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Presenter: Gen. Thomas Metz, Commander, Multinational Corps-Iraq

Wednesday, January 5, 2005

Operational Update

GEN. METZ: Good afternoon. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you and represent the Multinational Corps-Iraq. Thank you for taking your time to be here.

In just over three weeks Iraq will hold its first free election. This election is mandated by U.N. Resolution 1546, will be monitored by the leaders of the international community, conducted by the Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq, and secured by Iraqi security forces. The people of Iraq are actively engaged in setting the course for their country despite the campaign of intimidation by anti-Iraqi forces, former regime elements, terrorists and criminals.

The free nations whose service members comprise the Multinational Corps-Iraq have a deeply held belief in self-determination, representative government and individual freedom. We stand by the Iraqi people in full support of their efforts to establish a peaceful, secure and prosperous Iraq via these elections, which will establish a body of Iraqis to write the Iraqi constitution. As partners, we refuse to be intimidated by the thugs intent on advancing their selfish, oppressive intent through terror, destruction, intimidation and murder. This tiny minority of thugs has only their selfish interest in mind instead of the interests of the Iraqi people. They are growing weaker, and the Iraqi people's fierce determination ensures that the thugs will not succeed.

Iraqi security forces are increasing their capability, their capacity for security operations daily. And they have proven themselves in operations throughout Iraq in recent months in places like Najaf, Samarra and Fallujah. Each day they take on more responsibility, and we in the Multinational Corps-Iraq are proud to be along their side and look forward to continuing our partnership with them as their experience and capabilities grow.

Currently the Multinational Corps-Iraq is focused on setting security conditions in order to conduct successful elections -- free, fair and creditable (sic) elections on the 30th of January.

We continue to deal with violence and lawlessness in some areas of Iraq. But in Iraq's 18 provinces, 14 currently are prepared and secured enough to hold elections. The independent electoral commission of Iraq is leading the way in an effort to operate approximately 9,000 polling centers. And the Iraqi police services and Iraqi National Guard are focused on providing security, with the Multinational Corps Iraq providing technical assistance and quick reaction forces as required.

As I have said before, I am certain that the vast majority of Iraqis do not support the thugs and terrorists.

This insurgency is not a popular one, because the anti-Iraqi forces, former regime elements, terrorists and criminals offer the Iraqi people nothing but brutal repression, just like Saddam. Brutal intimidation is one of the only tools left in their arsenal, and murder, kidnapping and torture are not tools of a popular movement.

I believe Iraq has -- I believe Iraqis look forward to upcoming elections as a major milestone in bringing peace, security and prosperity to this great country. Each vote is a vote against the insurgency, and I am very optimistic as I look forward to Iraq's future.

Although we have seen a downturn in the anti-Iraqi forces' activities since the end of Ramadan, I expect an increase in violence as the elections approach. I expect the thugs and terrorists to make every effort to stop the elections by targeting candidates and polling sites, and by attempting to intimidate the Iraqi people. These attempts show that the enemy of Iraq are (sic) working only to squander Iraq's potential, hinder reconstruction and withhold freedom from the people of Iraq. However, the insurgents are destined to failure, and freedom will prevail. For example, in recent operations in Fallujah, in recent operations in Fallujah, we denied the insurgents, terrorists a safe haven. And since the 23rd of December almost 40,000 residents have begun returning to Fallujah, with security provided by Iraqi police and Iraqi army, with the support of the Multinational Corps.

I'd also like to take a moment to congratulate Iraq's army for Army Day, a proud day for the citizens of Iraq, who can look forward to having a professional army to protect them and not repress them.

As we draw closer to the elections, a little over three weeks away, we continue to work alongside the peaceful citizens of Iraq, the Iraqi government, the independent election commission of Iraq, their volunteers and the Iraqi security forces to provide security, prosperity and hope for the future of this great country via their first free elections.

Thank you very much again for you investing your time here today, and I'd like to take some of your questions.

