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Presenter: Army Brig. Gen. Carter Ham, Commander of the Multinational Brigade--Northwest, and Commanding General, Task Force Olympia

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DoD Update on Ongoing Security Operations in Northwestern Iraq

MODERATOR: Thank you for joining us today from Baghdad, general. Most of you I think know our briefer here today is Brigadier General Carter Ham. He's the commander of the Multinational Brigade--Northwest, and he's also the commander of Task Force Olympia. General Ham and his troops are responsible for the ongoing security operations in northwestern Iraq, and he's here today to update us on those efforts. And I think he has a few comments that he'd like to make, and then we'll start with some questions in Baghdad, and perhaps a few here. General.

GEN. HAM: Okay, well thank you, Brian. Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen -- and I guess good morning for those of you who are in Washington. It is indeed a privilege for me to be here today, representing the men and women of the Multinational Brigade--Northwest. We're headquartered in Mosul, I think as most of you know.

The service, the sacrifice, of these great soldiers, Marines, airmen and sailors, our coalition partners and the many civilian and contract employees should make all of us very proud. Much of what they do goes unnoticed each and every day, but their contributions to the people of Iraq are making a difference each and every day.

Two months ago, the security situation in Mosul was rather tenuous. Many of you recall the 10th and 11th of November, when police largely failed, and the insurgents conducted widespread attacks. Then, on the 21st of December, a murderous attack killed 22, and wounded over 70. More recently, the Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq staff largely quit in Nineweh Province. Insurgents have mounted a gruesome campaign of murder, threats and intimidation.

But those events have not deterred us. And, more importantly, they have not deterred the good people of northern Iraq. And on the 30th of January there will be elections in Mosul, and there will be elections throughout Nineweh Province. It's not going to be easy, but it will be done.

The elections will be possible because of the close partnership between the coalition and the Iraqi security forces. The Iraqi army, National Guard and Ministry of Interior forces, along with increased coalition force presence are helping to improve the security situation in Mosul and throughout Nineweh Province day by day.

The Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq staff has returned to Mosul, and in cooperation with the provincial government the Nineweh Province Council, many local mayors, the IECI is reestablishing the processes needed to support voting and registration on January 30th.

There are other positive signs. The interim Iraqi government has assigned a new police chief, a man who has accepted truly a monumental challenge to rebuild a very large police force, one that had been ruined by his predecessor. The chancellor of Mosul University has been replaced -- a very positive step forward. These and other measures by the interim Iraqi government offer what the people of Mosul and the people of the north want most, and that is hope -- hope for a better future for them and for their families; a better future that begins on January 30th, when the people of northern Iraq -- Arabs, Kurds, Turkoman, Yazidis, Christian and all others -- will vote to determine their own destiny. All of us in Multinational Brigade-Northwest are honored to serve in partnership with these brave Iraqis and look forward to working together with them as we move forward to a bright future.

I'd be glad to take some questions, I think first from here. Yes, sir, please?

Q Hi, general. I'm Jeffery Gettleman with the New York Times. We've been hearing talk about a three-day travel ban around the time of the elections. Do you know anything about this?

GEN. HAM: I know that the interim Iraqi government is considering a variety of measures to increase the security in and around the election period. There have been a lot of discussions at the local level. We've engaged with the IECI representatives in Mosul, with the provincial governor. I don't know that any decisions have been made affirmatively, and I would expect that those decisions once made would be made by -- the announcements would be made by the interim Iraqi government. But I think something like that may be very likely.

Yes, please?

Q Hi, general. It's Jason Keyser from the Associated Press. I wonder if -- How many election staff have actually -- had actually quit in your area, and where are you -- where and how are you going to recruit new staffers?

