



**U.S. Department of Defense**  
Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs)

## News Transcript

On the Web:

<http://www.defenselink.mil/cgi-bin/dlprint.cgi?http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/2005/tr20050616-3061.html>

Media contact: +1 (703) 697-5131

Public contact:

<http://www.dod.mil/faq/comment.html>  
or +1 (703) 428-0711

---

**Presenter: Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs and Director of Operations, J-3 Lieutenant General James T. Conway**

**Thursday, June 16, 2005 11:29 a.m. EDT**

---

### DoD News Briefing

MR. DIRITA: Good morning. We are very pleased to have General Conway with us today.

I'm very glad to see your level of interest in our activities is diminishing. We appreciate that. (Laughter.) Keep up the good work; we'll try and do the same.

I don't have any opening statement. I will just acknowledge the secretary had a morning breakfast meeting with some members of Congress, a good discussion about a variety of issues here at the Pentagon, and he's going about various meetings throughout the rest of the day.

I've asked General Conway to join us today, and he'll give you a bit of an operational update and then we'll be happy to take a couple of questions.

What, are you going to try and ask a question now, Joe?

Q No. (Off mike.)

MR. DIRITA: You're trying to get in there. But let's let General Conway talk first.

GEN. CONWAY: Thank you, Larry.

I'd like to talk just briefly about Iraqi security forces this morning. They continue to grow their operational capabilities. We've talked about numbers of trained and equipped Iraqi security forces, and that number now is just over 169,000.

I want to emphasize, however, that training and equipping are only part of the equation to building a capable and effective security force. You need to have strong leadership, effective command and control, operational capability and, simply put, experience. And that doesn't happen overnight.

We have a plan for growing the force. We're on track with projections of numbers. We're partnering our battalions with theirs, and our military transition teams are working with these units to enable them to operate independently. In fact, Iraqi troops, along with U.S. transition team members, led the operation to free

Australian hostage Doug Wood. Further, on Tuesday, Iraqi and coalition forces captured another one of al Qaeda's key leaders in northern Iraq, the so-called emir of Mosul, Abu Talha.

So they're out there, making progress, gaining experience and taking back their country from the insurgents. I'm confident that the trends are moving in the right direction.

And with that, we'll take your questions.

Q Larry, does the Pentagon welcome a budding move from members of both parties in Congress to set a deadline for removing U.S. troops from Iraq as early as this year?

MR. DIRITA: I think we've discussed this in some detail. And I'll let General Conway give a military perspective on these kinds of artificial deadlines.

But it has been, I think, consistently the view that since the situation in Iraq is developing along based on events in Iraq, it's difficult to establish a timeline for when U.S. forces would no longer be needed in Iraq. And we've talked about the timeline that includes the political transition, the development of Iraqi security forces, and those are the principal elements that our presence is geared to. So setting an artificial deadline, I think those who would wish to pick a deadline would find themselves when that deadline arrived either realizing that that was not a reasonable deadline or they got lucky and we may already be out by then.

So just to pick a deadline or demand that a deadline be established, I think -- in addition to, as the president and others have talked about, encouraging insurgents to just wait us out, is not -- I'm not sure anybody has sufficient knowledge to be able to pick the right deadline. We currently have U.S. forces in Bosnia, with some allies, on a mission that had a deadline that expired nine years ago. So, we're -- it's just deadlines don't work.

I don't know if, General, you want to comment on it.

GEN. CONWAY: I think it's fair to speak on behalf of the commanders and say that they would probably not welcome an artificially imposed deadline. They have their plan; it's a plan for victory. And forces will be withdrawn when victory is accomplished between U.S. and Iraqi forces.

If you look at it from the insurgents' perspective, they know our history, just like we study them. And they see where we have withdrawn previously -- in Vietnam, in Beirut, in Somalia. And nothing would make them happier, I suppose, than to think that there is a deadline out there, there's a time and distance factor associated with it, and then, as Larry said, they simply are able to wait us out.

Q General Conway, can you give us some details on the capture on Abu Talha, and perhaps the significance of that capture in the structure of Zarqawi's network in Iraq.

GEN. CONWAY: He was known as the "Emir of Mosul." He is a key lieutenant in the al Qaeda -- that has been established. He has said that he will not be taken alive; that he wore a vest and would detonate himself. In fact, he gave up rather peacefully when U.S. and Iraqi forces went to, actually, an associate's house, and he happened to be there with a number of others.