Yes, sir?

Q (Through interpreter.) Al-Kath (sp) Saudi newspaper. You have mentioned that the terrorist forces are growing weaker. But it is true that we have noticed lesser numbers of attacks, but they are concentrated in certain areas, such as Mosul, where police forces and army forces are facing such attacks. So how can you say that these forces are growing weaker while some attacks are being concentrated in other areas? Thank you.

GEN. METZ: One of the measurements that I think shows the weakness is the insurgents' inability to maintain safe havens. And I think we all know Fallujah was the major safe haven that they were able to maintain. That was taken from them, as was the safe haven of Samarra and the potential safe havens of Thawra and Najaf and many other places.

So today he has no safe haven. But you're right; he continues to attack. And he is working for more and more spectacular attacks, which is the techniques of a terrorist, to intimidate and frighten the people. But he is weaker and cannot control neighborhoods and towns as he could a couple of months ago. So we believe that he is desperate. We are three weeks away from the elections, and he is making those desperate efforts to intimidate the people of Iraq.

STAFF: Yes, sir?

Q Thank you. Tom Lasseter, Knight Ridder. I was wondering if you could compare daily contact numbers today versus daily contact numbers pre-Ramadan, and if you could also tell us perhaps why those numbers are not made available now, as they were before. There was a time when during briefings there were

daily contact numbers given and even trend lines given, sort of, you know, this week versus a week, a month ago; this month versus last month. I think that we're all -- you know, when we hear that attacks have gone down since Ramadan, it would be helpful if we could have numbers to compare to other time periods.

GEN. METZ: One of the reasons I think it's less and less fruitful to look at too much of the data in trend lines is because of the changing situation. And that data that was collected a year ago has a different context -- is in a different context than the current data. Obviously, we prepared for and knew that there was going to be a spike in the Ramadan time frame, and you couple that with the activities around Fallujah, we did have that increase.

The other thing we have done is we have looked at periods like pre-sovereignty, post-sovereignty and begun to break those up. We can probably show and try to normalize that data, but really to me it has less and less value, based on the continued changing of the situation. But we have seen -- we did see the rise in Ramadan, we have seen the tapering off. But as I said in my opening, I am fully anticipating, as the corps commander, a surge as we go into these last three weeks before the election. And that surge would be in the neighborhood of, let's say, 70-some attacks a day may surge to 80, 85. That's the kind of magnitude of numbers of attacks across the country we're talking about.

Q If I could, again, I understand that there was a spike during Ramadan, but what I'm asking is, you know, if you're looking at this graph of Ramadan now, how do the numbers today compare to numbers in the week before Ramadan, for instance? If you take what happened during Ramadan as being something separate from the normal trend line, if you looked at pre-Ramadan and post-Ramadan, how does that line up?

GEN. METZ: Let me do it this way. Pre-April was a level, April was obviously a time that there were lots of attacks because we not only had the fight in Fallujah and the parts of former regime areas and throughout the provinces in the south, so that the April level was an elevated level. That stayed rather constant through April-May and into sovereignty. After sovereignty, we saw some tapering off, so the summer was a little lower. August was obviously a spike, with Muqtada al-Sadr's militia fights in August, tapered off again after August to a level about the April-May level, then not as much a spike as we saw historically from the previous Ramadan in '03, but still a spike in Ramadan, and then now a tapering off again. But again, I'm anticipating that spike to come back as we move into the elections. Yes, sir?

Q General, you said that 14 of 18 Iraqi provinces are prepared and secured enough to hold elections. Is the corollary to that that four are not prepared and secured enough? And what are the four?

GEN. METZ: Well, Al Anbar, Nineveh, parts of Baghdad, and I think the Salahuddin is the next as you would rank them. So those are the four areas that we see enough of attacks that we're going to continue to focus our energies and effort.

Q General?

GEN. METZ: Did that answer your question?

Q Yes. Does that mean that they're not prepared or secured enough for elections today?

