Iraqi imams blame U.S. for sectarian strife: Clerics calling for unity among Muslims

News in the issue

As the last U.S. troops in President Bush's military buildup were deployed in Iraq in mid-June, a number of Shi'ite and Sunni clerics called for unity among Muslims, with some imams using their sermons to blame the U.S. military presence for sectarian tensions.

Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates arrived in Baghdad on June 15, the latest in a series of American military and political officials to visit the Iraqi capital in order to urge the country's leaders to enact political reforms, according to a *Los Angeles Times* report.

Gates arrived late that Friday in Baghdad, which was "strangely hushed" because of a curfew in place after the bombing June 13 of the Shi'ite Golden Mosque shrine in Samarra. The first and most devastating bombing occurred at that shrine in February 2006—an event that observers have generally marked as the start of Sunni-Shi'ite revenge killings.

This time, however, Iraqis seemed to agree with calls by Islamic and political leaders to avoid bloody retaliations. "We need to be united and in solidarity in the face of the tyrants and aggressors," said Salman Furaiji, who led prayers in Shi'ite-held Sadr City, according to the *Times*. "We should continue our demand for the withdrawal of the occupation forces and kick out their followers."

Sheik Ibrahim Nima issued a similar message at a Sunni mosque, the paper said. "It is the occupation forces that are responsible for what has happened so far and what is happening now: killings, lootings and kidnapping innocent people," Nima said.

Gates was expected to voice appeals for similar goals—legislation that would promote national reconciliation, including a law aimed at sharing oil revenues and

permitting former members of Saddam Hussein's Baathist Party regime to obtain jobs in the military and government.

Meanwhile, as various U.S. military experts express doubts about military or legislative improvements by September, U.S. troop deaths in Iraq increased to 3,519 since the war started in March 2003. The military deaths in April and May combined constituted the largest two-month total since the invasion, officials said.