In terms of impact, we think it will be significant. He has been in charge of the operation up there for a long time. Mosul, as you know, Bret, has become more and more a focal point for insurgent activities. So we have to think that the number two won't be as capable as he.

Q CENTCOM put out that he was some sort of operational close aide to Zarqawi. I mean, is this on

the scale of a Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and the big al Qaeda? Is this that significant operationally to Zarqawi's network?

GEN. CONWAY: Our belief is that Zarqawi has a number of key lieutenants in the various population centers around the triangle, and Talha operates in that realm and in that capacity.

Q If I could just ask --

Q Well, one more thing. The stream of suicide bombers -- we've seen a number of them this week just walking into crowds. And, of course, the car bombers have increased. Is there a thought about where they're coming from or how to stop the stream, and is it an endless stream? It seems to increase in recent weeks.

GEN. CONWAY: The intent of the insurgents is to create the spectacular attack. They have tried it against our base camps. It's failed. They are somewhat more successful against Iraqi security forces who have the ability to defend themselves. They are, unfortunately, able to succeed in even greater rate against defenseless women and children forming in lines at the bank or in the marketplace.

We do think that there's a saturation point wherein the Iraqi are simply going to stop standing for that, and the by-product of that will be more and more intelligence and tips on how to take these people down.

Q Can I follow up on that, please? General, while the number of attacks in Iraq isn't necessarily the highest that have been seen there since the insurgent war began, they do appear to be more effective, more lethal.

Could you tell us about the increased sophistication of the kind of devices they're using, the techniques, tactics? And also, what does that say about the increased sophistication of the enemy forces here? Are they getting some guidance or help from outside Iraq?

GEN. CONWAY: I think it's somewhat natural to expect over time that your enemy would observe you and your tactics and develop countertactics or approaches -- we call them TTPs, techniques, tactics and procedures -- that can be used against you. And so we're seeing some of that. He is learning how to make his explosives more effective by combining different systems in them, to give them more blast effect, if you will.

But again, I think the important factor here is who's being targeted. And the fact that even though they have targeted the Iraqi security forces, we continue to see those young men in Iraq sign on in huge numbers to join the Iraqi security forces, again, to take back their country. And we see that the people are not being deterred or supportive of what they're seeing. In fact, they're very much reacting against it. So I have to think that their technique and their tactic will in time fail.

Q But also there's talk about the insurgent forces now resorting to shape charges --

GEN. CONWAY: Yeah.

Q -- which create a more powerfully directed -- but could you explain to us how that works, what is a shape charge --

GEN. CONWAY: Yeah.

Q -- how it works, and how it's being used, and is it more effective against even an up-armored humvee, for example?

GEN. CONWAY: Yeah. We have seen instances in the recent past -- I think probably three since the 1st of May -- where there has been a shape charged type weapon developed. It's once again crude, but in some ways effective.

A shape charge essentially streams a jet, if you will -- in this case, with a projectile, with a base plate -- in a certain direction, at a very rapid rate, sufficient to penetrate certain levels of armor.

Q Even up-armored humvees, for example?

GEN. CONWAY: Up-armored humvees are susceptible if they're hit just right with the shape charge at just the right angle. We have lost soldiers and/or Marines to some of these devices.

Q And the one question I ask: Is there any indication that they are getting outside instruction, additional help from more organized, sophisticated forces than you might find in --

GEN. CONWAY: Jim, I think the answer is not directly, at least to our knowledge. However, some of that technology, if you want to call it that, is on the net.

MR. DIRITA: Let me just, if I can just follow up one point, on a slightly different topic, but one area where we would welcome, Charlie, more congressional interest -- to date, I think we've had something on the order of 11 senators, 77 members of the House, and 99 or a hundred congressional staff members go visit Guantanamo. We would facilitate members going down to visit Guantanamo, so that they would have a much better understanding of what's happening down there.

And I think many of them, particularly those who have not been down there, would find that it's quite different from what they think is happening down there. So we would certainly welcome more members going down there and looking at it. We've facilitated that; the secretary's gone down with members of Congress. And we've -- comments that are being made up on Capitol Hill about what's happening at Guantanamo reflect a real ignorance of what's really going on down there.

Q My follow-up to your follow-up --

MR. DIRITA: Sure! Was this authorized? Where's the parliamentarian around here?

