

With key report on Iraq due, Gates drops Latin America visit

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates canceled his Latin American trip as a deadline for a report on Iraq loomed.

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WASHINGTON --

(AP) -- Defense Secretary Robert Gates scrapped plans to go on a four-nation tour of Latin America this week and will instead stay home to attend meetings on Iraq, the Pentagon announced Sunday.

The meetings are related to a progress report on Iraq that is due to be delivered to Congress by Sunday.

Congress mandated the preliminary report and required it to be followed by another one in September. The report's findings could add to the pressure to end the war or change strategies.

It is due out as a growing number of moderate Republicans, including Sen. Richard Lugar of Indiana, a member of the Foreign Relations Committee, voice concerns.

Lugar said Sunday on CNN's *Late Edition* that the United States should start reducing its military presence in Iraq. But he added that careful consideration must be given over how to do that.

"We really have to be thoughtful as to physically how our troops could get out of Iraq," Lugar said.

The Senate is expected to start debate this week on a bill authorizing military spending in Iraq for the fiscal year starting in October.

The New York Times on Sunday devoted its editorial page, with the exception of the letters to the editor section, to calling for U.S. troops to leave Iraq. The newspaper said that should happen "without any more delay than the Pentagon needs to organize an orderly exit."

Gates' trip was to have included meetings with defense and political leaders in El Salvador, Colombia, Peru and Chile. He will travel to the region at an unspecified later date, the Pentagon said in a statement.

Gates is sticking with plans to attend a change of command ceremony in Tampa today. Navy Adm. Eric Olson will take over as head of the military's Special Operations Command.