

U.S. Talk of Early Pullout Angers Kurds

By William Branigin

Washington Post Service

ZAKHO, Iraq — Kurdish rebel leaders are angered and many former refugees alarmed over a statement by General Colin L. Powell that U.S. forces will leave northern Iraq sooner than expected.

Rebel leaders say that the comment from the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, although accompanied by a warning to Baghdad against any new attacks on the Kurds, tends to undercut their position in negotiations with President Saddam Hussein on a new autonomy agreement for Iraqi Kurds.

A Western relief official said U.S. commanders wanted to withdraw the bulk of the approximately 10,000 U.S. troops in the area by July Fourth. American officials have not confirmed a departure date.

Expressing opposition to the departure of the U.S. military and its European allies, about 1,000 people demonstrated Saturday near Sirsenk, some of them holding up placards that read, "Please don't leave us," a photographer reported. An airstrip at Sirsenk was the site of General Powell's remarks Thursday at the end of a day's visit to U.S. troops serving in the Kurdish relief effort.

General Powell said U.S. troops would withdraw from northern Iraq "sooner than we thought." He said he could not give the Kurds "concrete guarantees," but warned Baghdad against any repetition of the offensive in late

March that forced hundreds of thousands of Kurds to flee to the mountains of neighboring Turkey and Iran.

The comments appear to have forced Kurds to face an unwelcome reality: that the allied military presence on which they have come to depend for their security is only temporary.

"People are frightened once again, especially after General Powell's amazing statement that they are leaving the country soon," said a Kurdish guerrilla leader. "Why should he say that? This is weakening our position."

The leader, who spoke on condition of anonymity, called General Powell's warning to Mr. Hussein "silly." General Powell should know that "the Iraqis won't listen to warnings," he added.

"They listen to actions. His warnings are empty words while he says that he's pulling out."

In a meeting in Zakho on Friday between Kurdish tribal leaders and U.S. military officials, the Kurds were "extremely depressed" about the prospect of an early allied departure, according to a U.S. memorandum.

"We will steal your trousers to make you stay," one Kurd was quoted as telling the American officers present. Another said with despair that "the Iraqis are now going to eradicate us," according to the report of the meeting.

"We've been telling them all along that we're leaving," a U.S. officer said. "Now they're being forced to believe it."

■ Last Turkish Camp Closes

Stephen Kinzer of The New York Times reported from Silopi, Turkey:

The last Kurdish refugee camp in Turkey closed Saturday, an event that marked the end of a successful humanitarian mission along the Turkey-Iraq border.

The 11-nation effort that resolved the Kurdish crisis in Turkey is being hailed here as a model of cooperation among governments, armies and private relief agencies.

Some allied military officers have said that as many as 40,000 Kurds, most women and children, may have died during their flight out of Iraq and in the weeks before foreign aid reached them. Now, however, aid administrators say that estimate is probably far too high. The true figure, all acknowledge, will probably never be known.

The closing of the seventh and last refugee camp in Turkey, situated near the remote border town of Cukurca, represented a triumph for American and allied forces in the region.

"It's hard to believe that only a few weeks ago, there were real fears that this situation might drag on not only for months, but for years, and that it would become a disaster like the Palestinian problem," said Bernd Jaenicke, a German relief administrator working at the refugee camp in Zakho. "The problem is not yet fully settled, but it is no longer a real emergency."