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Reporters say Baghdad too dangerous despite surge

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By David Morgan

WASHINGTON, Nov 28 (Reuters) - Nearly 90 percent of U.S. journalists in Iraq say much of Baghdad is still too dangerous to visit, despite a recent drop in violence attributed to the build-up of U.S. forces, a poll released on Wednesday said.

The survey by the Washington-based Pew Research Center showed that many U.S. journalists believe coverage has painted too rosy a picture of the conflict.

A separate Pew poll released on Tuesday showed that 48 percent of Americans believe the U.S. military effort in Iraq is going very or fairly well, up from 34 percent in June, amid signs of declining Iraqi civilian casualties and progress against Islamist militants such as al Qaeda in Iraq.

But most journalists said they believe violence and the threat of violence have increased during their tenures.

Much of the danger for journalists is faced by local Iraqis, who often do most of the reporting outside Baghdad's heavily fortified Green Zone, the data showed.

Fifty-eight percent of U.S. news organizations have had local Iraqi staff killed or kidnapped within the past year, the survey said. About two-thirds of news outlets said local staff face physical or verbal threats at least several times a month.

"Above all, the journalists -- most of them veteran war correspondents -- describe conditions in Iraq as the most perilous they have ever encountered, and this above everything else is influencing the reporting," the authors said in a report that accompanied the data.

At least 122 journalists and 41 media support staff have been killed in Iraq since the U.S.-led invasion in 2003, the New-York based Committee to Protect Journalists says. About 85 percent of those killed were Iraqis.

Pew's Project for Excellence in Journalism surveyed 111 journalists who have worked in Iraq for 29 news organizations, all but one of them U.S.-based. The poll was conducted Sept. 28 through Nov. 7, Pew said.

HIGH MARKS FOR REPORTING EFFORT

Pew had tried to reach a total of 181 journalists, which it believes are nearly all those who have covered Iraq for American news organizations.

The journalists gave high marks to the overall reporting effort, with 74 percent rating news-gathering as good or excellent. The highest marks went to coverage of U.S. troops and the war against insurgents.

Despite claims by U.S. officials that reporting from Iraq is negatively biased, 70 percent of those surveyed believe overall coverage is accurate, while 15 percent say the coverage makes the situation look better than it is.

Forty-four percent of journalists believe reporting has treated the Bush

administration fairly, while 43 percent said coverage has been too easy on U.S. officials.

But the data also showed that 67 percent are at least somewhat concerned that the accuracy and completeness of their reports have suffered because of ongoing security problems that limit their access to the country.

President George W. Bush's so-called surge strategy to stabilize Baghdad and its environs has been credited with a fall-off in attacks on Iraqi civilians and U.S. coalition forces over the past two months.

But 87 percent of respondents said at least half of Baghdad remains too dangerous for a Western journalist to visit, with the capital's Shi'ite-dominated Sadr City enclave rated the most dangerous spot in Iraq. Eighteen percent said the entire city of Baghdad is too dangerous for travel.

Most U.S. journalists have traveled to danger spots such as Sadr City, either under the protection of private security guards or the U.S. military.

"Eight in 10 journalists believe conditions have deteriorated for reporters since their own first posting in the country," the survey's authors said.

Under-reported subjects of the war include the plight of Iraqi civilians, Shi'ite-on-Shi'ite violence in southern Iraq and general events occurring outside Baghdad, journalists said. (Editing by Alister Bull and David Alexander)

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