GEN. METZ: Yes. Today I would not -- I will be much better shaped to hold elections in three weeks in those provinces than we are today. Those provinces represent where we are concentrating effort to put together the security systems and procedures and the numbers of soldiers, Iraqi and coalition, to successfully hold those elections.

Back in the corner?

Q (Through interpreter.) Najim al-Rubaie, al Dustour newspaper. You have mentioned that there are 14 secure provinces while four are not. And as we look at the techniques of combating terrorists, we see that they are becoming more effective. So don't you believe it is a wise decision to postpone the elections in order to carry out these successful techniques in order to secure successful elections? And don't you feel that if the elections were carried out while certain parties are boycotting it, don't you believe that this could lead to a civil war in Iraq, and this will also cause an eruption of violence in Iraq? Thank you.

GEN. METZ: First of all, I feel very strongly that a delay in the elections is the wrong thing to do. From a corps commander, a military point of view, a delay in the elections just gives the thugs and terrorists more time to continue their intimidation, their cruelty, their brutal murders of innocent people. Any delay allows them more time, and I can see absolutely no advantage to a delay.

Now you mentioned a boycott. Part of a democracy is the right to choose, and if people choose to boycott the election that's a choice. I wish that they would not because they should choose the people they want to write their constitution, but I do not see any advantage to a delay. In fact, I think there's a greater chance of civil war with a delay than without one, in my military opinion. In the six months that I concentrated on training for this mission and the year long that I have been in Iraq, that's my military opinion. Q General, hi. It's Dexter Filkins with The New York Times. Just two questions, if you don't mind.

You said you were shaping the conditions to get them -- in preparation for the elections. And I'm just wondering, can you be a little bit more specific about what you're doing? And in particular, in Mosul there's been a lot of what appears to be stepped-up military activity and fighting and you sent some troops there, et cetera, et cetera. If you can maybe just focus on that a bit.

And the second question I had was just could you, as best you can, tell us how many Iraqi forces will be available on election day, and then what your role is going to be? Obviously, sort of standing back and getting off the streets, if you could just wind that just a bit.

GEN. METZ: Okay, those are great questions.

The shaping. As a corps commander, when we came out of what we call phase three in the fighting in Fallujah, we put together an operation, "al hurriyah" -- operation freedom, liberty -- as I directed actions across the entire country of Iraq, an entire core area, to get ourselves moving towards the elections. We looked at those places the enemy may look for safe haven, and so we concentrated on preempting that in North Babil and Baiji and places north from Baghdad towards Mosul. Obviously during the Fallujah fight, we had the spike in activity in Mosul. And so we recognized that, immediately began to move some coalition forces there, and have since completed that move of what was essentially a return of a Stryker battalion to its parent organization, a couple of motorized infantry battalions, and a heavy battalion of coalition forces. And significantly are -- and moving significant numbers of Iraqi forces to Mosul to give them the security and stability to hold! The election in one of the very important cities in Iraq.

Border operations, other operations, especially here in Baghdad. I think General Chiarelli yesterday discussed his Triple Play operation, where he increased activity, and operations in North Babil and Salman Pak and Abu Ghraib, lots of aggressive patrolling and action around Baghdad because Baghdad is a place that the insurgents appear to be concentrating. It's the capital. It's where so much of the print media and broadcast media will emanate from. And so that they've recognized that and General Chiarelli is countering that.

So I like to think that gets at your question of our efforts to shape the conditions in Mosul.

The Iraqi forces available. I don't have all the numbers memorized, but there are roughly two-thirds of

the planned force of 27 battalions are in operations now, and about a third are still in training, most of which will come out of training right before the elections and could be available for employment. We certainly would not employ them in the tougher places. We would give them some missions that were within the -- their training -- trained capability.

And the Iraqi police forces continue to increase. The Ministry of Defense continues to bring on forces in special commando battalions, in public order battalions. General Petraeus's command is working very hard to keep up with the demand for equipment and transportation and communications for these units.

