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Presenter: Lieutenant General John Sattler, Commander, Marine Expeditionary Force

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Special Defense Department on MEF Operations in Iraq

Photo essay's supporting subjects discussed during today's briefing can be found at: <http://www.marines.mil/marinelink/mcn2000.nsf/deployed>

MODERATOR: Good morning, General Sattler. Can you hear me?

GEN. SATTLER: I can hear you loud and clear. How am I coming across there?

MODERATOR: You're coming through just fine, sir. Thank you for joining us. And good morning to the Pentagon press corps here. Again, I'd like to welcome you to one of our live broadcasts, this one coming from Camp Fallujah. I think all of you know the General John Sattler. This is his third time, I believe, talking to you from his location. He's agreed to provide us with another overview of what his unit is doing to support Iraqi elections as well as some of the humanitarian assistance and reconstruction that's going on in his AOR and the return of citizens to Fallujah. And I think he has just a few comments and then he's going to open it up to questions right away.

So, General Sattler, with that I'll turn it over to you.

GEN. SATTLER: Thank you very much. And again, thanks to everyone for giving us the opportunity to go ahead and answer some questions and make a very brief opening statement. What I wanted to do is just talk about some of the atmospherics within the town of Fallujah. If you remember, on the 23rd of December, Prime Minister Allawi decided to go ahead and reintroduce the citizens of Fallujah back into the town. He made the decision we would do it one district at a time, and there are a total of 18 districts within the city. He gave us three days to get the first districts set, and then after that point, we rolled one district at a time each day.

On the first day, on the 23rd of December, just to give you an idea of how the atmospherics have changed, how the Fallujah have become more comfortable, more confident in the security environment within the town, on the first day opened up, we brought 921 citizens back through the checkpoints. Yesterday, we brought 9,400 into the city through the same five checkpoints.

On the first day we opened up, 12 government workers showed up to go and assist us with the operation. Yesterday, we had 640 government workers working side-by-side with coalition team.

On the first day, we had 192 contractors who actually signed contracts to clear up debris, to remove stagnant water, and to go ahead and work on the water plants and the lift stations within the town. So, 192 on the 23rd of the December. Yesterday, we had over 400 contractors show up. And we have been as high as over 600 in some of the contracting areas.

Humanitarian assist visits, we set up three humanitarian assistance points within the city in conjunction with the Iraqi government. On the first day, we had six visits at the humanitarian assistant sites. Yesterday, we had over 2,000 visits. And that's to pick up food, water, blankets, heaters, petroleum, water bottles, et cetera -- all the necessities that someone would need to go ahead and spend an extended period within the town.

We also just last week, we had it cleared with Prime Minister Allawi to go in and pay each head of household, and we figured there is somewhere between 32,000 and 34,000 heads of household within the town, to go ahead and pay each one of them \$200. This is a humanitarian assistance payment. It's not to offset any of the damage that was done to their home, but it gives them some money in their pocket so they can go ahead and buy the necessities as they move back in to reestablish themselves within the town, or if they decide to go back to where they were staying, they'll have some money to go ahead and put in the kitty if they're staying with relatives or friends somewhere else within the country.

And the last column, when we first did this, there were two, three, four ministries that came in from the prime minister's office. We actually worked that up to 19 ministries that were working with us, side-by-side, taking the lead to go ahead and set the standards to reintroduce the citizens back to the town of Fallujah. Yesterday, we had 45 individuals show from the ministries.

So, all of the indicators, all of the movement has been in a positive direction. There's still a lot of work to be done in Fallujah. The essential services are coming back up on line. By the end of this month, we should have all the running water. The treatment plants are already functioning, and we should have running water out to all districts within the town by the end of the first week in February.

The electrical grid, we have the grid, the main power stations back up, and we have electric power going to the essential services -- the pump stations, the clinics, the hospitals. It will take a number of months to go ahead and re-string the wires throughout the town. We can't turn the entire grid on out to the individual homes right now because of the danger -- loose wires, the danger of electrocution of the women, children and men who have -- (coughs) -- excuse me -- who have now returned to the town of Fallujah.

