

US to deploy 200 additional troops, 8 Apache helicopters to Iraq to fight against ISIS

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Baghdad: The U.S. has agreed to deploy more than 200 additional troops to Iraq and to send eight Apache helicopters for the first time into the fight against the Islamic State group in Iraq, the first major increase in U.S. forces in nearly a year, U.S. defense officials said Monday.

The uptick in American fighting forces "and the decision to put them closer to the front lines" is designed to help Iraqi forces as they move to retake the key northern city of Mosul.

Speaking to reporters Monday in Baghdad, Defense Secretary Ash Carter said the decision to move U.S. advisers to the Iraqi brigade and battalion level will put them "closer to the action," but he said they will have security forces with them and the U.S. will do what's needed to reduce the risks.

A senior U.S. official said there will be eight Apache helicopters authorized to help the Iraqi forces when Iraq leaders determine they need them. The official was not authorized to discuss the numbers publicly so spoke on condition of anonymity.

Last June the Obama administration announced that hundreds of troops would be deployed to help the Iraqis retake Ramadi "a goal they accomplished at the end of the year.

President Barack Obama on Monday emphasized the additional troops won't be doing the fighting, but the extra training and intelligence support they provide can "continually tighten the noose."

"As we see the Iraqis willing to fight and gaining ground, let's make sure we're providing them more support," Obama said in an interview with CBS that aired Monday evening.

Obama also predicted success in Mosul: "My expectation is that by the end of the year we will have created the conditions whereby Mosul will eventually fall."

Of the additional troops announced Monday, most would be Army special forces, who have been used throughout the anti-Islamic State campaign to advise and assist the Iraqis. The remainder would include some trainers, security forces for the advisers, and maintenance teams for the Apaches.

The decisions reflect weeks of discussions with commanders and Iraqi leaders, and a decision by Obama to increase the authorized troop level in Iraq by 217 forces "or from 3,870 to 4,087. The advise-and-assist teams" made up of about a dozen troops each "would embed with Iraqi brigades and battalions, likely putting them closer to the front lines and at greater risk from mortars and rocket fire.

The U.S., said Carter, is "on the same page with the Iraqi government" in how to intensify the fight against the Islamic State.

Sen. John McCain, chairman of the Armed Services Committee, said the deployment of troops was welcome but called it "yet another example of the kind of grudging incrementalism that rarely wins wars, but could certainly lose one."

The proximity to the battlefield will allow the U.S. teams to provide more tactical combat advice as the Iraqi units move toward Mosul, the country's second-largest city, still under Islamic State control. Until now, U.S. advisers have worked

with the Iraqis at the headquarters level, well back from the front lines.

Carter called the addition of the Apache helicopters significant, because they can "respond so quickly and so dynamically to an evolving tactical situation."

He said he discussed the Apaches with Iraq Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi on Monday and "he understood that it would be necessary for just these cases and agreed with me that we would provide it."

Last December, U.S. officials were trying to carefully negotiate new American assistance with Iraqi leaders who often have a different idea of how to wage war. At that time, the Iraqis refused Apache helicopters for the battle to retake Ramadi, saying they didn't think they were needed.

Speaking to U.S. troops at the airport in Baghdad, Carter also said that the U.S. will send an additional long-range, rocket-assisted artillery system to Iraq.

U.S. officials have also said that the number of special operations forces in Syria would be increased at some point, but Carter did not mention that in his comments. Officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to discuss the matter publicly.

Carter's announcement Monday came after several meetings with his commanders and Iraqi leaders about how the U.S. can best prepare Iraqi forces to retake Mosul.

In addition to his session with al-Abadi, Carter also met with Lt. Gen. Sean MacFarland, the top U.S. military commander for the Islamic State fight, and minister of defense Khalid al-Obeidi.

He also spoke by phone with the president of Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region, Massoud Barzani. Later, Carter announced to the troops that the U.S. aid will extend to the Kurdish Peshmerga forces fighting in northern Iraq. Carter said the U.S. has authorized sending up to \$415 million to the Kurds over time.

MacFarland told reporters that the money will be used in part to help feed the Peshmerga troops, who have been dealing with food shortages.

Carter on Tuesday will travel to Saudi Arabia to meet with defense ministers from Gulf nations. And Obama will also be in Riyadh to talk with Gulf leaders about the fight against the Islamic State and ask for their help in rebuilding Ramadi, which took heavy damage in the battle.

U.S. military and defense officials have made it clear that winning back Mosul is critical, but will be challenging, because the insurgents are dug in and have likely peppered the landscape with roadside bombs and other traps for any advancing military.

A senior defense official told reporters traveling with Carter that while Iraqi leaders have been reluctant to have a large number of U.S. troops in Iraq, they also need certain capabilities that only more American or coalition forces can provide. The official was not authorized to discuss the issue publicly so spoke on condition of anonymity.

- AP