As we look across the country, we think we will have then the force, as elections approach, to secure polling sites.

And we, the coalition, have every plan not to be anywhere close to a polling site, because it's not our election. It's the Iraqis' election. They will secure their polling sites. And we will be, as I said, offering technical advice as we get up to the election, and quick reaction forces on the election day.

Yes, sir? There in the back.

Q Hi. Borzu Durgani (sp) from CBC. I just wanted to ask you a couple questions related to each other. With regard to the number of insurgents, I think General Abizaid said -- a few months ago he said maybe 8,000 to 10,000. Just the other day Mr. Shawani (sp), the head of intelligence here, said 40,000 and maybe 160,000 supporters. And I was wondering what you thought of the numbers of insurgents, whether it's increased. Does that signal an increase?

And also, if you could, just what do you think is the strategy of the insurgency at this point, in your terms? What are they trying to do? Thank you.

GEN. METZ: Okay. First of all, that's -- the answer to your first question's easy. I'm going with my boss, General Abizaid.

But let me -- but I will expand on that a minute, because I also heard the predictions of those very, very large numbers. And the information that I'm privileged to -- and I'm a math-science academic background person -- I can't take those -- the metrics that I'm privileged to -- and work my way to a number in the 40- -- 100,000. I just -- I can't figure out a way that you would -- you could predict that.

At the 8,000 or 10,000 level, it's certainly a lot more understanding to me, in the metrics and the things that I see, the number of attacks per week, the number of IEDs that are put out, and go through some kind of equation that could come up with a number in the range that General Abizaid talked about.

But I quite -- as a corps commander, I don't do much with that number, because the insurgency has so many different flavors. There are hard-core terrorists that are fighting for an ideology. There are, on the other end of the spectrum, young impoverished men that need to make some money, and so that they periodically join for only the reason to feed their family. And so there can be different -- and it would change by province, and it would change by time of year. It changes by the illumination of the moon; it changes by the weather; it changes by the time of year, so that the number of insurgents, to me, is not necessarily the metric.

The thing that I find so key to this entire fight is that it is not a popular insurgency. It is not -- the tools that they are using -- murder, torture, kidnapping, indiscriminately, children, women -- those are tools of someone who is not popularly supported -- and that the majority of Iraqis do not want whatever they have as a strategy.

And that gets me into your -- the second part of your question. What is their strategy? Other than warning the coalition to go away, very few of these groups have a common objective, and they certainly don't articulate them. I do not know of an articulation of a better Iraq via murder, torture, intimidation. I see a better Iraq via reconstruction, free elections, an economy, a -- using the resources of this great country to its benefit. So I have a hard time understanding their -- now, their strategy, their fighting strategy is to get as much publicity out of each attack as they possibly can in places where that will bring that information operation advantage to them. And it is clearly just to intimidate, to make people so fearful that they would rather give up their rights of freedom. And that is exactly what the Iraqi security forces and the coalition are fighting against.

Yes, sir?

Q (Through interpreter.) Two questions. Could you give us the results of the raids carried out by the multinational forces in -- (inaudible) -- and Mosul and other areas? And also, the return of the Fallujah residents, does it indicate that security is fully established in this city? Thank you very much.

GEN. METZ: As the corps commander, on any given day there are a large number of raids, and so I do not memorize the metrics, the details of every single raid. We have had some very successful operations in north Babil, especially in finding major caches of weapons and munitions, and they have been very successful as of late.

Your question on Fallujah. In a macro sense, the return of the residents does represent the security of the city, but that does not say that there cannot be or will not be an insurgent who causes an attack to occur in Fallujah. We haven't had many since we opened the city for the returnees, but there have been, I think, two since the returnees. But we are working extremely hard with the Regimental Combat Team 1 of the Multinational Force West, the Iraqi security forces, be it minister of Interior and minister of Defense are both there in Fallujah.