GEN. HAM: This is the greatest -- this is the biggest challenge that the IECI faces in Mosul and throughout Nineweh Province right now. To tell you the truth, we don't know how many staff there actually were, but we know that at one point there were essentially none left. There is a coordinator now appointed for Mosul -- he's present in Mosul, and is building a staff. He has asked the provincial governor for assistance in recruiting. We learned today that they have had some success, but they are -- together, the IECI, the provincial governor, local mayors and local councils are working to identify the workers that are necessary to operate the polling stations.

There's also some consideration, I believe, being given by the IECI to bringing in polling center staff from other parts of Iraq to assist in Mosul and throughout the province. So that's not yet a resolved issue, and it is one that needs to be resolved very quickly. It is the highest priority for the IECI staff that is in Mosul today.

Yes, sir, please?

Q General, Jim Garamone with American Forces Press Service. What's your relationship to other Iraqi security forces, aside from the police, the Iraqi Army, the National Guard?

GEN. HAM: What's our relationship with them?

Q Right. Are they -- we had General Batiste in here the other day talking about how they were providing most of the security in his province, but are you getting -- are they sending in reinforcements from other parts of Iraq, for example, to help you out?

GEN. HAM: The Iraqi security forces are in fact coming from other parts of the country, and they are very helpful. The challenge that we have, that all of us have in Mosul right now is absent the credible and capable police force that is necessary in a city that large, in a province that large. The lack of that police force is being compensated by additional Iraqi security forces. Army National Guard, which as I think most of you know is transitioning to Army, as well as Iraqi intervention forces, and special police forces and other forces from the Ministry of Interior. All told, about 12,000, and of those about 4,000 or 4,500 are from outside the province.

Yes, sir. I'm going to take one more question here. Then we'll go back to the Pentagon.

Q Thank you, general. I'm Colin McMahon, from the Chicago Tribune. Two questions. The first, specifically, what is the troop strength of the task force right now, and how does that compare with a month ago? And, secondly, do you envision between now and the elections any operations that would require, say, more than a battalion of troops? Thank you.

GEN. HAM: I don't want to get too specific on our troop strength, but we're at about 12,000 multinational forces, and that is about half again as many as we normally have. We're normally right around 8,000. So we have been -- in addition to being augmented by Iraqi security forces, we have been augmented by additional multinational forces as well, and those forces are doing a great job in and around Mosul.

We are conducting operations each and every day, each and every night. Some of those do occasionally require forces at the battalion or larger level. And, again, I wouldn't want to be real specific about future operations, but we conduct operations as we develop the intelligence and the size of the force needed is generally not a significant constraint to us right now.

And, Brian, sir, we'll come back -- maybe we could go back, if there are any questions at the Pentagon.

MODERATOR: Sure, I think we have one.

Q General, this is Kathleen Koch with CNN. There are some experts who say that ironically that when it comes to percentage of voter turnout that it will actually -- they expect it to be greater among Iraqis living around the world who feel safer to go and vote than the percentage turnout you will actually see in the country of Iraq itself. What do you think about the irony of that situation?

GEN. HAM: Well, I think it goes to how do you measure the success of the elections, and I think while there are certainly a lot of different ways to measure success, voter turnout being one of them -- certainly that's something that I believe the IECL is very interested in -- I don't think that's the only measure of success. The fact that the elections are able to be conducted, that the people of all of Iraq -- and I'm specifically interested in the northern portions of Iraq -- that those people have the opportunity for the first time to make decisions, free and fair decisions, as to who their leaders will be. I think that in and of itself is a great success.

Do we want great -- would we like high voter turnout? Absolutely. Everyone would love to see high voter turnout. It's going to be a challenge. Frankly, as I mentioned, there's an ongoing campaign of intimidation that the insurgents have undertaken, particularly in the city of Mosul. That has many people scared right now. The Iraqi security forces are working very, very hard to counter that fear and that intimidation -- by their presence, by their engagement with the people.

So I hope that statement is wrong. I hope that voter turnout here is higher than people expect. But, again, I wouldn't want to say that's the only measure of merit.

