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Shortage of Vehicle Armor Becomes Issue for US Soldiers in Iraq

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Bush administration officials continue to react to a complaint from an American soldier headed for Iraq that U.S. forces deployed for battle there are not getting the vehicle armor they need to protect themselves from attacks. The issue came up during a visit to the troops in Kuwait by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld Wednesday and continues to reverberate around Washington.

A U.S. military commander in Kuwait says soldiers headed for Iraq still do not have all the armor they need to protect their vehicles from explosives and mortar shells being fired at them by Iraqi insurgents on a daily basis.

A day after Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was questioned about the shortages by a soldier who will soon be deployed to Iraq, Army Lieutenant General Steve Whitcomb told reporters about 2,000 more fully armored Humvees are still needed. "Our goal and what we're working towards is that no wheeled vehicle that leaves Kuwait going into Iraq is driven by a soldier that does not have some level of armored protection on it," he said.

The Kuwait-based general took questions from reporters at the Pentagon following Wednesday's pointed exchange between Secretary Rumsfeld and Specialist Thomas Wilson, one of several thousand soldiers headed for battle. "Why do we soldiers have to dig through local landfills for pieces of scrap metal and compromised ballistic glass to up-arm our vehicles and why don't we have those resources readily available to us?"

The question drew cheers and applause from fellow soldiers and criticism, including from lawmakers on Capitol Hill, over the way Secretary Rumsfeld

responded. "It's a matter of production and capability of doing it. As you know, you go to war with the army you have, not the army you might want or wish to have at a later time," he said.

Secretary Rumsfeld said he expects the army to do its best to provide the badly needed armor to protect against the insurgency, the strength of which he admits was underestimated.

At the White House President Bush told reporters the concerns of soldiers heading into battle are being addressed. "We expect our troops to have the best possible equipment. And if I were a soldier overseas wanting to defend my country, I would want to ask the Secretary of Defense the same question," he said.

But critics of the Bush administration's handling of the Iraq war see the shortage of armored vehicles as an indication that the Pentagon failed to plan adequately for the aftermath of the fall of Saddam Hussein.

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The Pentagon says it has a well planned schedule to improve the armor of military vehicles in Iraq. In a briefing Thursday, Lieutenant General Steven Whitcomb said the military had enough resources and was installing additional armor on military vehicles already in Iraq and Kuwait. He acknowledged, however, the increased armor would not protect troops from improvised explosive devices detonated from underneath the vehicles. General Whitcomb...

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The NATO alliance has announced that it will boost its training mission in Iraq after some European members responded to appeals to send instructors there to train Iraqi security forces. But, U.S. and NATO officials say they are disappointed that some members of the 26-nation alliance are still refusing to take part in the mission. NATO has been struggling for weeks to get its members to commit personnel to the training mission. It eventually hopes to have 300 instructors...

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As Iraq moves closer to national elections next month, insurgents continue their efforts to intimidate Iraqis into staying away from the polls. Car bombs and mortars were used in attacks Thursday against civilians and military personnel in Baghdad and in the north. While the political landscape in Iraq is beginning to take form, insurgents in the country continue to do all they can to disrupt the political process. Insurgents in Baghdad fired multiple mortar rounds...

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Iraq's Shi'ite Muslims, the country's largest electoral bloc, have announced a list of 228 candidates for January's elections as they seek to consolidate Shi'ite power after decades of Sunni rule. The United Iraqi Alliance, as it is called, has the support of the country's highest Shi'ite religious authority, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. The coalition includes two major

Shi'ite parties, the Islamic Dawa party and the Supreme Council...