

Odierno: Iraq deadline may be pushed back

by UPI

BAGHDAD -- The top U.S. military commander in Iraq says combat troops could remain to fight al-Qaida militants in two Iraqi cities past the June 30 withdrawal deadline.

U.S. Army Gen. Ray Odierno said U.S. troop numbers in the northern cities of Mosul and Baqubah may need to be increased rather than decreased in the coming year if U.S. and Iraqi officials deem the move necessary, The Times of London reported Friday.

Odierno, who took over the position of top commander from U.S. Army Gen. David Petraeus in September, said U.S. forces and Iraqi authorities will conduct a joint assessment before a final decision is made on troop levels in the cities.

U.S. combat forces are scheduled to leave Iraqi cities by the end of June with a goal of pulling all combat forces from Iraq by August 2010 while U.S. President Barack Obama shifts the military's focus to Afghanistan. An agreement between the U.S. and Iraqi governments states that all 140,000 U.S. troops must leave Iraq before the close of 2011.

Odierno warned of a possible resurgence of violence between Arabs and Kurds in the north of the country stemming from disputes about the ownership of land. He said Iranian-funded militants are also posing a "very dangerous" threat by basing their organizations on Hezbollah.

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