Remember Iraq

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

Today, Iraq remains very much a mixture of good news and bad - of late, mostly bad. Last week marked the beginning of the sixth year U.S. forces have been in that desert nation. Sunday marked the 4,000th U.S. service member killed. Add to that the 30,000 or so wounded - about 13,000 severely - and the tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of Iraqis killed since the United States initiated military action in March 2003. A renewal of fighting Tuesday in the oil-rich Basra region in southern Iraq and new attacks on Baghdad's supposedly safe Green Zone raise even more concerns.

Still, a look at the reduced violence levels throughout Iraq since last spring makes it difficult to argue that Gen. David Petraeus' "surge" in U.S. troops has not had a positive effect. For much of that time, observers there have chronicled a return to a degree of normalcy in many cities, particularly Baghdad. Iraqis also are assuming more responsibility for reconstruction projects and for their own security.

As the violence fell in Iraq, so did Americans' interest in what was happening there. In all but five weeks of the first half of 2007, the Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism recorded Iraq as this nation's most closely followed story. From October 2007 until now, Iraq has not been the nation's top story. Except for the milestones in U.S. casualties and time spent in Iraq, a look at the nation's newspaper front pages and top time on television news stories bear this out.

This current public detachment may have led Vice President Dick Cheney to respond with an arrogant "So?" to a reporter's statement that polls showed two-thirds of Americans believed the war was not worth fighting.

But this public disinterest, if that's what it is, may be about to shift. Troop levels brought on by the surge cannot be sustained. President Bush bought some time last year when he promised to go back to Congress with a progress report this spring. At the peak of the surge, U.S. troop levels reached about 170,000 from 132,000 before. Now, U.S. military commanders in Iraq are recommending that troop levels drop to no lower than 140,000.

From a military point of view, this makes perfect sense. The increased troop level brought some stability to much of Iraq and reduced U.S. casualties. Fewer troops will increase the possibility that violence levels will rise. Some observers speculated Tuesday that renewed violence in Basra was the result of anti-American cleric Muqtada al-Sadr easing the self-imposed "cease-fire" that had been observed by his Mahdi army militiamen.

So what America may be faced with is a troop level that will strain our forces even further while masking some of the many problems still facing U.S. military personnel and civilians in Iraq. With Bush apparently willing to leave major decisions about this nation's future in Iraq to the next president, the war must move back to the center of the American public's attention. It is up to those who seek to occupy the Oval Office in January to let America know in greater detail than they have so far just what they believe is at stake in Iraq

and how they plan to deal with it. Otherwise, all we can look forward to is marking more milestones.

Reprinted from The San Diego Union-Tribune â€“ CNS.

Remember Iraq by The San Diego Union-Tribune