Q General, I have another question. Under what -- basically it's my understanding that when it comes to security right at the polling places in Iraq, that will be provided primarily by the Iraqi security forces, Iraqi police, Iraqi Army. But under what cases would U.S. forces go in to provide additional help, and in what circumstances would that actually happen, that they would go right up to a polling place?

GEN. HAM: Well, Kathleen, again I wouldn't want to be too terribly specific about that, but in general you're exactly right. The Iraqi security forces have the responsibility to provide security not only at the polling centers themselves, but in the general area as well. And our responsibility as multinational forces are to support those security forces, help them with area security, quick reaction forces, and to help set the conditions in the days leading up to the elections, so that the situation is as stable as we can make it.

At the -- without getting -- again, without being too specific, if Iraqi security forces find themselves in a situation that is beyond their capability, then multinational forces will be postured and prepared and well rehearsed to reinforce those Iraqi security forces.

MODERATOR: General, let's go ahead back. I think you have the bulk of the reporters there. So let's go back to those correspondents in your audience.

Q (Inaudible)?

GEN. HAM: There are some indications clearly that the insurgency is receiving some support from former regime elements who are based in Syria. And the proximity of Mosul to the Syrian border I think makes that a little more problematic than it is perhaps in other parts of the country. But I would not say that that is the only concern certainly. There are many other security concerns there, but proximity to Syria is one of them.

Q (Inaudible)?

GEN. HAM: If I may, let me answer your second question first. There are -- clearly there are property disputes in Nineweh Province, in Mosul, as there are in many other parts of the country, and there is an Iraqi Property Claims Commission process that is established to deal with those instances where there is a disagreement or dispute over land ownership.

We do not see -- I have not seen any evidence of large-scale movement of families into or out of Mosul in the recent past; nor have any of my discussions with the provincial government or the Kurdish regional government with whom I interact indicate any concerns in that regard. And I interact with them on a very, very frequent basis.

Your first question with regard to potential similarities between Mosul and Fallujah, I don't think there are similarities. First, just the scale -- Mosul is a much, much larger city -- about two million. It's also a very ethnically diverse city of again -- of Arabs, both Sunni and Shi'ia, Kurds, Turkoman, Yazidis, Shabak, and many other groups. And there is a history of cooperation of those various groups inside Mosul.

Are there ethnic tensions in Mosul? Certainly there are. Will they get to the level that we saw in Fallujah, of that kind of violence? I do not foresee that as a very likely occurrence. The governor of Nineweh Province, the provincial council members, do not see that as a likely occurrence either. So we really see the situation in Mosul being very different from Fallujah.

Yes, sir, please.

Q General, Rod Nordland from Newsweek magazine. Two questions closely related. Can you tell us a bit more about the new police chief and just what he's doing to get the police going again? And will they actually be on the streets come election day?

And then we've heard from a lot of Sunnis complaints that after the mostly Sunni police force collapsed that the solution has been to bring in Kurds and Shi'ia from other parts of the country for Iraqi security forces, and they're quite unhappy about that.

GEN. HAM: The newly-appointed police chief was selected by the minister of interior, in consultation with a wide variety of individuals to include the provincial governor. He has been in Mosul now for a week, and is just starting the rebuilding process. Representatives of the minister of interior -- in fact, the minister of interior himself today was in Mosul discussing the rebuilding of the police force with the new chief and with the provincial governor.

It's going to take a long time, and there's clear recognition on the part of the new police chief, of the provincial governor, clearly of the minister of interior, that rebuilding a police force in a city the size of Mosul and in the province of Nineweh is not something that is going to happen quickly.

What they are focused on, and this is clearly an Iraqi issue -- but they are clearly focused on, first, is selecting the right leaders, and then from the right leaders then start to rebuild the police forces. There will not be large police forces present for duty in Mosul by the time the elections occur. The rebuilding of the police force will largely occur in the post-election period.

