

## U.S. says Iran still training Iraqi militias

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BAGHDAD (Reuters) - The U.S. military said on Sunday there had been a dramatic drop in the number of Iranian weapons being used in Iraq but no let-up in Tehran's training and financing of Iraqi militias.

Washington has accused Tehran of supplying Shi'ite militias in Iraq with sophisticated weapons, including deadly armor-piercing bombs known as explosively formed penetrators (EFPs), to attack American troops. Tehran denies the charge.

"We do believe that the number of signature weapons that have come from Iran and have been used against coalition and Iraqi security forces are down dramatically," U.S. military spokesman Rear Admiral Greg Smith told reporters in Baghdad.

"We do not think levels of training have been reduced at all. We don't believe levels of financing are reduced."

His comments come at a time of heightened tensions between Iran and the United States after Washington said its warships were threatened by Iranian craft in the Strait of Hormuz earlier this month. The two countries are already at odds over Iran's determination to pursue a nuclear program.

U.S. officials had softened their rhetoric towards Iran in recent weeks, partly attributing a sharp drop in violence in Iraq since June to Iran stemming the flow of smuggled weapons. U.S. forces also released a number of Iranian detainees.

Smith said there was an upswing in the number of EFP attacks reported in the first two weeks of January.

"There was an increase, we don't know why precisely ... and now they have returned to normal levels," he said. "It is uncertain what is happening inside Iran to lead to that."

### U.S.-IRANIAN MEETING

U.S. and Iranian officials were scheduled to meet in mid-December for a fourth round of talks on quelling violence in Iraq. The meeting was cancelled because of time pressure on U.S. diplomats as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice made a hurriedly arranged visit to Iraq.

Iraqi government spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh said no new date had been set for the meeting.

Smith said Iran continued to exert a "negative influence" in Iraq, with militia groups still being trained inside the Islamic Republic late last year, after Tehran had made a pledge to the Iraqi government to support efforts to end violence.

Many of the militiamen being trained in Iran are considered renegade members of Shi'ite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr's Mehdi Army. Sadr has ordered a six-month ceasefire that expires in late February so that he could reorganize his splintered militia.

The U.S. military says the Mehdi Army has been replaced by al Qaeda as the greatest threat to peace in Iraq, and has launched a major offensive against the Sunni Islamist group in four northern provinces and Baghdad's southern outskirts.

Smith said 121 militants had been killed, including 92 "high-value targets", since the operation began on January 8.

In an attack that bore the hallmarks of al Qaeda, a suicide bomber killed six people in western Anbar province on Sunday, including a member of a Sunni Arab tribe involved in fighting the militant group, officials said.

The attack was the second deadly bombing in as many days in Anbar, where violence has plunged in recent months after local tribes joined with the U.S. military to push al Qaeda out of much of the vast region. Many militants relocated to the north.

Smith said documents seized in an operation suggested that 90 percent of the group's suicide bombers were foreigners, along with much of the leadership, while the rank-and-file were Iraqi.

In 2007 al Qaeda militants killed 3,870 civilians and wounded almost 18,000, in 4,500 attacks, he said.

Al Qaeda was "in an almost constant state of fleeing", making it hard to plan and carry out attacks, a U.S. military intelligence analyst told a small group of reporters.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, he said there was considerable friction between Iraqi and foreign members but al Qaeda remained a "flexible and resilient" organization.

(Additional reporting by Wisam Mohammed and Paul Tait; editing by Keith Weir)

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