

The Secretary of State for Defence (John Reid) told Parliament today:

When I announced the last changeover in October last year, 190,000 members of the Iraqi security forces were already trained, capable and equipped. Today there are about 235,000—which is 45,000 more than when I announced the last roulement deployment—and others are joining them at the rate of about 5,000 every month. It is against that background that we assess our own force levels. I can therefore tell the House that, as a result of this roulement changeover, there will be a reduction of British forces in Iraq of about 800 personnel. That reflects the completion of our security sector reform tasks to develop the capability of the Iraqi forces, including training the trainers and those involved in guarding their own institutions. The reduction also reflects improvements in the way we configure our own forces. Our force levels reflect the in-theatre assessments in the south-east of Iraq. Today's announcement marks a reduction from the high point of some 10,000 UK personnel in October 2003 to just over 7,000 from May this year.

The lead formation in Iraq, currently 7th Armoured Brigade, will be replaced in early May by 20th Armoured Brigade.

The following major units will be deployed to replace those in theatre today:

1st The Queen's Dragoon Guards;

The Queen's Royal Hussars;

12th Regiment Royal Artillery;

33 and 35 Engineer Regiments;

1st Battalion Grenadier Guards;

1st Battalion The Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment; 2nd Battalion The Royal Regiment of Fusiliers (Reserve- Cyprus);

2nd Battalion The Royal Anglian Regiment;

1st Battalion The Devon and Dorset Light Infantry;

1st Battalion The Light Infantry;

and 3 Logistic Support Regiment, Royal Logistic Corps.

A number of reserve personnel will accompany this deployment, including soldiers from The

Lancastrian and Cumbrian Volunteers, and The King's and Cheshire Regiment. Aviation support will continue to be provided by five Merlin, eight Sea King support helicopters, and four Lynx. In May, there will be a reduction of two Sea King helicopters. Our support to the Iraqi navy and our contribution to the coalition taskforce in the north Arabian gulf will continue unchanged.