So the Iraqi security forces and the coalition are working extremely hard to ensure that only residents are coming back to Fallujah, who are not insurgents, who are not terrorists, who are not thugs. And we will work very hard to make it as secure as possible. But there could be an insurgent that leaks back in, and if so, we will find them and kill or capture them.

Yes, sir?

Q Andy Sanders, L.A. Times. What's your message to Iraqi voters right now who look to the U.S. to ultimately provide security in Iraq? I understand the election day will be handled primarily by Iraqi security forces, but ultimately the responsibility still rests with the U.S. So can you guarantee that if voters go to polls on election day, that they won't be attacked or killed?

GEN. METZ: No, I can't make that guarantee at all. And I see ourselves, the coalition, as a partner to a sovereign government who has been mandated by U.N. resolution to conduct elections, who has built a commission to conduct the election, who has invited in international leaders to monitor those elections, and who is putting together a security force to secure the polling sites. We are offering technical advice to how that's done, and we are continuing operations across the country, as I mentioned earlier, to continue to pursue the terrorists after eliminating their safe haven of Fallujah. But I can't guarantee that every person in Iraq that wants to vote, goes to a polling booth and can do that safely.

We're going to do everything possible to create that condition for them, but we are fighting an enemy who cares less who he kills, when he kills and how he kills, and he will work out a way to find some weakness that we're going to work hard not to give him. But I just can't guarantee that everyone will be able to go to a poll in total safety. I cannot put a bubble around every person walking from their home to the polling site. But we're

going to do everything possible that we possibly can in the next three weeks to create that condition for them.

Yes, sir?

Q Eric Eckorn (ph), New York Times. You mentioned something like 70 attacks a day. Does that include every attack you learn about on Iraqi police or National Guard or government officials in cars or in stations or whatever? And secondly, over the last month or two, has the mix changed dramatically, as it seems to from the news that we see, away from attacks on American forces and toward attacks on Iraqi forces and government officials?

GEN. METZ: I would tell you that the attacks that we record and put in a big database are still a majority against the coalition, although we, as you mentioned, we have seen an ever-increasing focus of the enemy on Iraqi security forces and intimidation of or murder of senior leaders. The recent example is of the governor here in Baghdad, and other officials. The 70 is a metric of everything that we're -- that's available to us -- attacks on us, attacks on Iraqi security forces, on civilians and infrastructure. So what I personally watch is about a seven-day average because that gives me kind of the time frame that I'm interested in as it moves. And then there's a database that goes as far back as -- and then it becomes a little less meaningful because of the changing situation. So we look at those attacks, and they are in total at about the 70 level over the past week, over the past seven-day window. And of that, we're in the 50s against the coalition.

Q But if you measured attacks by their severity and effect, I mean, we see every day 10, 15, 20 ING or police killed, some days no Americans killed. So are you in that list sort of comparing a shot fired at a convoy versus a car bomb?

GEN. METZ: See, that is the reason I don't want to put too much stock and weight into the data that we have been collecting for, to my knowledge, probably about a year, because you're absolutely right: The small arms fire against a convoy that drove by has very little to do with the major vehicle-borne suicide delivered vehicle that killed 20 or 30 Iraqi citizens. I mean, you're absolutely right. And that's why we shouldn't put too much stock in too much of the data. We need to use it for what it's valuable for.

But we clearly have got to look more carefully at this intimidation campaign because, again, I think it's the last tool in the enemy's kit bag. He has got to murder and intimidate and torture and kidnap to make the Iraqi people fearful. And I do not think that they will allow that; freedom is too strong a value. It is shown over the last 30 years that free people have made choices around the world to head in the direction of freedom as opposed to repression. And so I think we're -- right way to go.

Yes, sir.

Q (In Arabic.) You have mentioned many details and numbers and you -- are you fully prepared and committed in training and equipping Iraqi forces? And to what extent do you believe that merging the ING with the new Iraqi forces will affect your cooperation with these forces? This is the first question.