Q Would you recommend members of Congress, as Senator Specter has suggested, setting rules or criteria or whatever for holding and treating detainees in Guantanamo and elsewhere?

MR. DIRITA: It's a very complicated question; it's one that we addressed with seriousness when the administration -- when the president decided in February of 2002 to make the decisions that were made at the time, which is that people who themselves violate the Geneva Conventions probably should not be recognized as combatants under the protections of the Geneva Conventions. Nonetheless, they were provided treatment consistent with Geneva principles, and certainly humane treatment.

That's not the issue. The issue is, what do we do about people in the world we're in now that claim no country, they move across borders easily, they wear no uniforms, they target civilians purposely. Geneva was written so that that wouldn't happen. So the decision was made. And it is important that people can review that and understand it, and draw their conclusions as to whether that was the right decision.

Q The executive branch made that decision. Would you welcome the legislative branch entering the process, and perhaps changing or --

MR. DIRITA: The Congress will act as Congress decides to act, and it's not our place to do that. What I will say, on behalf of the executive branch -- we invite more members to go down to Guantanamo and see what's going on, because what's going on down there is not the way it's being described by certain members of Congress. And the way they are describing it is unfortunate, and in some cases, I believe those people will regret having made those kinds of comments.

Q A question for the general. General, earlier this week it was announced that a man had been taken into custody who was running sort of a suicide car factory or shop where he was outfitting these vehicles. I'm wondering, number one -- do you have any indication that he was like a lone wolf? Was he part of a larger network? Have you gotten other information that would lead you to suspect that there were other places that you could then clamp down on?

GEN. CONWAY: I've only read in the open source about the specific report that you cite. But he is part of a chain, and that chain begins with the materiel to create the weapon. The bomb-maker, we think -- which he is a part of that community -- is a key; the British would say that in some cases, maybe the most important aspect of the link. You then go to prevention, in terms of how you avoid the by-product of his effort. And then you go to protection.

And we're looking at all facets of that; breaking that link, if you will, of the IEDs or the VBIEDs, because it is the most significant casualty-maker in the country. 70 percent of our troops are injured by virtue of IEDs or VBIEDs, so.

Q So are you any further down the road on trying to clamp down on that at all?

GEN. CONWAY: Well, we continue to hammer away at it. And again, we focus on those people that we think have that sort of key knowledge base to create these things. And we have their names and we're trying to track them down.

Q Larry, do you have any information about those arrested in Spain yesterday? And they said that they are linked to Zarqawi network.

MR. DIRITA: I don't. I haven't even heard the report. So I don't have any information on that. If we've got something, we'll be happy to provide it to you.

(To staff) Have we -- on people arrested in Spain that might be al Qaeda, have we heard anything about it?

STAFF: I don't think we've released anything. I'll see if there's anything we can.

MR. DIRITA: If there is, we'll provide it.

John?

Q General, have you received any recommendation -- are you receiving recommendations from the Iraq theater on force size, U.S. force size, over the next six, 12, 18 months? And are they more than 140,000?

GEN. CONWAY: The commanders there -- General Vines, General Casey, General Abizaid -- I think have that as a constant part of their site picture, and they're reviewing, I would say weekly, just what that force structure needs to be. The force structure is very much augmented by the coming on line of these additional Iraqi security forces that I spoke to you about earlier, and there are more forces being contributed to the fight

and they're wearing Iraqi army uniforms.

Q General, can I follow up on that? Western Iraq, in Anbar province, there's been a number of stories in recent weeks quoting Marine officers, on the record, saying quite simply there aren't enough troops in Anbar province to deal with the threat and to deal with the size of Anbar province and the territory. And yet, from the podium we hear all the time that there's plenty of U.S. troops in Iraq and that there's no shortage of troops. Can you explain the disconnect? I mean, are you hearing anything similar from Marines in Anbar province, that they're just short men?

GEN. CONWAY: Well, frankly, I'm not. I've read some of the articles that you describe. And I suppose to the local commander you'd always like to be able to do more, and if you only had, you know, a few more helicopters or a few more tanks or a few more troops, you could probably do those things. So I suspect that's the genesis of what you're seeing, Mark.

I do know that the commanders in Baghdad are very sensitive to those types of concerns. You've seen massing of forces where need be, I think, to get after some of the things that they discover. There have recently been some movement, again, of Iraqi army forces out to the border and out to the western region. So I think some of those concerns are being answered.

