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Marine chief: Keep gay policy

New leader fears impact on combat

By Elliot Spagat
Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — The new commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps said Saturday that now is the wrong time to overturn the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy prohibiting gays from openly serving in the military, as U.S. troops remain in the thick of war in Afghanistan.

“There’s risk involved; I’m trying to determine how to measure that risk,” Gen. James Amos said. “This is not a social thing. This is combat effectiveness. That’s what the country pays its Marines to do.”

Last month, the Pentagon was forced to lift its ban on openly gay

service members for eight days after a federal judge in California ordered the military to do so. The Justice Department has appealed, and a federal appeals court granted a temporary stay of the injunction.

Amos said the policy’s repeal may have unique consequences for the Marines, which is exempt from a Defense Department rule for troops to have private living quarters. The Marines puts two people in each room to promote a sense of unity.

“There is nothing more intimate than young men and young women — and when you talk of infantry, we’re talking our young men — laying out, sleeping alongside of one another and sharing death, fear and loss of brothers,” he said. “I don’t know what the effect of that will be on cohesion. I mean, that’s what we’re looking at. It’s

unit cohesion, it’s combat effectiveness.”

Amos, who began his assignment last month, said he was reviewing preliminary findings of an internal Pentagon survey of the policy that was sent out to about 400,000 troops and another 150,000 family members. He will make recommendations to Defense Secretary Robert Gates later this month.

He declined to comment on the survey results, though portions have been leaked to reporters. Most troops and their families think the policy could be eliminated, according to officials familiar with its findings who spoke on condition of anonymity because the results had not been released.

He’s not just concerned with the gay issue. Amos said his top priority was success in Afghani-

stan — no matter how many people or how much equipment is required — and that he didn’t expect any pullback in Marine forces over the next year.

President Barack Obama wants to start to reduce the number of U.S. troops in July, if conditions on the ground allow.

Amos said the U.S. effort is showing progress, pointing to improved security in the Nawa district, but that more work lies ahead in allowing the Afghan army and police to gain control of the country. “The Marine Corps will stay the way it is (in Afghanistan) right now for probably at least the next year,” he said.

Amos said he expects the Marines to shrink from its current size of 202,000 after leaving Afghanistan, but “we need (the current numbers) now.”