

# More nations dropping out of US-led coalition in Iraq

By William J Kole

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**I**TALY'S prime minister announced plans to start drawing down his country's 3,000-strong contingent in Iraq in September, putting a fresh crack in US President George W. Bush's crumbling coalition. Bulgaria also called for a partial withdrawal, and Ukraine welcomed home its first wave of returning troops.

The moves come on top of the withdrawal of more than a dozen countries over the last year and could complicate efforts to keep the peace while Iraq's new government builds up police and military units capable of taking over from foreign forces. Two years after the US-led invasion toppled Saddam Hussein, the coalition is unraveling amid mounting casualties and kidnappings that have stoked anti-war sentiment and sapped leaders' resolve to keep troops in harm's way.

Italian Premier Silvio Berlusconi, who confirmed he would seek re-election next year, alluded to the rising public discontent and said he had spoken with British Prime Minister Tony Blair, another strong Washington ally. "We need to construct a precise exit strategy, also because our publics' opinions expect this communication and we agree to talk about it soon."

"Starting with the month of September, we would like to proceed with a gradual reduction of our soldiers," Berlusconi said on a state TV talk show that lasted into early Wednesday. He added that the withdrawal would be tied to the Iraqis' ability to secure the country.

As of now, the reduction in the Italian contingent will start "even before the year's end, in agreement with our allies," Berlusconi added. Italy's government, a staunch US ally, had vowed to stay despite suffering 21 casualties and enduring fierce public opposition that escalated this month after US soldiers in Baghdad fatally shot an Italian intelligence agent escorting a newly freed hostage.

Thirty-eight countries have provided troops in Iraq at one point or another. But

14 nations have permanently withdrawn since the March 2003 invasion, and today's coalition stands at 24. Excluding US forces, there are 22,750 foreign soldiers still in Iraq.

"Obviously, every country will make their own decisions about what they can continue to contribute or contribute in the future when it comes to helping the Iraqi people," White House spokesman Scott McClellan said Tuesday.

The scramble to get out has taken the multinational force from a high of about 300,000 soldiers in the region early in 2003 to 172,750 and falling. About 150,000 US troops shoulder the bulk of the responsibility and suffer the most casualties. A Pentagon spokesman, Lt. Col. Barry Venable, said the decisions by some nations to reduce or end their presence in Iraq was not a threat to security. "The coalition is strong," he said.

Venable said the reductions are part of the natural process of turning security over to Iraq's government. "The plan is to have the Iraqis fill in everywhere," he said. "That process will continue and indeed accelerate." The United States also is drawing down its troop levels.

After bolstering the US force to about 155,000 during Iraq's recent elections, the Pentagon is bringing some units home and expects to be down to 138,000 soldiers in a few months.

Some 137 Ukrainian servicemen returned home Tuesday, part of a gradual pullout of a 1,650-strong contingent to be completed in October. Ukraine has lost 18 soldiers in Iraq, and its people overwhelmingly oppose the deployment.

The Netherlands formally ended its mission March 7, and the bulk of its 1,400 troops return home this month. The US and British governments urged Dutch leaders to extend the mission, but they refused, saying they had met their commitments.

Poland, which has command responsibility for a large swath of central Iraq, plans to withdraw several hundred of its 1,700 soldiers in July and hopes to pull out completely by year's end or early in 2006. Among the nations that withdrew last year were Spain, which pulled out 1,300 soldiers; Tonga, 44; New Zealand, 60; Thailand, 423; the Philippines, 51; Honduras, 370; the Dominican Republic, 302; Nicaragua, 115; and Hungary, 300. Norway withdrew 150 troops but left 16

liaison officers, and Singapore withdrew 160, but later provided a landing ship tank and crew.

Last month, Portugal withdrew its 127 soldiers, and Moldova pulled out its 12.

The Associated Press tally is based on queries to military officials in the various coalition nations. The trend isn't closely tracked on Web sites maintained by the Defense Department or the US Central Command, which offer dated information.

Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi said on Wednesday that Italy's possible scale-down would have no effect on Tokyo's deployment of 550 troops.

Ferocious insurgent attacks, coalition casualties and a spate of civilian abductions and beheadings have rattled ordinary citizens in many countries. "If we continue to keep our troops in Iraq, Koreans — not only here but also abroad — will be subject to terrorist attacks. It only puts our security in danger," said Ryu Jae-yoon, a 22-year-old office worker in Seoul.

Anti-war sentiment boiled over there last June when a South Korean military contract worker was beheaded by militants after the Seoul government refused a demand to withdraw its forces. AP