Q Can I just follow up and push back a little bit? Why would we not listen to the guys on the ground who do say these things and do, you know, give these situation reports about what they're seeing? I mean, I'm not saying you're not listening to them, but I'm just wondering why wouldn't we take those very seriously as a very credible account of what's happening on the ground?

GEN. CONWAY: And I'm not saying that we're not taking them seriously. I'm simply saying that their perspective is that of a lieutenant or a captain; it deals with their immediate surroundings and doesn't always take into account the large picture and some of the things that their commanders are doing to try to facilitate their concerns.

MR. DIRITA: And when we've been there, we've been briefed by General Vines and then a subordinate division commander, and they'd had this very discussion about how a region might decide -- you know, from -- as you described, a local commander might say, "I need more." And they've described for us how -- for the secretary -- how they adjust to that.

So I think they do listen to and take quite seriously regional and local commanders who say "For the mission I'm assigned, you may need to shift some forces around," and that's what they try and do, when that's the right answer.

So I think -- I want to just make sure the premise is correct. They -- I think local commanders have a way to say this is what they need, and that process is what it is, and it's how we are managing -- how the commanders manage the problem in Iraq.

Yeah, Brian.

Q Shifting gears a little bit, another issue that's coming up in Congress, even with members like Gilchrest and Ros-Lehtinen are now saying that maybe they were wrong in supporting "don't ask, don't tell." Service Members Legal Defense Fund, a gay rights group, is saying that the military, since September 11th, has been discharging fewer and fewer and fewer gays from the military. What's happening with that issue? Why aren't you looking at reviewing the "don't ask, don't tell" policy and the administration's position on it, given the need, the challenges that the Army and the Marines are facing right now?

MR. DIRITA: It's -- the policy is the policy that everybody feels is the most effective for this issue, which is not an easy issue. But the policy is not under review. It's not seen as something that would have -- I don't think anybody believes it would have a significant impact on end strength. It's an important policy that has been working, and everybody's free to kind of express their views on whether they think it's the best policy. But it's the policy we've come up to, and it's not under review, that I'm aware of.

Q It wouldn't have -- okay, so it wouldn't have an impact positively on end strength. What would be the negative impact of the --

MR. DIRITA: You know, the issue's been discussed and debated in -- both here in the -- I would say in the government as well as in the public for about 10 years now. I think the policy is 10 years old. So I think all the pros and cons have been well aired, and we are at a policy that, I think, when you kind of weigh everything together, people think is the right policy.

Q Hasn't the nation changed over the last 10 years in the perceptions, in the way people think about dealing with gays in society and dealing with them in the workplace; hasn't that changed over the last decade?

MR. DIRITA: I suppose. But I guess where I come down is what I said, which is the policy is frequently challenged, and we have frequently determined that that remains the best policy.

Q General Conway, there was a newspaper report earlier this week that quoted U.S. military officials in Iraq as speculating, conjecturing, whatever, that the increased number of suicide bombers in Iraq over the past couple of months may indicate a shift in the way the war is being fought by the insurgent side and that it's becoming more of a religious jihad as opposed to an insurgency. Is there any intelligence or any indication from commanders on the ground that that's an increasing concern in Iraq?

GEN. CONWAY: I have not seen that officially registered, Jim.

MR. DIRITA: Jim.

Q Can I follow on that? The enemy in the past has always been former regime loyalists and jihadists, but they seem to be mutually exclusive. Are you seeing any falling out between those two groups?

GEN. CONWAY: We have seen some evidence of that. There are disparate reports, I don't know that we would call it finished intelligence at this point. But the issue is what I described earlier, that is that people are getting fed up with the attacks on civilians, and even the insurgent groups are warring amongst themselves over this continuous slaughter of Iraqis. So there is some fragmentation that we're seeing.

MR. DIRITA: And the emerging Iraqi government is trying to bring people who were not part of the political process to this point into that process, and that's going to necessarily peel off some of those people, I suppose.

Yes? Right here.

Q Thank you. The United States and South Korea have a joint military operations plan, 5029, in case of an emergency happening in the Korean peninsula. (Inaudible) -- the South Korean government is known to unilaterally changing the operation plan. What is your comment?