There are sufficient police who have remained strong through the events of the middle of November, through the last two months, that that force is sufficient to allow for the internal security of the polling centers, which is a police responsibility. The police chief, both the acting police chief and now the new police chief, have agreed that they have sufficient force to perform that goal. They are in consultation with the IECI, with the other members of the Iraqi security forces, and the provincial governor, to coordinate that force. So there will not be -- unfortunately, there will not be thousands and thousands of police in Mosul come election day. That process will take a bit more time.

Yes, sir, please?

Q Larry Kaplow with Cox Newspapers. Do you have any estimate yet about how many polling centers there will be in the city of Mosul? And have you had -- as far as you know, have the police and the IECI had to reduce the numbers because of the police personnel situation?

And, also, can you give us any statistical information you have about the number of engagements in Mosul over some time period recently?

GEN. HAM: I will. Let me come back. I didn't answer your question about the ethnic make-up of the police force. The police force -- previously and now -- largely represents the ethnic make-up represented, and still represents the ethnic make-up of the city. So it is a mix. It is predominantly Sunni Arab, because the city is predominantly Sunni Arab. But there were and are many Kurds and other ethnic groups represented in the police force. The new police chief has, as supported by the minister of interior, stated that it is his intention to build a multi-ethnic, diverse police force that serves the multi-ethnic nature of the city of Mosul. And I think he's going to take some active measures to do that.

On the number of polling centers, we're being purposely a little uncertain about the number of polling centers that will exist in the city. There is a process that's going on now through the IECI -- who will be the

ultimate deciders of how many polling centers there will be and where they will be. But right now it's probably a little advantageous to be a bit ambiguous about how many there will be and where they will be, but that process is underway; and though late -- and we all admit that it is late -- I am confident that the sites that will be selected will be adequate to serve the population both inside the city and throughout the province. We do have, at the request of the IECI, we are helping them with the physical security of the polling centers, and that process will be underway as soon as they identify those sites.

You asked about the number of engagements that we have on a weekly basis, and it really does vary from time to time. During the period of Ramadan, in the middle of November, if my memory serves me correctly, we had as many as 170 or 180 incidents in a particular week. Now we're at about 70 per week -- is the rate that we're at, and I think we'll probably -- my guess is we would stay about that number through the elections process.

Yes, sir?

Q Tyler Marshall from the Los Angeles Times. Staying on numbers for a second, maybe you could complete that last answer by roughly how many incidents before last fall -- a routine week in, say, July or August.

And also, on the police force, you gave us some numbers early on about security forces. But what was the blue-shirt Iraqi police force complement before the disintegration? And just implied that there are some still there. How many -- is the new police chief -- how many does he have?

GEN. HAM: The -- well, on the engagements against us, there's been a general trend upward since late summer, since August/September. We've been on a general upward trend that really spiked in mid-November with Ramadan, then a significant drop-off in late November/December, and now over the past few weeks has been about 70.

I'm reaching back into my memory banks, and I think probably in the summertime we were in the 40 to 50 range, I think is about right.

But a police force -- the Nineweh police force was at 8,900 full-time police. About 4,000 of those we think were assigned inside Mosul. We don't have exact records of that. Today the new police chief has control of about 1,000 or 1,200 police inside the city now, and we think they'll probably -- they'll grow a little bit between now and the election -- maybe about 1,500 or so. He's rightfully being pretty deliberate about that process.

Any questions from over here? Yes, please?

Q General, Dana Lewis from Fox Television. I'm curious where we've been hearing that U.S. forces on election day want to stay -- I don't know if "in the shadows" is the proper characterization of it, but they don't want to be out in front of polling stations. Given the slim numbers of police there that will man some of those cordons, is there any chance that you may in Mosul do things a little differently, that you may take some of the outer cordons to try and help the security situation?

And also, you say that multinational forces have set the stage -- helped set the stage for successful or otherwise election. What's your read on what's going to happen out there? Are the bad guys going to miss a chance to hit you all on election day?

