

Iraq Sunni tribes build police force

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Reuters

By Yara Bayoumy

BAGHDAD (Reuters) - A year ago, Iraq's Anbar was the most dangerous province for U.S. troops. Al Qaeda had dug in across the vast desert region. Iraqis were afraid to leave their homes in the local capital Ramadi, where insurgents held sway.

Then last summer Sunni tribal leader Sheikh Abdulsattar Abu Risha gathered his fellow tribal chiefs together and created a police force to try to restore security.

Under the umbrella of the Anbar Salvation Council, Abu Risha says his initiative is showing early signs of success, with recruitment putting some 20,000 police on the streets of the Sunni-dominated province.

"The situation (in Anbar) was unbearable before, people were tortured, shot dead, bodies littered the streets. We couldn't even leave our homes to bury the dead," Abu Risha told Reuters from Ramadi by a crackly satellite phone.

Abu Risha's initiative -- partly in response to Sunni Islamist al Qaeda's indiscriminate killing of civilians in Anbar -- has revived 15 large police stations that now come under the control of the provincial police chief.

Now, while car bombings still plague Anbar, and especially Ramadi, their number has fallen, U.S. military officials said.

And for the first time in three years, U.S. military deaths in the insurgent stronghold stretching across western Iraq number fewer than in Baghdad, where a new security crackdown began in February with additional troops.

This week police arrested 30 insurgents, including members of al Qaeda, and seized three cars rigged with bombs near Ramadi, 110 km (68 miles) west of Baghdad, police said.

"The number of attacks and incidents across the entire province has dropped significantly," said Brigadier-General Mark Gurganus, the U.S. Marine commander in charge of ground operations in Anbar, without giving details.

After the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, Sunni Arab insurgents and al Qaeda turned Anbar into a safe haven, and suddenly traditionally minded Sunni leaders, scholars and religious imams found themselves vulnerable targets.

By 2006, most police stations had been destroyed.

But the U.S. military now points to Anbar as a positive development in the four-year-old war in Iraq.

At a news conference in Washington on Thursday, the U.S. commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus, hailed Abu Risha and other Sunni tribal leaders.

He said the Sunni Arab tribes were "helping transform Anbar province and other areas from being assessed as lost as little as six months ago to being relatively heartening".

"V" FOR VICTORY

The changes have been noticeable in Ramadi.

More people are shopping at outdoor markets. Students are returning to schools.

Patrols in blue-and-white police vehicles with machine guns mounted on the top rumble along Ramadi's streets.

Police said when they first started patrolling the streets, residents threw flowers at them.

"God protect you. God save you," a woman dressed in a black abaya yelled at a passing patrol last week. A young boy signalled the 'v' sign for victory at the patrol.

About 200 young men from Abu Risha's tribe first signed up as police recruits last year and, after two months of basic training in Amman, they took to the streets.

"I joined the police force so that we can protect ourselves, and defend our tribes from the terrorist groups and al Qaeda," said Nizar Mahmoud, 30.

Abu Risha said life had improved but there was more to do.

"The Americans kind of failed in crushing this area. But we know where the (insurgents) hide," he said. "Once we've got more weapons, we'll continue with the crushing."