MR. DIRITA: My comment is that we don't discuss military operational planning. It's -- Korea is a(n) important ally of the United States, and we have all the appropriate interaction with the Korean government that we need, but we don't discuss specific operational plans.

Q Can I get back to the issue of a deadline? And General, you paint the picture of an enemy that could wait us out -- lessons of Vietnam, Lebanon, Somalia. What is the current definition of victory among the commanders over there? You just paint this picture of the -- they can absorb whatever punishment we take (sic). If we have a deadline, they can wait us out. What should the American public expect now? What's the latest definition, from the eyes of the commanders that you touch base with, of victory over there, where we can leave at some point?

MR. DIRITA: Let me start on that, and he can give you the military perspective, because it isn't just a military solution.

Q Right.

MR. DIRITA: It's -- you know, we've from the beginning laid out -- the president has laid out some objectives with respect to Iraq and its transition. He's talked about the transfer of sovereignty, which happened. It happened almost one year ago -- and since then, a great deal of political development, which was another objective. In other words, transfer sovereignty to the Iraqi government and then let that Iraqi government start developing, which it's doing. It has had several major milestones of electoral actions. It'll have more going forward, and they're scheduled. And there's a constitution -- a law that allows for that.

Greater involvement by the international community -- that's happening. NATO has a training mission in Iraq. The coalition remains more or less about where it is, with 30-plus or -minus countries involved.

Continued effort in the reconstruction of Iraq -- and that's happening. We're -- we've probably expended or at least obligated to expend, I would say, something south of \$10 billion and heading further.

And then the development of the Iraqi security forces.

So there's no military definition of success. The definition of success is those things: the Iraqi government taking responsibility for its own decisions, which it's increasingly doing; reconstruction continuing, which is going on. Sovereignty has already occurred. So those things will happen.

And then, as a component of that, military commanders will assess how much can Iraqi security forces take responsibility for, and that's happening. And I think that's an area where General Conway may have his thoughts.

GEN. CONWAY: You know, the actual mission, I suppose, is classified, but I can paraphrase it to say that a safe and secure Iraq that we are able to turn back over to the Iraqis.

The commander has multiple lines of operations, not just security, but they're economic, they're laws, they're governmental. All those things are working. They're being continually reevaluated, not just by U.S. but by U.S. and our Iraqi partners. And when the Iraqis feel like -- that they're able to take the reins completely, then, I think, we'll be looking at the V-word.

Q It's all very amorphous, though. (Off mike) --

MR. DIRITA: It's not amorphous. It was amorphous when people asked the question on May 1st of 2003, it was amorphous when they asked it on August 1st. And what's -- this -- the questions haven't changed, but the progress has been notable. And there's nothing amorphous about the election of an Iraqi government, the election of a National Assembly, the passage of a transitional law, the development of 165,000 security forces. That's real. And --

Q (Off mike.)

MR. DIRITA: And that is -- but keep in mind -- look at it from the terrorists' perspective. They are doing all these attacks, and yet transitional administrative law, the transition of sovereignty, 165,000 Iraqi security forces. So if you're looking at it from the terrorists' perspective and saying, What do we have to do? These people aren't stopping, they're moving forward and they're going to take control of this country and they're going to have their own security forces.

So I just turn the question back around. If you asked this question on May 1st, 2003, what's the progress, and we said, Well, at a certain point in time we want to have the Iraqis have their own sovereignty, we want to have the 165,000 security forces, it would have been fair at that point to say, Well, how the heck do you get there? But now we're there. And so --

Q But the -- but the one thing that you're leaving out --

MR. DIRITA: Hold on. We'll get back to you.

What do you got?

Q Well, but you said "safe and secure" -- that's the definition of part of the mission. How do you define that, though? Is it with attacks go from 50 to 60 a day, to zero, or to less than 10? I mean, can you give us a better sense of what that means, "safe and secure"?

GEN. CONWAY: There are metrics associated with it. And again, I think we'll know it when we see it. When the Iraqi security forces feel like that the -- it has transitioned from a military solution to a police solution and the local police can resolve their problems at the local level, then I think the Iraqi security forces will feel like that the handoff is somewhat complete.

MR. DIRITA: Okay, Ben.

Q Well, I mean, one context that we -- I haven't heard discussed regarding the timetable for withdrawing and the rest is the effect of a deteriorating support in the United States for the military operation there. Let me ask you to comment on that, if you could, please.

