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Presenter: Commander of Multinational Division Baghdad and Task Force Baghdad, Maj. Gen. William G. Webster, Jr.

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Defense Department Special Briefing on Security Operations in Baghdad

BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary for public affairs): General, thank you for joining us this morning. And good morning to the Pentagon press here.

Today our briefer is Major General William Webster, who is the commander of the Multinational Division in Baghdad and commander of the Task Force Baghdad, as well as commander of the 3rd Infantry Division. General Webster and his troops are responsible for the ongoing security operations in and around Baghdad. He's here today to provide us an operational update in his area of operations, and I think he has a few comments that he would like to make to you before we open it up for questions.

I just remind you that he can hear you but not see you, so when we go to the questions, if you could identify yourself, that would be helpful to him.

With that, General Webster, again, thank you for joining us this morning. This is very helpful for us back here. And I'll turn it over to you.

GEN. WEBSTER: Okay, thank you.

I'd like to take just a couple minutes and mention a few things to you, give you an orientation to Task Force Baghdad and the area of operations, the AO that we're responsible for.

First of all, some characteristics of the Baghdad area. It includes not only the urban area of Baghdad but much of the rural area of the province and beyond. About 1,600 to 1,700 square miles of territory, which stretches all the way up in the north to Tarmiya, in the west out to the Abu Ghraib prison, down in the south to Salman Pak and Latifiyah.

We have about 440 miles of designated supply routes that we have to secure through Baghdad. As you know, all roads lead through Baghdad. We've got about a thousand key facilities. That includes everything from power plants and, in one of the countries, three oil refineries, to schools and mosques. There are over 350 mosques in our area. We have the Baghdad International Airport and Camp Liberty, Camp Victory. The International Zone is in our area, of course. And a month or so ago, a month and a half ago, we were also given responsibility for the outer perimeter of the Abu Ghraib prison.

Baghdad, of course, has the highest population density of any metropolitan area in Iraq, with about 7 million citizens in our area of operations. Population, as we understand it, is about 62 percent Shi'a, about 25 percent Sunni, and with other segments of Iraqi society rounding out the population.

That's a sort of a quick snapshot of where we work. Let's talk about the task force for just a minute. It is not all of the 3rd Infantry Division, and we have provided two of our brigades to the 42nd Infantry Division of the New York National Guard. They work, of course, up around Tikrit, Baqubah.

I've got two of my own ground brigades and three other ground combat brigades of the United States Army, with about 30,000 soldiers of the Multinational Force in Task Force Baghdad. That includes soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines, and it also includes soldiers from Macedonia, Estonia and Georgia. So it's a joint and combined force.

I also have about 15,000 soldiers from the Iraqi army working for me and for us here in Baghdad. And we work with about 11,000 special police and commandos who belong to the minister of Interior.

Our mission, rather simply stated, is to secure Baghdad, to neutralize the anti-Iraqi forces and insurgents who are influencing this city and province, and to help develop a capable Iraqi security force.

Timeline. We arrived over here in January, so we've been here about six months. We took over from the 1st Cavalry Division here in AO Baghdad on the 27th of February. Since the 27th, we've conducted 11 brigade-sized operations, and by brigade-sized, I mean 2,000 troops or so, or more, rather.

Most recently, we've conducted a division-sized operation called Lightning. Our part of that we dubbed Operation Squeeze Play, which began on the 22nd of May. And we folded that in with our Iraqi army and Iraqi special police and commandos, into the Iraqi government's Operation Lightning, to help further secure Baghdad.

During those first 11 operations this year, we captured about 1,400 detainees in coalition custody. And since then, since we began Operation Lightning, we've captured another 1,700 or so suspects, not all of those under our direct control. Some of those were taken by Iraqi police and Iraqi army forces.

And that includes in our detainees on the coalition side 51 foreigners from countries outside of Iraq. Some of the people we've captured lately include foreign fighters from Egypt, Yemen, Syria and Sudan.

We inherited a situation from the 1st Cavalry Division that was relatively peaceful as compared to the November time frame, before the elections and on election day. Attacks were down significantly, but we expected them to come back up with several key events that were occurring in the country. One of those was, of course, the seating of the new government on the 28th of April, and the next day, of course, there was a huge spike in activity, with 14 car bombs or VBIEDs, as we call them, exploding inside Baghdad.

We worked very hard on gathering intelligence as to how these car bombs were put together, what the template looked like that our enemy was using, where he operated, and where the car bombs were exploding, because these were causing dozens of killed and hundreds of wounded, in some cases, because of the size of them. And we found as much as 800 pounds of explosives in some of these car bombs.

