

"By ANTONIO CASTANEDA, Associated Press WriterSun Oct 2, 8:16 PM ET
Periodic U.S. offensives across Iraq's huge western region aim to keep insurgents on the run. But stamping them out completely is another matter: Once the assault ends, the militants usually come back.

Overstretched American forces can't keep a permanent presence in the swath of territory leading to the Syrian border — an area the size of West Virginia — and too few Iraqi forces are on the ground to hold the towns.

The latest operation, launched Saturday when 1,000 mostly Marines stormed the village of Sadah near the Syrian border, could end the same way several other offensives have since this spring — with partial control of a spot for only a limited period of time.

The problem, the Marines say, is the lack of Iraqi troops or soldiers to maintain control once U.S. troops have swept through, searching block-by-block for suspects.

"We do maintenance work up and down here ... We just keep sweeping the trash back to Syria," Col. Stephen W. Davis, who commands Marine operations in western Anbar province, said in a recent interview.

Now, with open talk by the top U.S. commander in Iraq of a possible staged American withdrawal next year, the question of the sweeps' effectiveness has become more urgent. This area could — if substantial Iraqi forces are not added, or if U.S. forces are trimmed during a pullout — foretell a future where Sunni tribes with ties to the insurgency rule large parts of Iraq.

Since the U.S.-led invasion in March 2003, successive Iraqi governments have wielded little influence over this long river valley through which foreign militants are thought to pass.

Marines say the key to turning the tide is the introduction of troops — particularly Iraqis who can remain longer. An example of the effect came when two companies of Iraqi soldiers and Marine outposts were recently installed inside the Anbar town of Hit.

Commanders said they received more information from local people after they gained confidence that the Marines were staying and could follow up tips.

"The key is to get more Iraqi troops out there, that everyone says are coming," Gunnery Sgt. Ralph Perrine, an operations chief in 3rd Battalion, 25th Regiment, from Brunswick, Ohio, said. "We need to stop treating them like kids and train them, and get them protecting their own country."

But just this week Gen. George Casey, the top U.S. commander in Iraq, said only one Iraqi army battalion was prepared to fight on its own, down from a previous U.S. estimate that three were ready. Marines say this area needs hundreds, if not thousands, more Iraqi troops.

Despite that assessment, President Bush said Saturday he was encouraged by the increasing size and capability of the Iraqi security forces.

"All Americans can have confidence in the military commanders who are leading the effort in Iraq, and in the troops under their command," Bush said in upbeat remarks that appeared part of a renewed push to win support for the war effort from an increasingly reluctant American public.

In the latest offensive, known as Operation Iron Fist, which was extended to two other towns on Sunday, U.S. troops were largely fighting by themselves without a significant number of Iraqi troops.

At least 28 militants have been killed in the operation so far, the military said Sunday. Sadah appeared calm, suggesting most gunmen had left, but the military reported fighting on the outskirts of the village and a nearby town. There have been no U.S. casualties, the military said.

The region — at the point where the Euphrates River begins snaking through western Iraq from Syria — contains a string of troubled riverside towns and cities, slicing through hundreds of miles of bare desert to Baghdad. Tribal or family ties also serve as protection for some insurgents here.

Commanders acknowledge their job is not to control or rebuild these towns, but instead to periodically rush in to capture or kill any insurgents they can find and keep the rest off-balance and unable to establish overt bases.

Hundreds of insurgents have been killed and even more have been captured in two previous offensives in recent months, Marines say, but the operations have taken a toll on U.S. forces as well. The 3rd Battalion, 25th Regiment suffered 48 deaths during its seven-month tour before beginning to demobilize back to the United States.

The U.S. command, meanwhile, has focused the bulk of its more permanent resources to securing troubled cities closer to Baghdad, like Fallujah and Ramadi.

At the center of the conflict is the fierce Sunni Arab opposition to the new U.S.-backed, Shiite and Kurdish-dominated government — voter turnout in this province was only 2 percent in the January elections. Insurgents also have been bold enough to challenge local sheiks who head ancient tribes, Marine commanders said.

Lt. Col. Lionel Urquhart, who commands the 3rd Battalion, said it was unclear if the sheiks were part of the insurgency but "they're intimidated, afraid to be seen with coalition forces because they could be killed."

Local leaders have been under intense pressure from both militants and the Marines to take sides, but the military's ties to leaders with clout still remain shaky at best. Military officials have not communicated with city leaders in Haditha since the spring, Urquhart said.

Tribal infighting also has periodically erupted, apparently between those who support and oppose the insurgents.

"The big piece out here is human intelligence, and we don't have any," said Maj. Steve Lawson, of Columbus, Ohio, who commands Lima Company in the 3rd Battalion. "We don't have a connection to local leaders, and we've never been able to bridge the gap with them."

Tactics have been tailored as the fight has progressed. Commanders say they've had to adapt to a local population that respects brute strength first — and goodwill gestures second.

"I can go in and build a school and the next night, the insurgency will go in and blow it up," Davis said.

In the background remains the hunt for Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the head of al-Qaida in Iraq and officials insist the noose is tightening around the country's most-wanted terrorist. Davis says he's confident the region will eventually tip in the United States' favor: "As more (Iraqi troops) become available, we'll do it right here. We'll take this place back."