

Bush reiterates veto vow, says time running out on funding bill

by John Marelius

FORT IRWIN, Calif. - President Bush told soldiers Wednesday that time is running out for Congress to send him an acceptable bill to continue financing the war in Iraq without an arbitrary withdrawal date.

Bush warned that failing to do so by the middle of this month would lead to "Draconian measures" that would harm the troops and imperil the kind of training they get at this sprawling California high-desert military base.

President Bush at Fort Irwin "The clock is ticking for our military," the president said at a lunch with several hundred troops at the Fort Irwin National Training Center, one of the military's main training facilities for soldiers headed for Iraq or Afghanistan.

"The secretary of defense, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the chief of staff of the Army have warned that if Congress delays these funds past mid-April, we'll have significant consequences for our armed forces."

As the standoff between the Republican president and Democratic Congress over continuing to finance the war escalates, Bush reiterated that he will veto any legislation that includes a date for pulling out U.S. troops. House- and Senate-approved bills include timelines.

"A strategy that encourages our enemy to wait us out is dangerous," he said. "And it's not going to become law."

A new poll shows that a solid majority of California voters, 59 percent, agrees with congressional Democrats that there should be a timetable for withdrawing American troops from Iraq. The nonpartisan Field Poll also showed that Bush's steadily declining approval rating has reached yet another all-time low in California with

26 percent of the state's voters approving of the job he is doing. Twenty-four percent approve of his handling of the war in Iraq.

Bush said he understood the public's growing opposition to the war.

"It's a tough war," Bush said. "American people are weary of this war, they wonder if we can succeed."

But succeed the U.S. must, Bush said.

"I had a choice to make, and that is whether or not to pull back and hope that chaos wouldn't spread, or to do something about the sectarian violence that was taking place and to help the Iraqis bring order to their capital in order to give them breathing space, time to reconcile their differences after having lived under the thumb of a tyrant for years," he said.

Bush's 18th visit to California as president began with a tour of the base north of Barstow whose training facility replicates conditions in Iraq, complete with tanks, armored personnel carriers and mock villages with actors playing Iraqi civilians.

Brig. Gen. Robert Cone took the president on a tour of one of the villages and showed him a display of roadside explosive devices and the instruments used to detect them.

After the lunch with troops, Bush met privately with the families of military personnel killed in battle.

Later, he flew to Los Angeles for a fundraiser for the Republican National Committee and then headed to his ranch in Crawford, Texas.

In his speech Wednesday, Bush accused Congress of political gamesmanship in undermining his recent troop buildup just as he said it is starting to pay dividends.

Democrats, pointing to continued violence in Baghdad and around Iraq, question whether inroads are being made.

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