The second question: While elections are approaching, where we have 21 days left till the date, what is the new plan by you and with coordination with the Iraqi forces? What is this new plan, especially that you are familiar that Baghdad and the Baghdad residents long for security, long for power and water supplies. So what is the plan of the United States Army to -- how do you intend to help the people in these sections?

Thank you. GEN. METZ: I think on your first question as it relates to the training and equipping of the Iraqi security forces, we in the United States Army, and I think in the coalition armies, are very proud of our ability to train. And it is a clear matter of record that we had a hard time six months ago with the contracts and moving and getting the equipment available for the Iraqi army.

And the third component of building an army is the manning of an army. So you need to man an army, equip an army and train an army. We absolutely have no problem manning the army. There are volunteers for army and police positions constantly. Again, we think we are pretty doggone good trainers, and we have began to break the code, and we have equipment now available and we're moving that as quickly as we can to the Iraqi security forces.

The most important ingredient we're now focused on is finding the leadership. As we have learned in Najaf, in Samarra and Tall Afar, in Thawra and Fallujah, that good leaders -- where you find good leaders, you'll find a good unit. And so we are continuing to season the Iraqi security forces and finding those good leaders. And they are becoming a very, very capable force, which is exactly what the enemy is fearful of. Iraqis who are supporting freedom will destroy the thugs and the terrorists because Iraqis will be able to get the intelligence that the coalition can't. And I'm absolutely confident as we continue to mature the Iraqi security forces, they will be more and more successful.

Now, your question on as the election approaches, what are our plans, I'm not going to share those with you because I need to be as crafty and cunning and do everything I can do to destroy the enemy on the front end of the elections, catch him in the act on election day, and then continue to protect the Iraqis and the security forces after the election.

But in general, as I've said before, Iraqi police will be in the close proximity of the polling stations. Iraqi National Guard and army units will be in support of those police forces. And the coalition will be even in further support away, but be rehearsed and ready for quick reaction. Now, we will also be working the intelligence to try to determine where the most likely attack places may be and intercept the enemy before he gets there. But that's as much detail as I'd like to go into on how we're doing to protect the polling sites because I just don't want the enemy to know my plan.

Yes, sir?

Q Hi. Karl Vick, Washington Post. Have you seen an increase either in the number or the intelligence behind attacks on infrastructure and oil and electricity? And in general, do you find that insurgents are fighting smarter or better or more effectively? GEN. METZ: We track the attacks on infrastructure, as I mentioned a moment ago, as one of those types of attacks. I cannot see a particular trend in type of infrastructure or -- in fact, the infrastructure -- the data shows that attacks on infrastructure since sovereignty has actually gone down.

But I can tell you that Saddam left this country's infrastructure in such horrible condition that to keep it stable is a very difficult and hard task, which we're working very hard at, and we've gotten, at times, the power up to well above prewar levels. Right now the Iraqi minister of electricity has intentionally brought some power-generation capability off-line for maintenance, and so that there's a drop-off. And there have been attacks on the oil infrastructure, either the crude oil infrastructure or the refined product. But again, we don't see any particular consistent part of the infrastructure that's being attacked in any consistent way, but it is one of those things we watch. And because of its fragility and brittleness, it is important to watch, and we do so.

We have time for about two more questions. Back here.

Q (Through interpreter.) The Sunni parties boycotting the elections have put a demand of the withdrawal of multinational forces from Iraq in order for their return and for taking part in the elections. So how do you comment on this?

GEN. METZ: I think the best way for -- to achieve the goal of the coalition leaving is for everyone to come and vote, vote on the person that you want to help you write a constitution, let that body of people produce

the transition government and write that constitution, and in a year -- a little less than a year from now have those second elections that create the complete government of Iraq. By that time, we will have built an Iraqi security force that can secure the nation. We will certainly be the partner and ensure the integrity of this great country. And it would seem to me that is the fastest route for the coalition to exit, is a successful, prosperous, free Iraq that doesn't harbor terrorists. And that, to me, is the fastest route. And those that don't see it that way, there's not going to be any other faster route because we are determined, as a coalition, to ensure that the Iraqi people are free, that they are able to govern themselves with a rule of law, that they will not harbor terrorists.