So we focused our operations during Lightning on significantly reducing the number of car bombs while disrupting the enemy cells that were conducting operations against us and the Iraqi government.

We have run more than 2,500 traffic control points since Lightning began. It's still ongoing today. We have conducted over 7,000 patrols and conducted over 500 raids, which, as I stated, has allowed us to capture

over 1,700 suspected insurgents and 70 caches of bomb-making materials, electronics, computers, cell phones, explosives, weapons, et cetera, to include some air defense weapons and, just a couple days ago, a particularly large cache of about 5,000 mortar rounds that we uncovered.

We have been successful with the Iraqi security forces in reducing the overall number of attacks in Baghdad -- the overall number, meaning all kinds of attacks. The number of car bombs has been cut in half. VBIEDs are down just about 50 percent, and the number that explode have -- we've reduced their effectiveness down to about 38 percent of those that explode cause damage or injury. The number of roadside bombs are down, and only 21 percent of the roadside bombs are IEDs that explode are causing damage or injuries to people. And the number of mortar and rocket attacks are down. So we've significantly disrupted the insurgent cells that were conducting these operations in and around Baghdad.

We've made some progress against the insurgency in our area to the degree that the resumption of government activities -- to include drafting the constitution -- and the reconstruction of much of Iraq and the economy can continue. We fully realize that the role of Task Force Baghdad here, along with the Iraqi security forces and our coalition allies -- that we all have a role in supporting the development of an Iraqi democratic institution.

There are some more threats ahead. I do believe, however, that the majority -- that the ability of these insurgents to conduct sustained high-intensity operations, as they did last year -- we've mostly eliminated that. And there will still be some spikes because the enemy gets to choose when and where he conducts some of these attacks, and in fact, some criminals are involved in conducting some of these attacks. But we don't think the enemy is capable of sustained long-term operations against us and the Iraqi security forces.

So with that sort of introduction, I'll turn it over to you for questions.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, General, thank you very much for that comprehensive update.

Charlie, why don't you go ahead and start us.

Q General, Charlie Aldinger with Reuters. Just to clear up a couple of numbers, if I could, you said you had 30,000 multinational troops. Those are virtually all Americans, right? And the 15,000 Iraqi troops are in addition to that, not part of it, right?

GEN. WEBSTER: That's correct, Charlie, on both counts. We got about a thousand soldiers from Georgia, Estonia and Macedonia as part of the 30,000, and the 15,000 Iraqi soldiers are separate.

Q As you and others have said before, the insurgents keep changing their tactics. Now they seem to be attacking diplomats, as in the death of the Egyptian diplomat this week. Number one, have you found his body? And number two, do you plan to start offering multinational troops to help protect these diplomats, in order to keep other countries from withdrawing their representatives?

GEN. WEBSTER: First of all, Charlie, let me clarify. On the 15,000 Iraqi soldiers that have we have as part of the coalition, those soldiers are in various stages of training and readiness. We've got two Iraqi army brigades now controlling terrain with several thousand soldiers. And the others are in the process of company- or battalion- or brigade-level training, so that by the end of the summer, there will be an Iraqi division of about 18,000 soldiers by that time that will be controlling terrain in Baghdad. That's the first point.

I just want to clarify that those 15,000 are not all fighting every day.

I will say that in meetings recently with senior Iraqi leaders, we've been putting together plans for the

future, and we recognize that all of our forces must be available to help protect our international diplomats who are helping to begin relations with this new democratic government. And so we will be -- and we have talked about how we can do that together, to provide better security for them.

Reference the Egyptian diplomat -- we have not found his body. And at this point, we don't have any leads, but we are working hard to help the Iraqi security forces determine what happened and where that happened, and to get to the bottom of it by capturing or killing those who are responsible.

Q When do you think -- just a brief follow-up: When do you think you might begin providing security for -- helping provide security for these diplomats?

GEN. WEBSTER: Charlie, I'm not sure that in the end it will result in U.S. forces directly guarding some of those diplomats. We have not finalized our plan yet. But we certainly recognize we've got to do something very quickly.

And the first step, of course, is that this new Iraqi government has offered their own police force and special police commandos to help guard these diplomats. And it's my understanding that that will begin very soon. I probably shouldn't talk about when, but very soon.

Q Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: Bob?

Q General, this is Bob Burns with Associated Press. Thanks for taking the time to talk to us this morning.

I was taken by your comment in your opening statement that the insurgents' ability to conduct sustained high-intensity attacks has been mostly eliminated, you said. That sounds rather a permanent sort of thing. Or are they able to regenerate that capability, or have you turned the corner on the insurgency?

