

Pentagon chief signs order sending 82nd Airborne brigade to Kuwait

The Associated Press

Tuesday, December 26, 2006

WASHINGTON

U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates has signed orders that will send the 82nd Airborne Division's 2nd Brigade to Kuwait shortly after the new year, senior defense officials said Tuesday.

The decision to send the unit was first reported earlier this month. The soldiers, who are based at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, are expected to be deployed to Iraq early next year, and the move could be part of a short-term surge of troops to the battlefield to quell the ongoing violence.

The 82nd Airborne unit — which would include as many as 3,300 soldiers — will replace the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit, which had served as the reserve force based in Kuwait but has been deployed to Iraq.

U.S. Army officials said Tuesday they were not aware that a final decision had been made on sending the unit to Kuwait. But two senior defense officials, who requested anonymity because the announcement had not yet been made public, said Gates had signed the order Tuesday — the first of his week-old tenure as Pentagon chief.

Gates was in Iraq last week meeting with U.S. military commanders and Iraqi officials.

He met with President George W. Bush on Saturday to relay what he saw and learned during his three days in Iraq. He is scheduled to travel to Crawford, Texas, to meet with Bush on Thursday to discuss options for changes in the Iraq strategy. He and other military leaders have said that all options are on the table. Gen. Peter Pace, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, will also meet with Bush on Thursday.

Some of the options for a new strategy in Iraq that have been under discussion by U.S. officials include an increase in troops, to help tamp down the violence, particularly in Baghdad, and to beef up the training of Iraq soldiers.

There are 134,000 troops in Iraq. The U.S. military has consistently kept a reserve force in Kuwait that can easily and quickly be deployed into Iraq, or other places in the region, as needed.

Gates took over the top job at the Pentagon last week after the resignation of Donald H. Rumsfeld.

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