

Carrying heavy combat loads is taking a quiet but serious toll on troops deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, contributing to injuries that are sidelining them in growing numbers, according to senior military and defense officials.

Rising concern over the muscle and bone injuries -- as well as the hindrance caused by the cumbersome gear as troops maneuver in Afghanistan's mountains -- prompted Army and Marine Corps leaders and commanders to launch initiatives last month that will introduce lighter equipment for some U.S. troops.

As the military prepares to significantly increase the number of troops in Afghanistan -- including sending as many as 20,000 more Marines -- fielding a new, lighter vest and helmet is a top priority, Marine Corps Commandant Gen. James Conway said recently. "We are going to have to lighten our load," he said, after inspecting possible designs during a visit to the Quantico Marine base.

Army leaders and experts say the injuries -- linked to the stress of bearing heavy loads during repeated 12- or 15-month combat tours -- have increased the number of soldiers categorized as "non-deployable." Army personnel reported 257,000 acute orthopedic injuries in 2007, up from 247,000 the previous year.

As injuries force more soldiers to stay home, the Army is having a harder time filling units for upcoming deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq, said Gen. Peter W. Chiarelli, the service's vice chief of staff.

"There is no doubt that [in] our non-deployable rates, we're seeing increase," he said. "I don't want to see it grow any more."

The number of total non-deployables has risen by an estimated 2,000 to 3,000 since 2006, putting the current figure at about 20,000, according to Chiarelli. "That occurs when you run the force at the level we're running it now," he said.

"You can't hump a rucksack at 8,000 to 11,000 feet for 15 months, even at a young age, and not have that have an impact on your body, and we are seeing an increase in muscular-skeletal issues," Chiarelli told reporters last month.

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