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“Fighting continues in Basra for second day”

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BRIAN WILLIAMS, anchor:

On the topic of warfare now to what's happening on the ground in Iraq, and it's important. There's a big fight for the southern city of Basra. There's also right now a big concern at the Pentagon about fighting on two fronts, Iraq and fighting an escalating conflict in Afghanistan. NBC's Jim Miklaszewski, our man on duty tonight at the Pentagon.

Jim, good evening.

JIM MIKLASZEWSKI reporting:

Good evening, Brian. There's no question that this current fight in Basra is critical to both Iraq and the US, militarily and politically.

Intense street-to-street combat continued in Basra for the second day in a row. Fifteen to 20,000 Iraqi military and police are fighting to take back control of the city from renegade Shiite militias. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki himself is in Basra and has given the militias a 72-hour deadline to lay down their arms. Basra is at a critical crossroads in southern Iraq. Seventy to 80 percent of Iraq's oil flows through this region.

The Bush administration sees the battle for Basra as a decisive moment in the war, a test to see if the Iraqi government and military can stand up. Except for some limited US and British combat air support, the White House today insisted this is an all-Iraqi operation.

Mr. STEPHEN HADLEY (National Security Advisor): Iraq is now responsible for security in Basra.

MIKLASZEWSKI: If Iraqi forces prevail, it would demonstrate a growing ability to take over the fight from the Americans. If they fail...

Ms. **KATHLEEN HICKS** (CSIS): I think there's no doubt that a serious failure here by the central government will really just dampen expectations that any success in Iraq is going to be in the near term.

MIKLASZEWSKI: At the same time, [President Bush](#)

came to the Pentagon today to hear the recommendations from the Joint Chiefs of Staff on the Iraq war. Pentagon officials say it's unlikely there'll be any further withdrawal of American troops once the five surge combat brigades come home at the end of July. That would leave 130 to 140,000 US forces still in Iraq when Bush leaves office.

General BARRY McCaffrey (Retired, NBC News Military Analyst): Clearly the administration will be under huge pressure to not let it unravel on their watch. So they're going to err on the side of caution.

MIKLASZEWSKI: Pentagon sources tell NBC News the Joint Chiefs were also prepared to tell President Bush the prolonged war in Iraq has hampered the war effort in Afghanistan. According to one official, our ability to meet the risks in Afghanistan is being consumed by the fight in Iraq.

As for the battle in Basra, military officials admit that any success there would be timed perfectly for General David Petraeus' Iraq status report that he'll deliver to Congress in two weeks, Brian.

WILLIAMS: All right, Jim. Jim Miklaszewski at the Pentagon tonight. Thanks.