And the last big success were the lift stations. Fallujah, part of the town is below the water table on the Euphrates, and there's a series of lift stations that keep the water table pumped back into the Euphrates River. They had all been shut down during the conflict, and now all of those lift stations are back up. And even a better story, they're all being run by minister of Municipalities. So, the Iraqi government is in fact running those lift stations with some very strong assistance from our Navy Seabees.

That's all I have for an opening statement. I look forward to your questions. Please.

MODERATOR:

Q General, Charlie Aldinger with Reuters.

GEN. SATTLER:

Q I'd like to ask, who is in charge of security, and who is it now? And in the election, who will be protecting the polling places?

GEN. SATTLER: We have eight battalions of Iraqi security forces inside the town of Fallujah, six in the Ministry of Defense and two from the Ministry of Interior, the second two being public order battalions, police battalions. All of the security within the town was orchestrated by General Abdul Khadar (ph), who was the senior Iraqi officer on the scene. So, the Iraqi government has orchestrated the security posture within the town of Fallujah, but we also have three U.S. Marine battalions and a regimental combat team headquarters that are stationed in the town working side-by-side. So, the security itself is being directed by the Iraqi government, but we are in close -- very, very close partnership.

When it comes time to provide security for the polling sites throughout all of al-Anbar province, this once again will be a partnership. The Iraqi security forces will take the lead. In those cases where it's possible, they will have the inside cordon. They will definitely have the actual physical security inside the polling sites. But we will be where we need to be, in the strength we need to be. And we'll move where we have to go as things start to unfold on election day and prior to election day.

So, the roles are purposefully --left vague at this point. But let there be no doubt in anyone's mind that the Iraqi security forces are deeply involved, and are in fact in the lead.

MODERATOR: Go ahead, Carl.

Q General, it's Carl Rochelle with NBC. Do you see any recurrence of insurgents coming into the city, any of the guerrilla rebel forces coming in? And are there any incidents of shooting at all, or is that all quiet now?

GEN. SATTLER: Carl, for the last about a week, it's been fairly quiet. But we still, as I mentioned, in conjunction with the Iraqi security forces, all of the patrols, they're all combined right now, meaning the Iraqis and U.S. or coalition forces, we've shuffled the deck. So, the patrols throughout the city, which are -- they are proactive patrols, they're not sitting back waiting to react. They, on occasion, they'll find somebody who's in a place where they shouldn't be and they'll bring them in. We may detain them overnight and go ahead and question them -- somebody who doesn't have the proper papers that's in the wrong district of the town.

But we did have sporadic gunfire and fighting in the early stages as we started to populate the town, but over the course, now that we have almost a hundred -- probably after today it's about 140,000, 140,000 Iraqis, Fallujah citizens, because each one is carded when they come back in, they go through security checks, and then vetting with the Iraqi security forces, also with some technology that we have out there to ensure that no one brings weapons or explosives back into the town.

And during the course of the clean-up of the town, we picked up over 500 caches of weapons that were stored -- ammunition, small arms, rockets, mortars that had been stored and stashed throughout the town. Plus, we cleaned up over 30 improvised explosive device manufacturing shops that we found inside the town, and at least two VB, vehicle- borne improvised explosive device shops.

So, long answer to a short question. We have not had any activity, any hostile fire against either Iraqi security, civilians, or our coalition forces in at least the last 10 days.

Q Just to follow up, if you will, General, the insurgents who were in the town, particularly the foreign nationals who were in the city causing a problem, any sense of where they went when you guys shut down Fallujah?

GEN. SATTLER: At least 72 of them are in detention right now, we know for a fact. I would tell you that a large -- a large portion of them did not make it out of the town. Those who did make it out of the town, some of them went to the outlying areas. When we concluded the Fallujan operation, we continued in the offense for another -- well, we're still in the offense today.

But we went out to each of the outlying towns where intelligence indicated some of these individuals, they either -- they ran, they turned and ran before the fighting started, or they may have exfiltrated the town and actually gotten away. We went out to each of those areas and we picked up numerous additional detainees, picked up a large number of small caches, not big caches like we found in the town but small caches of weapons and ordinance that we picked up throughout the surrounding area. And we believe that we either picked them up out there or -- it's just hard to tell a foreign fighter, it's hard to tell a terrorist who came from outside because they don't carry any documentation. They've completely stripped themselves of any identification that would tie them back to their roots.

