

Army 'can't go to war for five years'

by Michael Smith, *The Independent*

25 March 2004

Britain's Armed Forces will not be able to mount another operation on the scale of the Iraq war for another five years, the Chief of Defence Staff said yesterday.

Gen Sir Michael Walker told the Commons defence committee that the Army in particular would not be able to recover from operations in Iraq until 2008 or 2009.

"I think we have already accepted that we cannot do another large-scale operation now," he said. "We are unlikely to be able to get to large-scale much before the end of the decade, somewhere around 08 or 09." The claim goes much further than Adml Sir Michael Boyce, his predecessor, who said at the end of the war that the Armed Forces would not be ready for another such operation until the end of this year.

The Army has been stretched to breaking point by its involvement in the war on terrorism and a series of operational commitments in the Falklands, Cyprus, Sierra Leone, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Northern Ireland.

Sir Michael said the Army was still reconstituting units from the Iraq conflict and at the same time undergoing reorganisation.

He told the MPs that if he was asked to send the same number of troops to another hotspot urgently he would have to tell Geoff Hoon, the Defence Secretary, that "something will have to give".

The problems have already affected the deployment of extra troops to Afghanistan to back up the American-led hunt for Osama bin Laden. Defence chiefs have been considering sending 1,400 commandos and paratroopers to support the SAS and US special forces' operation in Afghanistan.

Operation Mountain Storm is led by Task Force 121, which is made up of US and British special forces units and has been ordered to capture bin Laden before the US presidential elections. But Gen John Reith, Chief of Joint Operations, has warned Sir Michael that the British troops could not be committed to the hunt for bin Laden for more than six months.

One of the two units being considered for Afghanistan, the Royal Marines' 40 Commando, was due to be sent to Basra, so if it goes to Afghanistan another infantry unit will have to be sent in its place.

There are even more problems finding paratroopers. The Parachute Regiment's second battalion is in Basra, the first is on standby to fly to Kosovo, and the third, which would have to go, is

training for a tour in Northern Ireland.

Sir Michael's complaint to the defence committee comes days after 700 men were sent to Kosovo, adding to the pressure faced by planners to identify units that could be deployed.

Gen Sir Mike Jackson, Chief of General Staff, told the MPs that the Army was short of medics and experts in "human intelligence" gathering, both of which skills are heavily dependent on reservists.

Large numbers are now resigning from the TA, largely because they cannot combine the increasing demands being made on reservists with their civilian careers.

One senior TA source said it was clear that many were waiting to receive their annual £1,000 bonus before resigning.