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## Army Special Ops chiefs see demand for units growing

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RALEIGH – Army Special Operations were designed for the kind of conflicts U.S. forces now face in Iraq and Afghanistan, their commanders said Monday, and their skills are under increasing demand.

Even as U.S. combat forces have officially withdrawn from Iraq, Special Operations soldiers remain in the country at the same levels, helping train police and military forces. In Afghanistan, Special Ops soldiers are expanding their efforts in small villages across the countryside, where they live in small groups among the native people.

“We are our nation’s most relevant force,” said Lt. Gen. John F. Mulholland, commanding general of the Special Operations Command, the small, elite branch of the Army that includes 27,000

of its best-trained and most-educated soldiers.

Mulholland and his senior commanders are in Raleigh this week for one of their biannual conferences. Like most of the work of the elusive forces themselves, the meetings are out of the public eye. But the leaders talked to reporters Monday about how Special Operations are evolving.

They said that in Afghanistan, teams of soldiers are finding acceptance in small villages, away from big alliance-run military bases, working closely instead with local police and tribal leaders to counter the influence of the Taliban.

“It’s like a neighborhood watch,” said Brig. Gen. Edward M. Reeder Jr., commanding general of the U.S. Army Special Forces Command, one of seven Special Operations branches.

On any given day, leaders said, more

than 5,000 Special Operations soldiers are deployed at more than 50 worldwide locations. Some are based at Fort Bragg, home to the 3rd and 7th Special Forces groups, or Green Berets, and the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School.

Challenges for Special Operations leaders include making sure the soldiers have the funding they need for training and equipment - not a problem right now, Mulholland said, because the teams have been so important in Afghanistan and Iraq.

As U.S. involvement in those countries winds down, Mulholland said, Special Ops skills and adaptability will be needed elsewhere. He hopes they will continue to get the support they need.

Though Special Operations are voluntary, thousands of soldiers apply each year for hundreds of openings.