

## General: Iraq air strikes not escalation

*by UPI*

WASHINGTON - A series of air strikes southeast of Baghdad were to target al-Qaida sanctuaries in Iraq, not escalate the fighting, the U.S. Defense Department said Friday. The purpose of the U.S. air strikes on Thursday "was to shape the battlefield and take out known threats" before ground troops enter the area, U.S. Army Col Terry Ferrell said during a briefing. "Our aim was to neutralize any advantage the enemy could claim" by improvised explosive device and other weapons. "This is by no means an escalation of fighting in Iraq," Ferrell said. "(It) is one step in maintaining security for both our ground forces and Iraqi citizens who are repeatedly threatened by al-Qaida and want the violence to stop." "The air strikes are part of a series of offensives in a country-wide campaign involving multinational and Iraqi armed forces." "In our battle space, these air strikes, as well as upcoming offensive operations, are aimed at flushing out al-Qaida from the southern Arab Jabour area," Ferrell said

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