MR. DIRITA: It's an important consideration. Obviously, the public support of these kinds of operations is critical, which is why we spend enough -- a lot of time trying to make sure that the public has full access to all the information. I think that the public recognizes that this is -- has been a challenge, that the president has laid out some objectives. It's important to always remind people how we're doing against those objectives. And I think we'll see more of that as we get closer to the transition date to remind people that, you know, a year ago this happened. It's a -- it is important. I don't want to -- I don't want to discount it. I --

You know, the polls move up and down, they go a lot of different directions. I think when people are here every day, that it's terrible in Iraq because a bomb went off, they wonder, jeez, maybe it's terrible in Iraq: a bomb went off. If you look at one indicator, the people who are there and know the most -- the Americans who are in Iraq and know the most about Iraq are our military. And in numbers we've probably not seen maybe in my lifetime, their recruit -- they're reenlisting 200 percent a goal, 150 percent a goal for units that have deployed to Iraq. So those individuals who are the most knowledgeable Americans of all think, jeez, it's something worth doing.

Now, I know that does not translate to public support, but it's not a bad indicator of what's really going on

in Iraq as opposed to what people sort of have the perception; that it is our challenge to make sure that that perception is as broad as possible.

Q (Off mike.)

GEN. CONWAY: Could I also comment on that?

(Cross talk.)

MR. DIRITA: (Inaudible) -- let me -- we'll get back to it; let the general -- if your position is, if your belief is that the only reason our soldiers are reenlisting is because they're getting tax --

Q (Off mike) -- not the only reason, but that partially is a reason -- (off mike) --

MR. DIRITA: Of course, we offer incentives. There's no question. But it's -- when you talk to them, their answers are manifold. They do get better pay and incentives; they also feel like what they're doing is very important and that it's making a difference, and that they're keeping America secure. So, it's a range of things.

Did you want to finish your comment?

Q (Off mike) -- if I could ask you ask you, in your comments, to talk about what you spoke of earlier, which was Vietnam, for instance. Which was, I think, we'll agree, affected by public opinion -- (inaudible).

GEN. CONWAY: There's a story that goes back to Vietnam I'll use to start off with. It was the story of a Marine colonel talking to a Vietnamese colonel. And the Marine said to him, "We beat you every time on the battlefield." And the Vietnamese colonel said, "That is true, but it's also irrelevant."

And the fact is, they realized what I think our contemporary enemy realizes -- that American public opinion is the center of gravity. That a democracy can't do certain things if, in fact, the citizens don't support it. So it is concerning that our public is not as supportive as perhaps they once were.

We'd like, I believe, to try to reverse those figures and start the trend back the other direction. Because it's extremely important to the soldier and the Marine, the airman and the sailor over there to know that their country's behind them. We believe that this global war on terrorism is not going to be ended, necessarily, with Iraq and Afghanistan. And we didn't start this fight. So I don't know that it's our option to simply withdraw at this point until such time as this whole concept of the global war on terrorism is --

Q (Cross talk.)

MR. DIRITA: Fellas, look. We're going to get to you. We'll get to you. We're going to get to everybody here; don't -- please, don't just blurt out questions.

It's an important one, and it's an important factor. And that's why government officials and military officers and others spend a lot of time trying to interact and -- let the public understand what's happening there, because public support is obviously very important for these kinds of actions.

Pam?

Q I have a question for each of you. General, could you give us an update on Afghanistan? Anecdotally, it seems to be getting worse. It seems as though they're adopting some tactics that are successful in Iraq. And Larry, could you talk about the Defense counsels for the Guantanamo detainees?

It came out yesterday at the hearing, Lieutenant Commander Swift said that the office is going down from six attorneys full-time to one attorney full-time. And while I know that each of the attorneys that are assigned to detainees maintain that account, they're also having -- they have other jobs -- now -- to do. And so a cynical person could look at that, and say that this Defense Department is now sort of taking away the one advocate that the Guantanamo detainees do have in military commissions. And those lawyers have actually been quite critical of the whole military commission -- (inaudible) --

MR. DIRITA: Yeah. I'll answer that and we'll let General Conway talk to Afghanistan.