And in my personal observations as I've been all around the country, I want Iraq to be as prosperous as -- the potential is there for Iraqis to be prosperous. It has enormous potential as a great country, and when it is, it will be a great example for the world. And because it will not harbor terrorists, it will join free nations in continuing the battle against global terrorism until we have won that -- won that war.

Yes, sir? Q (Through interpreter.) You have mentioned the -- you have talked about the decrease in numbers of the terrorist operations, but you have also mentioned higher qualities of such operations. So does this indicate a higher level of professionalism within these terrorist forces? Thank you.

GEN. METZ: That is a very good question, and let me answer it broadly because I think you hit on some very important points. The decrease -- we have seen the decrease. You say that there's a higher quality. I don't think there's a higher quality. There are some more spectacular attacks, and on occasion, where they have some success, they bring that focus.

But we're finding, even in the past couple of days as an example, suicide bombers that were going to attack a convoy did it poorly and detonated early and were very ineffective against the convoy. In cases that they wanted to attack traffic control points, they did that very poorly. In some cases, we have seen vehicles that were built to be explosive devices explode where we could not determine the target, so we are making the assumption that it exploded accidentally. In fact, in one case not only did the vehicle explode accidentally, it was such a large explosion the vehicle traveling behind it also exploded, which tells me that they were moving two vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices to a future location and they had an accident. So in many cases the quality of the people doing the operations I think is down, and maybe the assembly of those are down because they accidentally exploded.

And so, again, you've got a very ruthless, valueless enemy who wants to kill anybody, and he is going to be successful doing that. We're going to work very hard for him to be unsuccessful, but I'm seeing the numbers of attacks decrease and I'm seeing the quality of those attacks decrease. But that is a different issue than the catastrophic or the attention which a particular attacker gets. So -- and he does get that attention, and we've got to work against that equally.

Yes, sir?

Q If the Iraqi -- sorry. Matt Spitalmack (ph) with Reuters News Service. If the Iraqi security forces are going to be in the frontlines, close in at polling stations, how can you actually expect sane voters to be willing to go to polls manned by security forces that have hardly been able to even protect themselves?

GEN. METZ: Well, I think they've done better than "hardly been able to protect themselves." They have -- when engaged in the fight, they have done increasingly better; every fight they've done better. And a little to the disappointment is that when we have a police station or a traffic control point that repels an enemy, we -- to include me -- very seldom see that. I mean, I get the reports. But the international community -- and we just don't see that on a given day there may have been 10 repels and one kind of successful, but at the end of the day, we still held the police station or we still held the traffic control point.

So I have a little more confidence than you emphasized in the capability of those Iraqi security forces. Can they be better? Sure they can be better, and we're going to help continue to train them and mature them, and they will become more seasoned, and they will get better. But they are good enough to protect a particular polling site.

Yes, sir?

Q Thanks, General. Sam Dagher with AFP. Just a clarification on some numbers you mentioned earlier. You said 27 battalions of the new Iraqi army is what we're looking at. The prime minister yesterday repeated what was I guess mentioned earlier, that the ING would be folded into the army. Does that 27 represent that, reflect that?

GEN. METZ: No, no. The original plan for the Iraqi army was 27. As we began to grow -- a year ago, the Iraqi Civil Defense Corps, which became the National Guard, that number has changed a number of times since I've been in command. We are focused right now on 45 battalions, but with an expansion program to about the 65-battalion level. That has a relationship to the amount of equipment we can ship in to get them to that level.

So I just don't have all the numbers memorized, but there is a 27-battalion army original plan; 45-battalion National Guard growing to 65 plan. The minister of interior has an ever-increasing and robust structure that he's putting together. The army has made some decisions inside of that original plan to go with intervention forces and change some of the training for the army battalions. He's brought on -- he's working on bringing on mechanized forces.

