

Reserve Troops' Job Woes Increase

The annual number of reservists and National Guard members who say they have been reassigned, lost benefits or been fired from civilian jobs after returning from duty has increased by about 30% since 2002.

The sharp spike in complaints brought to the U.S. Labor Department reflects the extensive use of part-time troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, the largest call-up of reserves since the 1950-53 Korean War.

About 500,000 of the 850,000 reservists and National Guard members eligible for duty have been mobilized since late 2001, said Maj. Rob Palmer, spokesman for a Pentagon office that tries to resolve job disputes.

Not all have been treated well by their employers when they return home.

After the 1991 Gulf War, "I was welcomed home with ticker tape," said Marc Garcia, a lieutenant colonel in the Army Reserves. "This time, I get the door slammed in my face."

Garcia, a member of the State Department's Bureau of Diplomatic Security, has been called up twice since Sept. 11, 2001, once for Afghanistan and the last time for stateside duty.

Garcia, 44, had been a supervisor in the Miami office of the security bureau. When he returned to work early last month, he was given a desk job in Washington with no clear responsibilities, he said.

Last month, a judge in Atlanta ruled that the State Department violated Garcia's rights under a 1994 law, which requires employers to give returning reservists their old jobs or equivalent positions. The law was passed to address employment problems faced by veterans returning from the 1991 Gulf War.

The Labor Department said it handled 1,548 complaints from returning servicemembers in the fiscal year ending Sept. 30, up from 1,195 in the year that ended Sept. 30, 2002. About a third of the cases are resolved in favor of employees, the department said.

Those numbers don't reflect all the servicemen and women with problems. Many of the cases are settled before they get to the Labor Department.

The Pentagon received more than 8,000 complaints this year, nearly double the previous year, but most were resolved without further government action, Palmer said. Complaints range from being fired, losing chances for promotion or being reassigned to jobs with less pay or responsibility.

Retired Marine lieutenant general Dennis McCarthy, executive director of the Reserve Officers Association, a private advocacy group, acknowledged the deployments can be difficult for employers, particularly small companies. "That burden is an acceptable cost when it's compared to the value of reserve service to our country," he said.