So, if there are any others, there may still be some out in the west, in the al-Anbar that we haven't discovered yet, but we haven't stopped looking. We're constantly breathing down their necks. We're keeping them off-balance. We're using all the tools in the intelligence toolbox to go ahead and (fine-fix ?) them, and then we're going to go finish them. And that could be capture, or if they resist, then we kill them.

MODERATOR: Let's go over her to Barbara Starr.

Q General Sattler, Barbara Starr from CNN. A couple of questions. First of all, on the election day procedures, can you walk us through in more detail the plan? In other words, will there be polling places for all Fallujans within the city? Are you still considering putting polling places outside the city for better security? Will the polling places be secret? Will they be open and known?

And just briefly on a different topic, I wanted to ask you what progress there has been in the investigation of the Marine shooting inside the mosque that was seen, of course, on that news video? How much of that is still a priority for you? What progress have you made on that?

GEN. SATTLER: Okay, Barbara, on the election polls, on the polling centers, we will have -- I really can't get into the number of centers, but right now the enemy is trying to figure out where they're going to be, how many there are going to be, where will they be located, so that he can in fact take the scarce resources that he has and he can start planning now, because if he finds out at the 11th hour, he's not -- they're not that good. It takes them time to surveil. It takes them time to plan. If they have to do something that they have to call an audible, then execute, they're not very successful. And in those cases, when they try that, we normally find them before they have the opportunity to complete their nefarious schemes, or they actually detonate against themselves because they put the device together so hastily and sloppily.

So, I will just tell you that inside al-Anbar, there's approximately between 900 and 1,100 residents (sic) within the province. By our estimate, that means that there's probably somewhere around half-a-million who are of the age where they would desire to vote. And it's our goal to make polling places available so that the preponderance of that approximately 500,000 would in fact have the opportunity. It will be safe. It will be secure, and they'll be within proximity that if in fact they desire, and we highly encourage that, they desire to go, they'll have the opportunity to.

I'll leave it at that for now. We have not even put the word out to the Iraqi people. We're going to hold that till right down to the bitter to ensure that the enemy has -- does not have much time at all if in fact they decide to plan against those positions.

Concerning the investigation, it is moving along. There's a couple of critical elements that aren't in yet that the commander who will have to make the first judgment call does not control the pace of those. We expect that last -- those last bits of information to come in soon, and then we will move that investigation forward. So, it is still ongoing at this time.

MODERATOR: Jim.

Q General, this is Jim Mannion from Agence France-Presse. Can you say whether there will be elections held in Fallujah, and also in Ramadi? There has been some talk about holding them -- holding -- allowing people to vote outside the city. Will there be election in those two places that have been the source of so much trouble?

GEN. SATTLER: The citizens of both Fallujah and Ramadi will be afforded the opportunity to vote within their town. There is -- the IECI is looking at the opportunity for offering some Fallujans whose homes, they cannot be re-occupied at this point because they need work, they're taking a hard look at extending them the opportunity to potentially vote at other places outside of Fallujah proper.

So, the first part of your question is definitely, if you're in Fallujah, you'll be able to vote in Fallujah. If you're in Ramadi, you'll definitely be able to vote in Ramadi. And the other one is being looked at right now by the IECI.

Q General, this is Tony Capaccio of Bloomberg News. General Metz told me on Friday that in al-Anbar and in (Aninawa ?) provinces, the U.S. Marines will have a more active role than in other places, other U.S. troops in other provinces and actually guarding, providing special security for ballots going in and then ballots leaving. The Independent Election Commission asked you to do that recently. Can you flesh that out a little bit?

GEN. SATTLER: Tony, we're assisting the IECI in the movement and the logistics phase of moving the ballots to a central location. And we'll also assist them in breaking the ballots down based on the polling centers and populations in those locations to make sure that we have adequate ballots, adequate polling booths at the different polling centers.

