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NO LONGER NEEDING U.S. SUPPORT, KUCHMA WANTS TO BRING TROOPS HOME ON HIS WATCH

By Taras Kuzio

On January 10, President Leonid Kuchma held a meeting to discuss the deteriorating situation in Iraq. Eight Ukrainian troops died when a bomb they were defusing went off accidentally on January 9. Another seven Ukrainian troops were injured.

Ukraine has the fourth-largest military contingent in Iraq and the largest contingent from a non-NATO member country. Since August 2003, some 1,600 troops have been deployed in central Iraq, a sector that is under Polish overall command. Ukrainian troops have not been involved in major military operations, and, until this latest incident, Ukrainian casualties had been low: nine dead and 20 injured. However, the Iraq deployment was always controversial, and polls showed that most Ukrainians opposed the mission.

Kuchma instructed Defense Minister Oleksandr Kuzmuk, Minister of Foreign Affairs Kostiantyn Hryshchenko, and National Security and Defense Council (NRBO) Secretary Volodymyr Radchenko to make preparations to withdraw Ukrainian troops during the first half of 2005. The 72nd Battalion would be repatriated in March-April with the remainder following by June (president.gov.ua, January 10).

Only two days earlier, Kuzmuk had told Inter TV that Ukrainian troops would be withdrawn by the end of 2005, i.e. after elections in Iraq, the establishment of a new government, and completed training of Iraqi security forces. However, the deaths have give Kuchma an excuse to bring Kuzmuk's timetable forward.

Kuchma's decision to recall the troops reflects the fact that he no longer needs them to curry favor with the Bush administration. Kuchma had hoped that stationing Ukrainian troops in Iraq would make the Bush administration go light on U.S. criticism of the rigged presidential elections. This proved to be a strategic miscalculation, as U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell led the West's refusal to recognize the official results of the November 21st runoff.

Other post-communist states, such as Poland and Romania, sent troops to Iraq as a gesture of gratitude for U.S. support for the anti-communist opposition during the Cold War. This was never the case with Kuchma, whose only reason was to repair his personal image in the aftermath of the Gongadze murder and the Kolchuga radar sale to Iraq.

During Ukraine's 2004 presidential elections the Iraqi issue, and foreign policy in general, was eclipsed by domestic issues. This diversion was

welcome to presidential hopeful Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich who, as head of the government, would have had to defend the presence of Ukrainian troops in Iraq.

Paradoxically, challenger Viktor Yushchenko, who was constantly portrayed as an "American stooge" by the Kuchma-Yanukovich camp, strongly favored the withdrawal of Ukraine's troops from Iraq. The political agreement he signed with Socialist leader Oleksandr Moroz after round two included a clause stipulating that, if elected, Yushchenko would remove Ukrainian troops from Iraq.

After the recent Ukrainian casualties, Yushchenko promised to provide compensation for the families of those killed. A statement from his office reiterated that withdrawal "remains one of Yushchenko's priorities as soon as he assumes office" (AFK Europe, January 9).

After Yushchenko's inauguration, he plans to immediately begin consultations with the NRBO and foreign partners leading to a decree setting out plans for withdrawal. "I can say that the promise made by Viktor Yushchenko to the Ukrainian people will be implemented," vowed his campaign chief, Oleksandr Zinchenk (razom.org.ua, December 10).

One day after Kuchma ordered preparations for withdrawal, the Ukrainian parliament voted by the constitutional majority of 318 to withdraw troops from Iraq. This margin surpassed that of a similar parliamentary resolution adopted on December 3, which was supported by only 234 deputies (rada.kiev.ua). Two pro-Kuchma factions, Regions of Ukraine and the Social Democratic United Party members supported the December 3 resolution. Most Communist and Socialists backed both the January 11 and the December 3 resolutions. However, 69 out of 101 of Yushchenko's Our Ukraine faction and 6 out of 19 of Yulia Tymoshenko's faction supported the January 11 resolution, an increase over the 17 Our Ukraine deputies who backed the December 3 resolution.

Acting Defense Minister Kuzmuk believes that Ukraine's troops will be withdrawn by the end of June (Ukrayinska pravda, January 12). But, as Kuchma will not be around to make any final decisions, Kuzmuk will also not be re-appointed as Defense Minister in President Yushchenko's new cabinet.

Any Ukrainian withdrawal would affect not only the U.S.-led operation as a whole. It would also pose major difficulties for Poland, which has become Ukraine's main lobbyist for integration into Euro-Atlantic structures.

On March 11, 2004, terrorists killed 201 people using ten bombs deployed in three train stations in Madrid. Three days later, the Spanish Socialist Workers Party won parliamentary elections on a platform that called for the withdrawal of Spanish troops from Iraq. With 1,300 troops, Spain had the fifth-largest contingent in Iraq. With that contingent gone, a withdrawal of

1,600 Ukrainian troops from Iraq would be even more painful for the U.S.-led Coalition.