

Strickland sees Iraq deployment as likely

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

WASHINGTON - Gov. Ted Strickland believes President Bush's surge of troops into Iraq will require sending the Ohio National Guard to the war zone early next year.

"It is likely, I believe, under the surge proposals that additional Ohioans will- be called into action perhaps as early as - the early part of next year," he said Monday.

Strickland was responding to reports that 2,000 or more Ohio guard troops could be sent to Iraq in 2008.

Ohio guard officials said last week they have been notified that the 37th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, which is based in Columbus, could be sent to Iraq next year. Earlier, officials were told the team might be deployed in 2009.

The team has about 2,400 troops in Ohio and 1,200 in Michigan. The Ohio troops are based at units scattered across the state, including the cities of Akron, Austintown, Cleveland and Medina.

So far, no decision has been made to send the team to Iraq, officials said.

Strickland, a Democrat, opposes the president's plan to deploy more than 21,000 additional troops to Iraq as part of a new strategy that Bush said will help stabilize the country.

"I think it's an unwise course of action and I am troubled that young Americans and perhaps many young Ohioans will find themselves being placed in that situation where they may lose their lives, lose their health, lose their limbs," he said.

Yet Strickland also acknowledged that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have not taken as much of a toll on the Ohio guard as in some other states.

"I've heard from several of my fellow governors here in the last couple of days about their intense concern about equipment that their National Guard has available to them," Strickland said after he and several other governors met with Bush in the White House Monday.

But he added that "probably because of good planning on the part of" the Ohio guard's adjutant general, Maj. Gen. Gregory L. Wayt, "Ohio is probably in a little better condition when it comes to the volume and the condition of our equipment than are some other states."

Strickland said Wayt told him "he believes that we do have sufficient equipment to continue the kinds of training and preparation that will be needed prior to our men and women leaving Ohio and going to Iraq or Afghanistan."

Ohio Guard spokesman Mark Wayda agreed that Ohio's guard is better equipped than its counterparts in many states.

"We can do our homeland security missions," he said, referring to the guard's capacity to respond to any potential attacks or emergencies in the state.

The Ohio guard has about 15,600 troops and airmen in all. Recent studies and assessments have shown that while the average state guard has only one-third of the equipment it needs, the Ohio guard has 50 percent to 60 percent of what it requires.

However, Wayda said if the 37th Infantry Brigade team were to be sent to Iraq, its personnel would first need to be trained in using the type of equipment they would receive in Iraq.

The brigade has little of the "war-fighting equipment" it would use in Iraq, he said.

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