As I mentioned earlier, we do not -- we're not in the consequence-management business. If we see that additional security is required and the Iraqi security forces ask us to beef them up, whether that's in the outer ring, the inner ring, or close to the polling site, we will do whatever we're asked to do. And we have already taken a hard look at where we believe the polling centers will be, and we've taken a look at multiple courses of action where we might be called upon. So, this will be rehearsed and thought out well in advance. But right now our plan is that the inner cordon will be done by Iraqi security forces, but you are correct, we do have the option, if asked, to move wherever we need to be to ensure security for the Iraqi people as they move forward to the polls.

Q General, Richard Sisk New York Daily News. I believe you said, sir, that 140,000, up to 140,000 have returned to Fallujah. Can you say, sir, are you finding instances where people have come back, seen the conditions and turned around and decided to leave?

GEN. SATTLER: Absolutely, Richard. Some of the homes, as we mentioned in an earlier brief, each and every bomb that was dropped was precision guided; each and every business or home that was hit was hit because there were troops in contact, and they were taking fire from that particular location. It was a long, tough fight. Urban combat is extremely vicious; it's mano-a-mano; it's up close and personal. And a number of the homes are, in fact, totally destroyed. So some of the individuals who did come back and found out that their homes were destroyed and they would not be able to occupy them or fix them up where they could be occupied, some of those individuals came through, picked up some humanitarian assistance, and moved back out.

Now, we feel that they probably came back in again once we started to pay the \$200 humanitarian assistance payment, because it's not there to repair your home. That will be done later. But this was just to give each and every head of household a stipend so that they could get on with their lives in the interim.

So I can't give you the number of those -- you know, of folks who came back and found themselves in that situation, but, yes, some of them did.

Q Sir, you still say that currently you believe about 140,000 have returned?

GEN. SATTLER: 140,000 have come back into the town, not close to that number right now, because of the temperatures are night, we don't have the electricity on, and they're just now starting to bring in generators. We're seeing more lights on every night. I do not have a figure as to how many stayed in the town -- of that 140,000, what percentage are there and have set up shop. But, I will tell you that over the course of the last three or four days, we're starting to see commerce reappear on the streets, we're starting to see fruit stands, small vendors are setting up their shops again. And although -- albeit slow, but again, in a positive direction, we're starting to see some degree of commercial enterprise kick back in within Fallujah.

Q General, Rick Little (ph) with the Dallas News. Do you have any sense of how the average Fallujan who has come back feels about what went on there? Do you think that they are grateful that your troops came in and got rid of the insurgents, or are they resentful at all the damage and that more eager to see the United States leave Iraq?

GEN. SATTLER: It's a mixed bag, Rick. Some of the folks who have come back have made it very clear to us that they felt the thugs, the murderers, the intimidators, the foreign fighters, the Zarqawis, the Janabis, the Haddids -- as you know, none of them were there when the fight -- when it actually came time to fight. So they came into the town, used their town, they mortgaged the town of Fallujah for their own cause, they brought nothing to the town. They have not done one thing for the individual Fallujan citizen. They just brought chaos and destruction, then they left. And they've taken it somewhere else, at least at this time. A lot of the Fallujan people see it that way, but there is still the destruction of their homes.

I believe that once we're able to go ahead and start to do the evaluation on their homes, and we're starting to settle claims for the individual homes, where Fallujans will be able to take a larger sum of money and then work on their homes to put it back online, or if it's totally destroyed, to remove the rubble and then they can rebuild. I think that we'll see a continuation of the positive attitude that's there right now. But, that's what needs to be done at this point. And that's what we're working on in conjunction with the Iraqi government.

So I can't put a percentage on it. If you walked out there, there's a lot of happy people to be back, to see their personal belongings, to see their town. But, it was a hell of a fight there, as you know. So there is destruction, and there is some dismay and despair. But, the combination of the two, I think that there's more -- I would say at least today there are more that are happy we went in and we rid the town of that vermin, and now they have the opportunity to go ahead and bring it back up online.

Q Just one more thing. Back after the initial success against the insurgents in Fallujah, you said that you thought you had broken the back of the insurgency. How did you mean that exactly, and what would you say about that today?

