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# Air base reopens in northern Iraq

By Borzou Daragahi  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

HARIR, Iraq (AP) — In a fertile plain in Kurdish northern Iraq, a black, paved air strip runs between a patchwork of fields dotted by dozens of new, white tents.

The bustle at this remote airfield — controlled by people without any planes — has convinced many residents that U.S. forces are preparing to use it for a war against Saddam Hussein.

At the Pentagon on Wednesday, Gen. Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was asked whether U.S. ground forces had entered Kurdish areas of northern Iraq.

Myers said he did not want to discuss the disposition of U.S. forces, but then added, "There are not significant numbers of military forces in northern Iraq right now."

During the past weeks, residents here have reported a sudden increase of movements, such as late-night convoys of trucks and Humvees, a vehicle preferred by the U.S. military.

On Monday afternoon, a Humvee all-terrain vehicle could be seen on a nearby hilltop. Trucks with commercial markings were also moving through the area.

All this has led to speculation that the airport is being readied for use by the Americans for a northern front against Baghdad's forces, which lie less than 60 miles away. The runway at Harir is 8,500 feet — long enough to accommodate military transports and fighter jets.

Asked about reports of U.S. military cargo planes arriving in northern Iraq recently, Myers said he was not aware of any planes there.

Officials of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, which runs the northwestern section of the autonomous Kurdish zone, denied knowledge of any U.S. military presence and say the Harir airstrip might be used for humanitarian flights.

But a high-level Kurdish official said U.S. specialists were expected to staff airfields in three northern provinces, including Irbil, where Harir is located. He spoke on condition of anonymity.

The privately owned Turkish television station NTV reported Wednesday that if Turkey does not permit American troops to use its bases, the United States plans to airlift troops to the Kurdish areas of northern Iraq. Presumably, airfields such as Harir would fit into such plans.

Saddam's government built the Harir airfield in 1983 and used it to launch airstrikes during the war against Iran.

## Kurdish airfield reopens

The reopening of an air base in Kurdish northern Iraq has raised speculation that the U.S. forces might be preparing to use it for war against Saddam Hussein's regime.

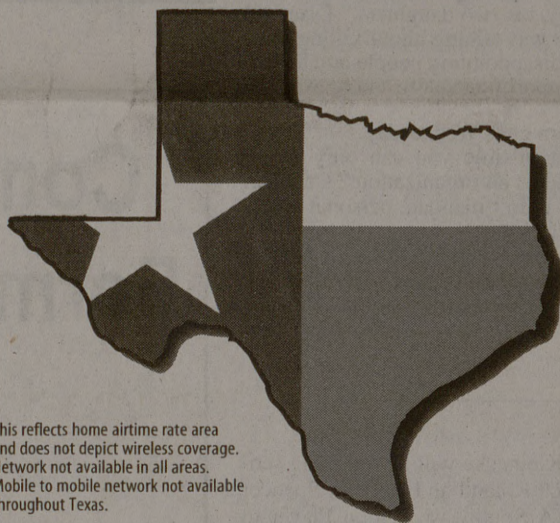


SOURCES: Associated Press, GlobalSecurity.org, ESRI



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