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Pool of soldiers ready for deployment shrinking

By Gregg Zoroya, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — More soldiers have been unavailable for combat in the last year because of wounds or injuries than at any time since the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan began, shrinking the pool of soldiers ready for deployment to those conflicts, according to Pentagon records, congressional testimony and interviews.

The Army is counting on plans to draw down forces from Iraq to ease this situation, said Gen. Peter Chiarelli, the service's vice chief of staff. Without that relief, the Army will have to rely more heavily on National Guard and reserve soldiers, and plans to lengthen downtime between combat deployments — something military families are counting on — may be in jeopardy, he said.

The Army is investigating whether stress and multiple deployments helped spark the fatal shooting in Baghdad Monday of five servicemembers allegedly by Sgt. John Russell, who was on his third deployment to Iraq.

About 20,000 soldiers are currently unavailable for combat because of wounds or injuries. Many of them are "trying to heal from past combat rotations," Chiarelli said.

Further aggravating the problem are 10,000 to 15,000 more soldiers unable to deploy with combat brigades because they are working in new wounded-care units or have non-combat assignments such as nation-building efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, he said.

Army leaders believe the number of troops unable to deploy, while fluctuating month to month, has been highest over the past year that any other time since the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq began in 2001 and 2003, respectively, said Lt. Col. Michelle Martin-Hing, an Army spokesperson.

"Demand has continued to grow," Chiarelli said, while "our forces have become smaller in terms of the number of available personnel."

During the past two to three years, the number of soldiers held back from combat because of physical or emotional injuries has risen by 9% to 12%, according to Col. Debra Head, with the Army's personnel management office. The most common health complaints are back and neck pains, in many cases from long periods of carrying heavy body armor, ammunition and weapons, Chiarelli said.

Such conditions are alarming, said Sen. Evan Bayh, D-Ind., chairman of a Senate subcommittee on military readiness.

"As quickly as we're trying to rebuild our forces, they're being cannibalized by the conflicts in which we are currently engaged, which leaves us vulnerable to unforeseen developments," Bayh told USA TODAY.


"They're human," he said. "They're not robots."

Chiarelli said the Army is banking on plans by President Obama to draw down the bulk of the Army's 14 combat brigades in Iraq by the middle of next year. The Army has already added 65,000 soldiers to reach its goal of 547,700 active-duty troops.

"It used to be much, much easier to grow an Army," Chiarelli said. "When you had draft Army and you needed another 100,000 soldiers, what did you do? You turned to the draft board and you said, 'Go get me another 100,000 more soldiers.' You don't have that capability today."

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