GEN. SATTLER: When I said that we had broken the back of the insurgency, I was speaking towards my area of operations, or our area -- the MEF's area of operations, which includes Fallujah all the way out to the West to Kadhimiya and Al Qa'im on the Syrian border, goes down to an-Najaf, and at that point it went up into Northern Babil. For example -- and I took a look at the statistics before I came in -- we had 270 attacks on us out here in the West, in the areas I just talked about, prior to crossing the line of departure on the 7th of November. The week prior, 270 attacks upon us. I just took a look at the last week, we had 92, 92 attacks, the preponderance of those being indirect fire and IEDs, improvised explosive devices.

Now, we'd all like to see the 92 go down to nothing, and a large number of those 92 were ineffective,

meaning there were no casualties, and no damage to equipment. But, if you look at 270 prior to, 92 now, and if you just do the math, that's quite a reduction in their activity, their opportunity to export their attacks, their plans, outside of the town of Fallujah. When you take away 500-plus caches of ordinance, we captured or killed some of the instructors, we could tell by who we picked up, and we could tell by intelligence who was either killed or captured. So we took the materials that they use, we took the instructors that taught the rookies how to do it, and we took a lot of the fighters, a lot of those who came in to fight alongside of the foreign fighters, or who were filled with rhetoric by the foreign fighters.

One other metric I'll throw out, that this camp where we are standing today we were averaging three to five attacks a week of indirect fire, rockets and mortars on this camp. And today is the 56th day, 56th consecutive day that we haven't taken a round, an enemy round of fire here at the camp. So again, you could say that might be coincidental, but I don't think so. I think that's an act of breaking the back of those who would attempt to export their terror and their murder out of the town of Fallujah.

Q General, it's AI -- (inaudible) -- from Voice of America. I wonder if we could get your take on two issues that we keep getting conflicting views from different sources on. One is the level of U.S. forces. So I would just ask you directly if you have in your area sufficient forces to carry out your mission, or if you'd like to have some more at your command?

And the other issue is the preparedness of the Iraqi forces. We've heard from some of your counterparts great praise for the Iraqi forces in their area, and yet we still see stories, quoting other sources, as saying that it's not a very good situation, it's well behind where it ought to be or where it could be for any sort of a reduction in the U.S. presence. So if I could get your comment on those two issues, thank you.

GEN. SATTLER: Both tough questions. When you ask any commander if he could use more forces, I think any work force anywhere will always say, yeah, I could probably put some more here, put some more there. Then if you came back and if you saw me probably two weeks later and asked me the same question, I would probably find a place where I could use another battalion, or even regimental combat team. But, I think if you look at the fight for Fallujah, when you're fighting a counter-insurgency, it's not about ubiquitous presence. You don't have to be all places at all times. But what you do have to be is flexible enough where you can shift forces to the point where you want them, at the time you want them, and in the volume and in the firepower that you need them.

If you go back to the fight for Fallujah, we brought six Army battalions from the other great divisions that are here inside Iraq, from the Baghdad area, from the North Central area, and all the way up north. They came on in to join the fight. And we used them for the time that we needed them, and as soon as we were done, we thanked them, and we pushed them on back to their parent command.

So, I believe that based on the way that General Metz and General Casey structured the force that we have that capability to cross attach and shift back and forth. And I also think that speaks volumes for our forces. The soldiers can come in and in 24 hours of socialization can attack in a major attack side-by-side with two Marine battalions. Or a Marine battalion can chop into an Army brigade and start to work forward the next morning as they go off on operations. And right now, we have chopped forces up to the First Cav, up to General Chiarelli up in Baghdad. He has portions of the MEP working for him now.

So, I think we can accomplish what more forces would accomplish by virtue of using the ones that we have wisely, and I think that General Casey and General Metz have done that.