And so, again, we had a plan before sovereignty and it was a baseline to work from. But the sovereign government has made decisions and is changing things, and we're offering advice. But it's going to be a robust enough structure, I think, in 2005 to take on the insurgent fight here in Iraq, and it will be equipped and trained to do so.

Does that help?

Q Yes, sir, thank you. Just, the 65, is that by the end of this year, or what is --

GEN. METZ: I would say by the end of '05 for sure. I'm sure that we can get you that data. I just -- I apologize, I just don't have it all memorized --

Q Sure, no problem. GEN. METZ: -- and that's because my good friend, Dave Petraeus, he's supposed to put me out of business. And every time I see him I hug him and say, "Dave, you've got to put me out of business. I'm the Multinational Corps fighting here. You're building the transition security capability -- get on with it." And he is. And we really are a team. We're good friends. But I look to him to memorize all those numbers. And when he gets them trained and they become tactical control, take on to the Multinational Corps, we employ them and they are good troops.

Q Just a quick follow-up, sir. So what is the actual size of the Iraqi army now, army plus National Guard? Any figures? Any numbers?

GEN. METZ: I'll just say 60 battalions. It's in that neighborhood because there are probably at least 40-some National Guard battalions out there, and we're in the neighborhood of the 20 army, the equivalent of a couple or actually six special commando battalions in the Ministry of Interior. So we have a major force out there now that is capable and we're beginning to use and move around the country, and we're beginning to

mentor and grow the brigade and division headquarters. Today, on Army Day, we -- the announcement of those -- activating those divisions. We will begin to help those staffs come together, and they will begin to command and control more and more their forces. As an example, in Najaf we had a couple of battalions that were working in the coalition. By the time we got to Fallujah, we had a couple of brigades with brigade commanders there and battalion commanders there. So this whole effort is on a glide path that's constructed and flexible enough as the sovereign government wants to change things.

GEN. METZ: Okay. Let's -- one more. Maybe that's all.

Q I'll take it.

GEN. METZ: Now we --

Q By the way, I forgot earlier; Colin McMahon from the Chicago Tribune. There's been a lot of talk in the United States about building up a much smaller unit, we're talking maybe a couple of brigades or maybe as many as three, that would be solely charged with fighting the insurgency, much more specialized. And is there any thought to going that direction? I know there is the rapid reaction force and whatnot in the Iraqi army, but is there any thought to forming specifically that kind of group?

GEN. METZ: Are you asking on the Iraqi security side or on the coalition side?

Q Iraqi side.

GEN. METZ: On the Iraqi side. There are special units -- 36th Commando is an example, and the Iraqi Counterterrorism Force -- and we'll continue to grow those special forces in the department of -- in the Ministry of Defense. Likewise, in the Ministry of Interior, the special commando battalions are growing and emergency reaction units. But there is not a major change in the philosophy of where we're going with that effort. There have always been and are special units, and we'll continue that alongside the border police, the regular police and province leadership in that. So I don't think there's a real change on the Iraqi security side.

Well, let me close with just a few words, if you would. And I appreciate your time today.

I would like to congratulate, again, the Iraqis on their Army Day. It is a very important day. And again, as I said earlier, having a professional army that will protect them as opposed to repress them is very important.

The corps will continue our efforts to bring security to the people of Iraq as we move toward free elections. And you, each one of you out here, play a very important role in shaping that public opinion, and I appreciate your candid and balanced reporting.

In closing, let me offer my heartfelt condolences to the families of the coalition and Iraqis who have given the ultimate sacrifice, especially patriots, Iraqi leaders like the governor of Baghdad, who have fallen in this war on terror. My heartfelt condolences. They have given that ultimate sacrifice for a very important cause, which is the freedom of the Iraqi people.

Thank you very much.

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