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By Tom Vanden Brook, USA TODAY

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WASHINGTON — The Army's use of involuntary extensions of combat duty will likely continue through 2009 despite pledges earlier this year by top military officials to reduce reliance on the policy known as stop loss.

In September, 12,204 soldiers were affected by stop loss, a policy that forces them to remain in the Army after their service commitment has expired. The same number likely will be affected each month through 2009, Army Lt. Col. Mike Moose said last week.

Stop loss strains troops and their families, Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Adm. Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, acknowledged in May. Gates and the Army say the policy is needed to maintain the cohesion of units heading to battle.

"The secretary understands the stress on the Army, but … he wants to see the Army rely less on stop loss. They need to make better progress on this," Pentagon press secretary Geoff Morrell said Sunday.

Rep. Joe Sestak, D-Pa., a retired vice admiral and member of the House Armed Services Committee, blamed the reliance on stop loss on "the failures to properly plan and execute." Rep. John Murtha, D-Pa., chairman of the panel that funds the Pentagon, said the policy is "a draft" that disrupts lives. Murtha said those affected now receive an additional \$500 a month, but he says he wants to compensate all troops who have been extended involuntarily since 2001.

The number of soldiers affected by stop loss peaked in 2005 at 15,758. Gates ordered stop loss to be minimized in January 2007. It fell to 8,540 in May 2007 but rose to about 12,000 in March and has stayed near that level. The troop buildup in Iraq and extension of Army tours from 12 to 15 months last year resulted in more stop-loss orders.

The five combat brigades associated with the escalation of U.S. forces in Iraq returned this summer, and combat tours were reduced to 12 months on Aug. 1. But 151,000 troops remain in Iraq — 25,000 more than before the buildup began in early 2007.

In Afghanistan, there are 32,000 U.S. troops, and commanders there are seeking four more brigades. A brigade has about 3,500 to 5,000 troops.

If demand for U.S. combat troops stays constant through 2009, Moose said, the number of soldiers affected by stop loss will remain at about 12,000. "Stop loss is a function of how many units are preparing to deploy," he said. "We only use stop loss when we have to."

Stop loss can keep a soldier in the Army if his or her unit deploys within 90 days of the end of their commitment. In August, 55% of those affected were privates through specialists, and 45% were non-commissioned officers, Moose said.

About 1% of active duty, National Guard and reservists are affected. More than 140,000 soldiers have had tours extended by stop loss since January 2002.

Joe Davis, a spokesman for the Veterans of Foreign Wars, criticized the Pentagon for not deploying more of its personnel: 43% of active duty soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines have not served in Iraq or Afghanistan.

"Being stop-lossed means you and your family have to place your future plans on hold," he said, when "half the military has never set one foot in Iraq or Afghanistan."