple of years ago. I still think we have a ways to go."

More broadly, McKenzie noted that the U.S. troop presence across the Middle East has significantly dropped since last year, when it peaked amid tensions with Iran, at as much as 80,000. The U.S. has identified China and Russia as the top national security threats, labeling China as America's "pacing challenge," and has looked to focus more effort and assets in the Pacific.

In its recent review of the positioning of U.S. forces around the world, the Pentagon said little about removing or repositioning troops in the Middle East. McKenzie and other top military leaders have long worried that the U.S. military is concentrated in too few locations in the Middle East and must disperse more to increase security.

"We think it is important to work with our partners in the region to present a more complex targeting problem to Iran," he said, adding that U.S. will look at other bases and opportunities to move troops around to achieve that goal.

McKenzie said he is particularly concerned by Iran's development of ballistic and cruise missiles as well as armed drones.

"And so those things are very concerning to me because they continue to develop them," he said. "And they show no signs of abating in their research in this field, and their fielding of new and increasingly lethal and capable weapons."

Pakistan: 70 million fully vaccinated against COVID-19

ISLAMABAD : Pakistan says it has administered 155 million COVID-19 vaccine doses as of Friday, fully vaccinating 70 million people, or 30% of the country's total population, since launching the inoculation drive in February.

The South Asian nation of about 220 million reported its first case in early 2020 and since then the pandemic has infected about 1.3 million people and killed nearly 29,000 people, keeping the situation largely under control.

"Of the total eligible population [age 12 and above], 46% is fully vaccinated and 63% has received at least one dose," Planning and Development Minister Asad Umar who heads the National Command and Operation Center that oversees Pakistan's pandemic response, tweeted.

The government had set the target in May and achieved it "with the help of countless workers, citizens and leadership across the country," tweeted Faisal Sultan, the special assistant to Prime Minister Imran Khan on national health services.

Faisal advised Pakistanis to continue to use masks, avoid crowded places and ensure social distancing in the wake of rising cases of infection from the omicron variant.

Officials said Pakistan has received a total of 247 doses of COVID-19 vaccine to date. The government has purchased 157 million while 78 million arrived through the COVAX dose-sharing program, including 32.6 million donated by the United States, and nearly 9 million donated from China.

The United Nations and other global partners have acknowledged Pakistan's effective response to the pandemic, citing the country's success in vaccinating children against polio and other transmittable diseases through mass immunization campaigns.

In response to the COVID-19 outbreak, the federal health ministry adapted its facilities to vaccinate adults, who make up about half of Pakistan's population, according to a recent UNICEF statement. **voanews**

Stolen Nepali statue returns to its temple after decades in US

A centuries-old sculpture of two Hindu gods has been reinstalled at its temple in the Nepali capital Kathmandu, nearly 40 years after it was stolen and later emerged in the United States.

The stone statue of the gods Laxmi and Narayan was repatriated to Nepal in March by the Dallas Museum of Art and the FBI after a months-long investigation by Nepali and American activists and officials.

It was taken from the temple in 1984 and appeared on display at the Dallas museum six years later, on loan from a collector.

The work, dating back to between the 12th and 15th centuries, is one of a handful of cultural artefacts returned to Nepal from foreign museums and collectors this year.

A priest chanted prayers and locals played traditional music on Saturday as the statue was carried in a palanquin back to the pagoda-style temple, which was draped in marigold garlands to welcome the work.

It was placed back on its original stone plinth, with a replica that locals had been worshipping instead moved to stand alongside.

"We are very happy. Our efforts of three to four years have been fruitful, everyone is celebrating," said Dilendra Raj Shrestha of the Nepal Heritage Recovery Campaign.

Laser sensors and CCTV cameras have now been installed in the temple to protect the statue, he added.

"We are seeing the beginning of a trend, to bring back Nepal's gods from the United States, from Europe, from other countries where they have now ended up," said the US ambassador to Nepal Randy Berry.

"I hope this is the first of many such celebrations."

Nepal is deeply religious and its Hindu and Buddhist temples, as well as heritage sites, have remained an integral part of people's everyday lives.

"What may be objects of art for many, have deep cultural and spiritual significance for generations of Nepalese," Al Jazeera's Ramyata Limbu said, reporting from the ceremony in Patan.

Many sites are bereft of centuries-old sculptures, paintings, ornamental windows and even doors, which were often stolen after the country opened up to the outside world in the 1950s.

Many pieces were taken with the help of corrupt officials to feed art markets in the United States, Europe and elsewhere.

"I think there is a global change … Many countries are demanding their artefacts back and Nepal is in a great position legally because export was never permitted," arts crime professor Erin L Thompson told the AFP news agency.

A tweet by Thompson questioning the statue's origin and history had prompted the investigation into the sculpture.

Six pieces have been returned to Nepal this year and authorities are seeking more from France, the US and the UK. **aljazeera**

Kazakhstan tightens security to prevent mass protests on Independence Day

ALMATY, Kazakhstan – Security measures have been beefed up in Kazakhstan's largest city, Almaty, to prevent mass protests as the country marks the 30th anniversary of independence.

Almaty's Republic Square and major streets nearby were cordoned off by police on December 16, while Internet access was blocked in the area.

"It is not a celebration day now, it is a day of mourning," Tyrsybek Toqtasyn told RFE/RL, referring to two anniversaries of violent crackdowns on protests that coincide with Kazakhstan's Independence Day.