The Office of Military Commissions is up, it's operating. We've published the commission regulations and the various commission papers widely. The rules exist. We've had one or two proceedings under the military commissions. The Defense attorneys, as part of the military commissions, will mount a vigorous defense for their clients, as they should. And part of their vigorous defense appears to be to challenge the legitimacy of military commissions, and that's their right to do that.

We believe that the military commissions process is one that is based in precedent, that will be capable of providing an important process to kind of come to closure on detainees. It is under review by a Circuit Court right now, and once that review is complete, we believe we'll be able to move forward and that detainees will have the full rights that they're being provided by the military commissions, when that happens.

Q How vigorous of a defense can they get, though, if their lawyers who were once full-time assigned to that job are now -- now have other jobs?

MR. DIRITA: Well, we'll wait and see. When there's military commissions, I think everybody will have the opportunity to evaluate for themselves.

In addition to military commissions, though, let me remind you there is a Combatant Status Review Tribunal where a detainee is allowed to have representation. And most of those Combatant Status Review Tribunals -- many of them, I should say, have been open. NGOs have observed, some press have observed.

Q (Off mike) -- by lawyers, right?

MR. DIRITA: It need not be by lawyers. It's an administrative process.

There's Administrative Review Boards where detainees will have the opportunity to have their cases reviewed each year.

There's a lot of process -- review process in place, and there is a process in place that is tested by history, known as the military commissions, and we're confident that it will survive challenge and that it will be seen as something fair and appropriate to this unusual situation we find ourselves in.

Q (Off mike) -- to say why that office has been reduced from six to one full-time --

MR. DIRITA: Offhand, I don't know. If there's a reasonable answer we can provide you, we'll try to. But it's -- as I said, time will tell. People will have the opportunity to evaluate for themselves.

In addition, by the way, the Supreme Court allowed for habeas appeals, and there are now, I think, some 200 detainees that are represented by attorneys in that venue too. There is a very transparent review process going on down in Guantanamo, and those detainees are going to get a lot more rights than the people they were involved in killing.

Q Thank you. Afghanistan.

GEN. CONWAY: You know, I think our intelligence experts would say that there's not much that's happened in the last couple of months that wasn't anticipated. The bad guys have come down out of the mountains, after a harsh winter. Attacks are still averaging less than three a day. The turnover, Stage 2 turnover to NATO forces is complete as of 31 May. So they now command and control the northern and now the western portions of the country. Another large chunk up against the Pakistani border is being looked at as Stage 3.

So the expansion of the Afghan National Army is again happening according to the time line that's been laid out by the commanders there. So I think we're quite pleased, in fact, with developments --

MR. DIRITA: We may have time for one or two more.

Q A follow-up?

MR. DIRITA: A follow-up. Go ahead.

Q The statement from the outgoing envoy to Afghanistan, Osama bin Laden and Mullah Omar are no longer in Afghanistan, is that your best information, and should -- and does that mean they're in Pakistan? Or have they gone somewhere else?

GEN. CONWAY: Probably shouldn't talk about that in an open forum.

MR. DIRITA: Well, and I'm not sure -- (laughs). Well, I will say in an open forum, who knows? (Laughter.) So if you've got something better in a closed forum I'll be happy to hear it. But there's Afghanistan and then 200 other countries in the world. So I'm not sure that because Afghanistan no means Pakistan yes. I -- Zell, I guess, gave his views on it?

Q He said it's believed that Osama bin Laden and Mullah Mohammed Omar are not inside --

MR. DIRITA: Are not in Afghanistan, and I think there are other people who believe that. But -- we've talked a lot about this. When we've got him, we've got him.

Will. And then we'll go back to you.

Q Yeah, on the U.S. defense sales to Israel. Is it the U.S. policy now not to move forward with any defense sales to Israel until the dispute over Israel's sales to China is resolved?

MR. DIRITA: I don't think it's quite that sweeping. We have some restrictions within the Joint Strike Fighter Program that we've discussed, and I think we've provided some detail on that. And it's mostly restrictions on technology going forward in that program. And I think -- in fact, I saw an interview that General Kohler gave on this issue that you might want to take a look at -- General Kohler's the head of the Defense Security Cooperation Agency, where he talked a little bit about this. But it's -- I don't believe that it's -- and Brian will either correct me or will provide additional information -- it's not a(n) across-the-board policy, it's -- with respect to the Joint Strike Fighter, we have some tech transfer issues that we are working with the Israeli government on, that we've talked a little bit about, and I'll try and provide some more detail.

