

## **Iraq: Honduras Follows Spain In Planned Troop Withdrawal, Other Coalition Members Reaffirm Support**

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Honduran President Ricardo Maduro announced late yesterday he was recalling the 368 soldiers his country had deployed to Iraq.

"I have told the coalition countries and other friendly countries that I have decided that the Honduran troops are going to return from Iraq," Maduro said.

Honduran forces had been scheduled to leave Iraq around 1 July. A presidential spokesman says the troops will now leave "before July," although a precise date has yet to be announced.

The announcement came just a day after Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero said Spain is withdrawing its troops.

In Madrid, Spanish Defense Minister Jose Bono said that Spain's 1,300 troops would be pulled from Iraq over the next six weeks.

Zapatero is scheduled to address parliament later today to explain his decision.

The prime minister, who was elected last month, pledged in his campaign to recall Spanish troops from Iraq unless they were brought under United Nations command by June. He has since said it seems unlikely that the United Nations will adopt a resolution that will meet Spain's requirements for remaining in Iraq.

President George W. Bush scolded Zapatero for the abrupt withdrawal, warning him in a telephone conversation yesterday to avoid actions that give "false comfort to terrorists or enemies of freedom in Iraq."

The U.S. military has put on a brave face following the Spanish announcement, saying the withdrawal of the Spanish and other troops would not affect the coalition.

Speaking yesterday, U.S. Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt said: "We know that the departure of the Spanish and any other forces that will be departing at the same time will be orderly, we know it will be professional."

Spain has contributed some 1,300 troops to the 9,000-strong Polish-led force patrolling a large swathe of south-central Iraq.

Thailand today said it may withdraw its 450 medical and engineering troops from Iraq if they come under attack.

Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra said his country's soldiers did not go to Iraq to fight. "If we get hurt or killed, I will not keep them there," he said.

But other members of the U.S.-led coalition -- such as Britain, Poland, Ukraine, Australia, Italy, Bulgaria, Romania, Albania, and Japan -- have pledged their commitment to stay the course.

Ukraine, the second-largest contributor of troops to the Polish-led sector with 1,650, said its plans were not affected. A Defense Ministry spokesman has said "no changes" in the Ukrainian contingent are expected.

Ukraine recently pulled out of the southern town of Kut after troops came under a fierce attack by Shi'a militiamen that resulted in the death of a Ukrainian soldier.

Japanese Defense Minister Shigeru Ishiba today insisted that Tokyo will not withdraw its 550-strong force from Iraq, despite two kidnapping incidents involving five Japanese civilians. All five were released unharmed.

Australian Prime Minister John Howard today said threats from Iraqi insurgents to kidnap Australian troops will not force him to withdraw the 850-strong Australian contingent.

Romanian Foreign Minister Mircea Geoana told U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell and U.S. National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice in phone conversations that Romania would continue its commitment to Iraq with the same number of troops.

Romania has 500 troops serving under British command near Al-Nasiriyah, and 200 under Polish command in Al-Hillah.

Bulgarian Foreign Minister Solomon Pasi also assured the United States that Bulgaria would continue its mission in Iraq. Bulgaria has 485 troops in Karbala under Polish command.

Albania has said it is ready to increase its presence in Iraq. The country currently contributes 71 noncombat troops patrolling the city of Mosul under U.S. command.

But the announced withdrawal of Spanish and Honduran troops has cast doubts on the future of other Latin American contingents currently serving under a Spanish-led brigade.

Salvadoran officials have said they are going to keep their 374 troops in Iraq until the end of their mission in July.

But El Salvador's leftist opposition has stepped up pressure on the government to withdraw troops following the death of a 19-year-old Salvadoran soldier in Al-Najaf earlier this month.

The Dominican Republic has also said it will recall its 302 troops at the end of their mission in July.

Spanish and Latin American troops are mostly based in or around the holy city of Al-Najaf, some 160 kilometers south of Baghdad, where U.S. soldiers have been locked in a tense standoff with the forces of radical Shi'a cleric Muqtada al-Sadr.

Some 2,500 U.S. troops have been massed outside Al-Najaf. Coalition forces want al-Sadr arrested in connection with the murder of a rival cleric last year.

Reports say mediation efforts were continuing today to resolve the standoff with al-Sadr peacefully.

Al-Sadr yesterday urged his followers to stop attacks against the Spanish forces following the announcement of their withdrawal and called on other countries to follow the Spanish example and leave Iraq.

Excluding U.S. and British forces, 38 coalition troops have died from hostile fire in Iraq since the war began.