One is the 1986 anti-Kremlin youth demonstrations, known as Zheltoqsan, in Almaty that erupted after Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev replaced Kazakhstan's long-term ruler, Dinmukhammed Konaev, with Gennady Kolbin, an ethnic Russian sent by Moscow to head the republic.

Demonstrations against the appointment were squelched by a violent crackdown by Soviet authorities. Hundreds of people are believed to have been killed by security forces, while officially only several people lost their lives during the demonstrations that lasted for three days.

Also, 10 years ago police opened fire at protesting oil workers in the southwestern town of Zhanaozen, killing at least 16 people and one person in the nearby town of Shetpe.

Despite the police cordon on December 16, dozens of protesters representing the unregistered opposition Democratic Party managed to make it to Republic Square, chanting "Zheltoqsan! Zhanaozen! We will not forget! We will not forgive!" and held a collective prayer near the monument to Zheltoqsan victims.

Toqtasyn, one of the protesters, told RFE/RL that "the essence of Independence Day has gone" because of the blood shed on that day in Zhanaozen in 2011.

Seven activists of the Oyan, Qazaqstan (Wake Up, Kazakhstan!) youth group held a performance to honor victims of Zheltoqsan and Zhanaozen in Almaty's center, wearing white clothes with a target mark on their backs splashed with red paint.

In Nur-Sultan, the capital, police cordoned the area around the Monument to the Victims of the 1930s Famine and the Internet was switched off there as well.

Many opposition activists across the Central Asian state were detained before December 16 on charges related to their previous participation in unsanctioned rallies.

On December 16, leading opposition activist Almat Zhumaghulov was detained when he was leaving a shop in Almaty without explanation. Zhumaghulov was released from prison in early October after serving four years for supporting the banned Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (DVK) opposition movement.

The DVK, established by Mukhtar Ablyazov, a fugitive tycoon and opposition politician, had announced plans to organize rallies in the two cities and elsewhere in Kazakhstan on Independence Day.

A court banned the movement, branding it an extremist organization in 2017. The move was criticized by the European Parliament as politically motivated.

Ablyazov and his movement have openly called on Kazakhs to rally against the government, which has been dominated for more than 30 years by the 81-year-old Nursultan Nazarbaev.

Tajikistan exempts Emirati nationals from pre-entry visa

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MoFAIC) has announced that UAE nationals with diplomatic, special and normal passports can now travel to the Republic of Tajikistan without pre-entry visas and for stays of up to 90 days for each visit.

The decision comes into effect on January 1st, 2022.

Entry to Tajikistan for tourism is currently suspended because of the conditions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Khalid Abdullah Belhoul, Under-Secretary of MoFAIC, said the agreement reflects the strong ties between the UAE and the Republic of Tajikistan, that were founded on mutual understanding and respect and a will to bolster bilateral relations, to reflect the aspirations and visions of the leaderships of the two countries and serves common goals and interests.

Belhoul added that this step in part of MoFAIC's diplomatic and consular efforts that aim to strengthen the UAE's global position. He stressed that providing distinguished consular services to ensure the happiness of Emiratis is one of the Ministry's strategic goals, in accordance with the directives of the wise leadership to provide all means of care and happiness to UAE nationals around the world. **sharjah24**

Bangladesh starts vaccine booster shot drive to ward off Omicron

Bangladesh began administering coronavirus vaccine booster shots on Tuesday as the South Asian country tries to fend off the highly contagious Omicron variant.

The country detected two Omicron cases variant in cricketers who returned home from Zimbabwe this month but has yet to see community transmission, the health ministry says.

The booster shots are being given to frontline workers and people over 60 who have taken the second dose at least six months ago, health officials said.

The booster drive started in the capital, Dhaka, while the government aims to start administering shots outside the capital soon, the officials said.

Bangladesh has administered about 132 million vaccine doses in total, with 27% of the population having had two shots.

There have been more than 1.5 million infections and 28,062 coronavirus-related deaths reported in Bangladesh since the pandemic began.

Reuters

Kyrgyzstan elects new parliament speaker

The deputies of the 7th convocation of the Kyrgyz Parliament elected Talant Mamytov as the speaker of the parliament.

The oath taking ceremony and the first meeting of the new parliament of Kyrgyzstan took place on Wednesday.

There were two candidates: Talant Mamytov, a deputy from the Yntymak faction, and Adakhan Madumarov, a deputy from the Butun Kyrgyzstan faction.

Thus, 63 out of 87 deputies voted for Mamytov and 10 members of parliament voted for Madumarov. Another 14 deputies voted against both.

Mamytov was the speaker of the last convocation. He was elected speaker on Nov. 4, 2020. Mamytov suspended his powers at the end of October 2021 in connection with his participation in the parliamentary elections on Nov. 28.

The newly elected deputies of the new 7th convocation of the Kyrgyz Parliament also took the oath on Wednesday.

Head of the country's Central Election Commission (CEC) Nurzhan Shailabekova announced the official results of the parliamentary elections.

For the first time, the parliamentary elections in Kyrgyzstan were held through a mixed electoral system, with 54 members of the 90-member parliament elected according to a proportional system from political parties, and 36 others elected from single-mandate constituencies on a majority basis.

Thus in the parliament, there are deputies elected from single-mandate constituencies, as well as political parties, namely Ata-Zhurt Kyrgyzstan (15 deputies), Ishenim (12 deputies), Yntymak (9 deputies), Alliance (7 deputies), Butun Kyrgyzstan (6 deputies), and Yiman Nuru (5 deputies).