

US Defence Chief Says Iraq Has Consensus On Extended US Presence
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WASHINGTON, Aug 20 (Bernama) -- Iraqi leaders have reached political consensus that could lead to an extended US military presence in the country, US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta said on Friday, stressing the United States would keep its commitment to continue the drawdown, Xinhua news agency reported.

During a roundtable with military media outlets, Panetta was asked if there had been progress in discussions with the Iraqi government since his visit six weeks ago, said Pentagon spokesman George Little.

Panetta made clear that "the Iraqis have said yes to discussions about the strategic relationship beyond 2011, and what that relationship might look like," according to Little.

"My view is that they finally did say yes... it was unanimous consent among the key leaders of the country to go ahead and request that we negotiate on some kind of training, what a training presence would look like," said Panetta, according to a transcript provided by the Pentagon.

Earlier this month, the Iraqi political leaders agreed to give green light to Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki to hold talks with the US about keeping some of its troops in Iraq beyond the end of 2011 deadline.

More than 40,000 US service members are now stationed in Iraq, and they are to pull out completely by the end of 2011, according to a security agreement signed in 2008 between Baghdad and Washington.

It remains unclear how many US troops will stay in Iraq and what their mission will be. Panetta said the United States is "going to be engaging with them to try to negotiate what that presence will look like," noting the kind of training assistance and presence the US forces provides will depend on what Iraq feels it needs "in order to be able to defend itself and secure itself."

During those negotiations, the US will continue the drawdown as planned, Panetta said.

"We have begun the drawdown, and we will continue the drawdown and we will fulfill the commitment that we are going to take all the combat forces out of Iraq," he noted.

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