The second part of your question concerning the Iraqi Security Forces, when we conducted the fight inside Fallujah, we had five battalions of Iraqi forces that fought beside us. They fought extremely well. They had been seasoned forces that fought next to the Marine Expeditionary units down in Najaf along with two other

Army battalions there, so they were already battle-seasoned. Some of them fought up in Samara. So, when they showed up, we had about four or five days to cross attach and train with them, and they did extremely well fighting beside us up in the northern portion of the town, and then actually taking the lead when we kicked down to the south, they populated the preponderance of the buildings in the north that had to be re-cleared.

So, very capable forces, the leadership is coming up online. If you remember back in April, it was nowhere close to what I just described. And then if you fast forward, before the 23rd of December, when we brought the Fallujan people back, all five of those battalions were replaced by another, in this case, eight battalions of Iraqis, six from the Ministry of Defense, and two from the Ministry of Interior. They are still working with us inside the town, and they're doing a great job.

There's growth -- there's lots of room for growth everywhere, but that's why we work side-by-side, that's why we trade ideas and thoughts. They get a chance to watch our leadership. We get a chance to watch their leadership. So, it's a cross-learning experience, and I'm very comfortable and very confident of the Iraqi Security Forces.

We have another battalion of police commandos that's working out inside Ramadi that's also doing great things with the Second Brigade combat team that's out there working with them. So, I'm on the side that gives a thumbs up to the Iraqi Security Forces, but there's still more work to be done.

MODERATOR: Al, go ahead and start wrapping, and then we've got time for one more, I think.

Q Okay. You said -- you referred to side-by-side and joint patrols quite a bit. Are the Iraqis launching any independent operations in your area?

GEN. SATTLER: Yes, they are. But, keeping in mind that the six battalions that came in, the first battalions that we had, the five that fought the battle for Fallujah with us, they did a number of independent ops at the company level, and even at the battalion level. So, that was a more mature unit, had more experienced leadership, had already been tested in two fights before they got to us. When they left, the units that came in were fairly new Iraqi units, had been through the full boot camp, had had their training, but you need that experience, and you need to walk -- you need to crawl-walk-run before you start to do independent ops.

We've wanted to be working together. We don't want to be independently inside Fallujah after we have brought in over 100,000 Fallujans. So it works very well for the cultural, for the language challenges to have the units working together. So that's the other reason why we shuffled the deck inside the town.

The police commandos, they'll take their own intelligence. They'll use us as the outside cordon, and the police commandos that are operating up inside Ramadi, they are doing independent ops. They'll plan the operations and they'll execute it themselves, and we're nothing more than backup in a lot of the cases up there.

MODERATOR: Mike, we're going to make you the last one here.

Q Wondering if you could tell us the progress or what you've been doing along the Syrian border to cut back on folks coming through, foreign fighters coming through the border there, as well as the rat lines that crisscross your section of the country?

GEN. SATTLER: The State Department is doing a lot of work with the government of Syria. The Syrians have really stepped up on their side of the border to go ahead and ensure that any cuts through the berms were filled back in, and to ensure that they have more active -- proactive patrols working the Syrian border from the Syrian side. We also still have the border crossing point in the town of Husaybah, which is way out on our west, right north of Al Qa'im, still shut down. We're not letting flow go back and forth through that

border point. And the border point down to the south, we've restricted that. It's still restricted to those who have a bill of lading. If you're coming in on vacation, you're not going to get in. But you have commerce that's going to come in, if you have a bill of lading where you're going to deliver it, you can come through the -- through the border point. So we still have restricted that.

I can't get into the specifics of the intelligence, but we're using quite a bit of our technical means to go ahead and watch and observe those rat lines you referred to, the points between the official crossing points where we find people attempt to come through with falsified documentation, they can't even get false documentation or, since we have the points tightly controlled, we do have to watch those rat lines. I will tell you it's a priority. We are watching the rat lines, but I can't get into how we're doing it, Mike.

MODERATOR: General, we want to be respectful of your time. We really do appreciate you taking the time to be with us. We hope that you will join us again very soon, and tell us again what 1-MEF is up to as we move forward toward the Iraqi elections. Thank you very much.

GEN. SATTLER: Thank you, and thanks a lot to everyone there. I'd just remind everyone that we've got plenty of cots out here and MREs, so you're welcome anytime to come on out and experience it first hand. Thank you very much.

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