GEN. HAM: Well, it's not so much that they'll miss an opportunity. The best way is to not give them that opportunity, and the best way to do that is to conduct operations now before the elections to disrupt their efforts and prevent them from being in a situation where they can interrupt -- interfere with the electoral process.

There are sufficient Iraqi security forces -- Army, National Guard, Ministry of Interior forces -- to allow for security forces to be both the outer cordon and inner cordon, and also the small number of security forces inside the stations. And so I'm confident that we have sufficient forces to do that. The interim Iraqi government has been very good about recognizing that requirement and providing the forces that are necessary for those purposes.

But, again, should the Iraqi forces find themselves in a situation that is beyond their capability, we will always be nearby and able to assist them very, very rapidly to make sure they are successful.

Yes, ma'am?

Q Thank you, general. Ilana Ozeroy from U.S. News and World Report. Is there any expectation on your end on what's going to happen after the elections, after life goes more back to normal, and there is a period of time in which the government tries to form itself, and in effect there is a bit of a gap there? Is there any expectation in a surge in violence or --

GEN. HAM: I think the post-election period is going to be difficult. It's not -- as much as we would like on the 30th of January when elections occur for everything to be wonderful thereafter, unfortunately I don't think that's going to be the reality.

I think what we will enter a different but still dangerous period in the post-election timeframe. And I think we will see the insurgents focus their efforts perhaps not -- no longer on disrupting the electoral process, but perhaps seeking to intimidate or threaten those who either participated or the winners of the elections. So I think there are some threats that will emerge in the post-election period which are very, very important.

For us in Mosul, one of the very key factors will be to help the Ministry of Interior and the provincial governor start in earnest this rebuilding of the provincial police force, which will be very necessary. And we'll need to retain some of the Iraqi security forces that are there now until that process is complete. So there is going to be a transition period as at the national level, the interim Iraqi government transitions to the transitional government. There will be new provincial councils elected. There will be for us a transition of a new police force. So all these transitions create vulnerabilities. We have a responsibility to help the Iraqis identify those vulnerabilities and create ways to minimize the threat to them. It's going to be -- it's not going to be a risk-free environment.

Yes, sir?

Q Ahmed (inaudible) from the Knight-Ridder. I have two questions, please. My first question is: How many soldiers have been killed and wounded in Mosul during the past two months? And my second question is: How many Iraqi police left their force on the 10th of November after the attack there? And how many stayed? And can they be trusted? Thank you.

GEN. HAM: I don't have the exact numbers for your first question, but I can get that for you pretty quickly right after this press conference.

For the Iraqi police, again there were in the province a total of about 8,900. About 4,000 we think were inside the city of Mosul. And today there are about 1,000 or 1,200 remaining inside the city of Mosul. So inside the city, about 3,000 were the ones that failed on the 10th and 11th of November.

Yes, sir? Please?

Q Thank you. Bearing in mind that the -- (inaudible) -- impact might be happening? That's my first

point.

The second point, if you don't mind, that in November, mid-November, peshmurga were part of the operation in that part of the country. Will they be again also part in this operation -- peshmurga from the north would be with the government forces doing the job of cleansing, as the minister of interior mentioned it? And will you be visible there close to polling stations? Will MNF be there visible, or a little bit away?

GEN. HAM: I don't think there's much of a negative consequence of conducting operations in Mosul right now. What's most important to the people of Mosul and the people throughout Nineweh Province is to establish a security environment that is sufficient to allow the conduct of elections. That's hard work. It takes multinational forces and Iraqi security forces, all coordinated at the Joint Coordination Center, and in concert with the provincial governor to make sure our operations are well coordinated. So there may be some downsides -- and there clearly are people who don't like us conducting operations there, but for the establishment of the security necessary for the elections I think we have to go forward.

