

WikiLeaks near release of secret US war documents

LONDON – The WikiLeaks website is poised to release what the Pentagon fears is the largest cache of secret U.S. documents in history — hundreds of thousands of intelligence reports that could amount to a classified history of the war in Iraq.

U.S. officials condemned the move and said Friday they were racing to contain the damage from the imminent release, while NATO's top official told reporters he feared that lives could be put at risk by the mammoth disclosure.

NATO chief Anders Fogh Rasmussen said any release would create "a very unfortunate situation."

"I can't comment on the details of the exact impact on security, but in general I can tell you that such leaks ... may have a very negative security impact for people involved," he told reporters Friday in Berlin following a meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

In a posting to Twitter, the secret-spilling website said there would be a "major WikiLeaks announcement in Europe" at 0900 GMT (5 a.m. EDT) Saturday. The group has revealed almost nothing publicly about the nature of the announcement.

A U.S. Defense Department spokesman, Marine Corps Col. Dave Lapan, echoed Rasmussen's stance, urging WikiLeaks to return the stolen material — some 400,000 secret files on Iraq that Pentagon officials believe someone slipped to the organization.

"We deplore WikiLeaks for inducing individuals to break the law, leak classified documents and then cavalierly share that secret information with the world, including our enemies," Lapan said. "By disclosing such sensitive information, WikiLeaks continues to put at risk the lives of our troops, their coalition partners and those Iraqis and Afghans working with us."

In Baghdad, Iraqi government spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh and Col. Barry Johnson, a U.S. military spokesman, both declined to comment about the documents Friday night, saying they have not seen them yet.

Meanwhile, a team of more than a hundred analysts from across the U.S. military, led by the Defense Intelligence Agency, has been combing through the Iraq documents they think will be released in anticipation of the leak.

Called the Information Review Task Force, its analysts have pored over the documents and used word searches to try to pull out names and other issues that would be particularly sensitive, officials have said.

The task force has informed U.S. Central Command of some of the names of Iraqis and

allies and other information they believe might be released that could present a danger, officials have said. They noted that — unlike the WikiLeaks previous disclosure of some 77,000 documents from Afghanistan — in this case they had advance notice that names may be exposed.

Once officials see what is publicly released, the command "can quickly push the information down" to forces in Iraq, Lapan said Friday in Washington. "Centcom can jump into action and take whatever mitigating steps" might be needed, he said.

Throughout the conflict, the U.S. and its allies have relied heavily on Iraqis as translators and support workers, who were frequently targeted by insurgents. The Iraqis often hid their identities to avoid revealing their links to the Western forces and many emigrated to other nations to flee the threat of violence.

While the latest WikiLeaks revelations may not change public perceptions of the Iraq war — it has been extremely unpopular in Europe and divides opinion in the United States — they could provide new insight about a conflict that seemed headed for success after the invasion in 2003 before descending into a yearslong, blood-soaked struggle.

The documents could shed light on the root causes of the insurgency, for instance, or the growth of sectarian violence that blighted Baghdad and other Iraqi cities. It may also give a behind-the-scenes glimpse at some of the major episodes of the war — like the manhunt for insurgent chief Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, or the killing of U.S. security contractors on March 31, 2004, by a mob in Fallujah, an incident that led to the U.S. assault on the Iraqi city.

The release of the documents would come at a pivotal time for the U.S. in Iraq as the military prepares to withdraw all 50,000 remaining troops from the country by the end of next year, raising questions about the future of relations between the two countries. The U.S. military had as many as 170,000 troops in Iraq in 2007.

Violence has declined sharply over the past two years, but near-daily bombings and shootings continue, casting doubt on the ability of Iraqi forces to protect the people.

The situation has been exacerbated by growing frustration among the public over the failure of Iraqi politicians to unite and form a new government more than seven months after inconclusive parliamentary elections.

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is struggling to remain in power since his Shiite alliance narrowly lost the March 7 vote to a Sunni-backed bloc led by rival Ayad Allawi.

Wikileaks' previous release in July of secret war documents from Iraq and Afghanistan

outraged the Pentagon, which accused the group of being irresponsible. Fogh Rasmussen said Friday that leaks of this nature "may put soldiers as well as civilians at risk."

It appears that those fears — which the military has invoked in its appeal to WikiLeaks and the media not to publish the documents — have yet to materialize. A Pentagon letter obtained by The Associated Press reported that no U.S. intelligence sources or practices were compromised by the Afghan war logs' disclosure.

Still, the military feels any classified documents release can harm national security and raise fears for people who might consider cooperating with the U.S. in the future, Lapan said.

Ryan Crocker, U.S. ambassador to Iraq in 2007-08, said the disclosures would be more worrisome if the U.S. were still fully engaged in combat in Iraq — but he still sees it as a major problem.

"I'd really be worried if — as looks to be the case — you have Iraqi political figures named in a context or a connection that can make them politically and physically vulnerable to their adversaries," he told a conference Friday at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington.

"That has an utterly chilling effect on the willingness of political figures to talk to us — not just in Iraq but anywhere in the world," he said.

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Jelinek reported from Washington. National Security Writer Robert Burns in Washington and Associated Press Writers Melissa Eddy in Berlin and Lara Jakes in Baghdad contributed to this report.