Q So it's not a uniform freeze, but it's a case-by-case basis?

MR. DIRITA: It's a -- it's a -- it's a policy that's right now, at the moment, as I understand it, focused on the Joint Strike Fighter and technology involved in that program.

Q Whether you're under an exit deadline or not, because of the importance of public opinion, aren't you, in fact, under a kind of time pressure to turn things around in Iraq?

MR. DIRITA: Again, I guess it just goes based -- it's based on what people determine what "turning around" is. There's -- what we believe we're under is the timetable established by the transitional administrative law to transfer full control to the Iraqi government. And that timetable's been well established, that timetable's being worked against. There have been periods where some of the -- the nature of the attacks have spiked. We saw a period in that summer- fall of '03, I guess it was, where it was -- the questions sounded a lot similar to what we're hearing now, and I understand that because it was a tough time. We had a couple of aircraft shot down, helicopters, we had the Karbala bombing that killed 180 people, if my memory serves me correctly, the U. N. bombing. And yet, through all of that, people would have said -- and I think did at that time -- when are you going to turn things around in Iraq? And we since then had a new government -- actually, two governments since then: the transitional government and now this government, the interim government. We have -- we've had the elections of the National Assembly.

I mean, the progress is inexorable. We hope it continues in this way. And it's -- we believe it will. There's no reason -- there's better reason to believe that it will than won't. And in the meantime, we're going to have to deal with these obvious challenges, and nobody's trying to put a happy face on it. They are challenges.

Q Why aren't the polls reflecting that, though?

MR. DIRITA: Look, there's a lot of reasons. Americans, I think, genetically speaking, are impatient people, and I understand that. I respect that. I -- people want to see things happen. Right now we're living in an age where it's 24/7 news coverage. We've talked a lot about this. They're being inundated every day with images that are negative, and they rightly react by saying, "Jeez, if it's so bad over there, you know, is there any hope for the future?" And our job is to keep reminding people that the future is one that is a very different future for 50 million people who have been liberated by U.S. forces and other coalition allies, and one that there has been significant, notable progress. And I think --

Q (Off mike.)

MR. DIRITA: I didn't say that. No. Did I say that?

Q Well, you said, you know, 24/7 news coverage, people are being inundated with bad news. I mean, people are talking to us from the U.S. government, from the U.S. military --

MR. DIRITA: Right.

Q -- are telling us these things that we're reporting. We're not making them up out of thin air.

MR. DIRITA: Nonetheless, my statement is equally valid, which is 24/7 news coverage of car bombs, and that just tends to leave a certain impression. And I'm not challenging it. I'm simply stating it as a fact. And so our job is to make sure that there are other perspectives that are available. We try our best to provide those perspectives.

And as I said, over time, I think the American public's judgment is a good one. And the American public will judge that this cause -- I believe, that this cause was a worthwhile cause, that it was one that they're proud

of, and they'll look back on it feeling very good about what this country and what our allies accomplished in both those countries, together with those countries.

I think that's about it. Thanks very much, folks.

COPYRIGHT 2005, FEDERAL NEWS SERVICE, INC., 1000 VERMONT AVE. NW; 5TH FLOOR; WASHINGTON, DC - 20005, USA. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. ANY REPRODUCTION, REDISTRIBUTION OR RETRANSMISSION IS EXPRESSLY PROHIBITED. UNAUTHORIZED REPRODUCTION, REDISTRIBUTION OR RETRANSMISSION CONSTITUTES A MISAPPROPRIATION UNDER APPLICABLE UNFAIR COMPETITION LAW, AND FEDERAL NEWS SERVICE, INC. RESERVES THE RIGHT TO PURSUE ALL REMEDIES AVAILABLE TO IT IN RESPECT TO SUCH MISAPPROPRIATION. FEDERAL NEWS SERVICE, INC. IS A PRIVATE FIRM AND IS NOT AFFILIATED WITH THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT. NO COPYRIGHT IS CLAIMED AS TO ANY PART OF THE ORIGINAL WORK PREPARED BY A UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT OFFICER OR EMPLOYEE AS PART OF THAT PERSON'S OFFICIAL DUTIES. FOR INFORMATION ON SUBSCRIBING TO FNS, PLEASE CALL JACK GRAEME AT 202-347-1400.

<http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/2005/tr20050616-3061.html>