

By Phil Stewart

From [Reuters](#) | Original article

The United States will take unilateral action when needed to deal with the threat to American troops in Iraq from Shi'ite militias armed by [Iran](#) , Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta said Monday.

Panetta's comments came during his first trip as defense secretary to Iraq, where he also vented frustration over Baghdad's failure to decide whether it wanted to keep some of the remaining 46,000 U.S. troops in the country beyond an end-year deadline for their withdrawal.

U.S. forces officially ended combat operations in Iraq last August but have come under increasing fire in recent weeks. A senior U.S. defense official described it as part of a campaign by militants to "bloody our noses on the way out."

Fourteen U.S. service members were killed in hostile incidents in June, the highest monthly toll in three years. [ID:nLDE75T11D] At least three more have been killed in July, including one Sunday, the day Panetta arrived in Baghdad.

"We are very concerned about Iran and the weapons they are providing to extremists here in Iraq," the former CIA director said in an address to U.S. troops in Baghdad.

"In June we lost a hell of a lot of Americans as a result of those attacks. And we cannot just simply stand back and allow this to continue to happen ..."

Panetta said Washington's first effort would be to press Iraq to go after Shi'ite groups responsible for the attacks, a point he raised in a meeting with Shi'ite Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and President Jalal Talabani.

"Secondly, to do what we have to do unilaterally, to be able to go after those threats as well, and we're doing that," he said, referring to the right of U.S. forces to defend themselves on Iraqi soil.

U.S. officials blame Shi'ite militias armed by Iraq's Shi'ite neighbor Iran for most of the recent attacks and U.S. military explosives experts showed reporters traveling with Panetta pieces of rockets used for attacks in Iraq that they linked to Iran.

General Lloyd Austin, the commander of U.S. forces in Iraq, declined to comment on what specific measures unilateral action might involve.

"I think what the secretary was pointing to was we'll do what's necessary to protect ourselves and that could include a host of things ... so we'll just leave it at that," he said.

MAKE A DECISION!

During his talks, Panetta stressed that the clock was ticking for Baghdad to decide whether it would ask some troops to remain in Iraq beyond 2011, a Pentagon official said.

But Maliki's office offered little clarity, saying in a statement that the decision was "up to the national consensus and what the political parties and parliament agree on."

Panetta, unafraid of blunt, colorful language, made no secret earlier Monday about his frustration with Iraq's failure to come to a decision -- even as he acknowledged that the delays

were part of the country's democratic process.

"Do they want us to stay? Don't they want us to stay? ... Dammit, make a decision," Panetta told U.S. troops. "So it gets frustrating. But that's the nature of democracy ...it's that kind of debate, that kind of dialogue goes on."

Earlier Monday, militants fired three Katyusha rockets into Baghdad's heavily fortified Green Zone, home to the massive U.S. embassy complex and Iraqi government buildings, according to an Iraqi Interior Ministry source.

Panetta, who as CIA director helped oversee the covert raid that killed Osama bin Laden, said his number one priority since becoming defense secretary was to defeat al Qaeda. He has estimated there are around 1,000 al Qaeda fighters in Iraq.

In language reminiscent of the Bush era, he appeared to link the Iraq war to the September 11, 2001 attacks in his comments to troops.

"The reason you guys are here is because on 9/11 the United States got attacked, and 3,000 ... innocent human beings got killed because of al Qaeda," Panetta said. "And we've been fighting them as a result."

He told reporters he was not talking about the justification for the 2003 invasion -- intelligence, later proved wrong, that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction.

Instead, he said it was the fact that in the years since then, "al Qaeda had really developed a presence here."