I'm glad you asked the question about the peshmurga, because this is an untruth that comes forward periodically. The fact is is after the collapse of the police in the middle of November, the interim Iraqi government chose to deploy Iraqi National Guard battalions from Dahuk and Irbil into Mosul to assist with the security situation. They were well-trained, readily available forces that could come into Mosul.

Now, as you all know, Iraqi National Guard are locally recruited, so Iraqi National Guard battalions from Dahuk and Irbil are not surprisingly 100 percent Kurdish and many of them were former peshmurga. But they are legitimate Iraqi security forces in formally established Iraqi National Guard battalions operating in Mosul. They are there today, and they will stay there through the election process, as approved by the provincial governor and the interim Iraqi government.

About whether multinational forces will be close to polling centers, it not our intent to be so. It is the responsibility of Iraqi security forces to secure the polling centers -- again, should they need us, should they find themselves in a situation that is beyond their capabilities, we'll come to reinforce them. But it is their responsibility to do that.

Brian, let me check one more time to see if there are any more questions back there.

MODERATOR: General, no -- or, yes, we do have one. I'm sorry.

Q General, Kathleen Koch with CNN again. I understand that authorities there in Nineweh Province have agreed to let voters both register and cast ballots on the same day. If you already have a shortage of poll workers just to handle the balloting, does that complicate things?

GEN. HAM: Well, I think it does. Clearly it's better to have a separate registration process and voting process, but that was not practical in Mosul, nor throughout Nineweh Province, given the nature of the security environment in November during the registration period. I know that the Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq has had a lot of deliberation about this. This was their decision. They believe that this is the best way to move forward. We'll do everything we can to help them, but this -- that clearly the internal mechanisms of the voting and registration process is one for the IECEI to manage. That's not a part of this that we are involved in.

Maybe we'll take one more question from here, please. Who didn't get to ask one? You had your hand up first.

Q Thank you, sir. Could you give us a quick update on the Marez investigation? And, secondly, do you attribute the spike in incidents in mid-November to Ramadan, or to the offensive in Fallujah? Thank you.

GEN. HAM: I'll take the second one first. I think it's attributable to both. It's never one clean thing. Clearly we expected an increase in insurgent activity during Ramadan. The initiation of offensive operations in Fallujah certainly triggered some insurgents inside Mosul to conduct operations. We saw something similar to that in April, to be sure. And there are a number of other reasons that contributed to that significant increase. So never just one thing, but the merging of various factors I think drove us to that situation in mid-November.

The investigation into the bombing at the dining facility at Forward Operating Base Marez is ongoing, so there are not yet any formal conclusions or announcements to be made from that investigation. When that investigation is done, then I'm sure the appointing authority will make those.

But I would tell you that as the investigation has proceeded there are things that we are learning about that specific incident, and also about any time we look at ourselves we find things that we can improve upon. So we are looking at our security procedures, both for the access to the bases themselves to the access to critical sites, to how do we maintain security at gathering areas such as the dining facilities or MWR facilities such as gymnasiums and other places where groups of soldiers tend to congregate. So we have learned a lot from that, and we have made some adjustments in our force protection actions as a result of those investigations, which I think are very, very positive.

I don't think -- you know, we are also on a separate line, in addition to that specific incident, we are also looking for the intelligence indicators to track down what group organized and conducted this attack. Ansar al-Sunna as I think you know has claimed responsibility for that. As I said on that day, and will say today, I have no reason to disbelieve that. We are pursuing a number of leads, and have conducted a number of operations against those that we think had something to do with that attack. Some of those operations have been successful, and have led to more and more information. So we have not yet -- we have not yet concluded our operations in search of those who precipitated that attack.

Okay, I think that's it. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, very much. And, Brian, thank you to all those back there at the Pentagon. Thank you.

MODERATOR: General, thank you from Washington here. We know that you have a lot of demands on your time, and we appreciate you taking the time today, and hope to be able to talk to you real soon.

GEN. HAM: Okay, thank you.

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