Q I think in an insurgency, it's not helpful at all to talk about turning the corner or nearing the end, those kinds of things, because when you're talking about an insurgency in a country like this, where the borders are still rather porous and folks can still come in, and there is money available to hire local criminals and others to participate in the fight, it's very difficult to get a day- to-day estimate of the number of people you're fighting. And it's very difficult to know it's over until the Iraqi people are comfortable with the level of security that they have around them and that they're able to go on with their lives in a normal way.

So sort of a difficult answer to a difficult question. I don't think we can say this is a permanent solution, but I would say in the next couple of months we will not see sustained, long, bloody months in Baghdad.

Q Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: Let's go back to Pam.

Q Sir, this is Pam Hess with UPI. Could you talk a little bit about the VBIEDs. You said they're down 50 percent. Would you bound those numbers for us; from what to what? And to what do you attribute the diminishing of their effectiveness? You said only about 38 percent of them explode. Do you have some kind of new technological means to defuse them, or do you just have people with less experience building them?

GEN. WEBSTER: I think -- you were cut off there in the middle, but I think I got the bulk of your answer -- I mean your question. We were experiencing, just prior to conducting Operation Lightning, we were

experiencing 14 to 21 car bombs a week, and we are now down to about seven to eight a week. We attribute our success to having better trained and experienced Iraqi security forces patrolling the streets, talking to the Iraqi people, gathering greater intelligence. People are gaining more confidence in their security forces here in Baghdad and they're providing them lots of information, which they share with us, and we use that to conduct operations to disrupt these cells and take away some of the key components.

We have also become more experienced in finding these things because we know pretty much where they're concentrated in terms of their production. And it isn't a factory kind of thing. These are produced in ones and twos in garages and the back end of some shop that has some other meaning altogether, not in very obvious places. But it's both. It's that we've disrupted the cells; they're less -- in some cases they're less capable of making these things well. And in some cases we have more experience and more intelligence that allows us to get to them before they get out on the street.

Q Can I follow up -- may I follow up? We've heard -- and you can't get into details, I'm sure -- but has there been some sort of technological solution? We've heard that there are some kind of sensors out there that are helping in the car bomb problem. Have you seen any of these?

GEN. WEBSTER: We have some. I'm not sure that they're brand new, high -- latest technology solutions because this is a very adaptive enemy, as Charlie talked about a few minutes ago in terms of -- or Bob did, in terms of attacking diplomats. This enemy is able to shift his tactics and share information easily by word of mouth, over cell phone, and over the Internet.

But the triggers that are available to cause these to go off are many and varied, and there isn't a single solution for all of them. Some of them are remotely controlled. Some of them are remotely controlled from inside the car by a driver. Some of them are suicide bombs with a point detonating trigger; in other words, as soon as it touches -- hits something, it goes off. Others are tied to a timer and driven someplace and left, or sometimes go off with the driver still inside, the suicide driver.

So there are many ways that these things are triggered. And so our ways of getting at them and finding them have to be more varied than what the enemy is capable of doing. It's also a very difficult problem.

MR. WHITMAN: Let's go over here. Vince.

Q Yes, General, this is Vince Crawley with the Army Times newspapers. You said you have about 15,000 security forces in the whole of Baghdad, but that you'll be able to -- the Iraqis will be able to deploy a division-sized element of 18,000 by the end of the summer. Where will those folks be coming from, and what state of training are they in right now?

GEN. WEBSTER: Let me correct the numbers for you. We have about 30,000 coalition forces under Task Force Baghdad control -- Americans and Europeans. We have about 15,000 soldiers of the Iraqi army under our control today. They're continuing to train hundreds each week and form new units, and in the end, there will be a brigade of about -- I'm sorry, a division of six brigades that will have roughly 3,000 soldiers each. So we're still growing and training those units as we go.

Now in addition to that, there are currently about 11,000 Iraqi police -- special police, that is, not the average beat cop, but Iraqi special police and Iraqi special commandoes who are also conducting operations in Baghdad with us.

If those numbers were further confusing, I'll be glad to retry.

Q Fine, but what's the time frame for getting the six brigades of the Iraqi army on line in Baghdad

region?

GEN. WEBSTER: Well, we've got six brigade headquarters now. Two of those brigades own battlespace. Two more will be gaining battlespace in the next, my guess is or my estimate is, about 45 to 60 days. The division headquarters is operational and is functioning. We're training them every day. And the six -- division commander is partnered with me, and I've got a full-time team assisting him. So by the October elections, for sure, we will have five to six of those brigades operational.

Q And just one follow-up. How many U.S. personnel are assigned to those units, assisting them?

GEN. WEBSTER: I think the average is about 45 that do day-to-day training, 40 to 45. It varies by unit and their level of expertise and experience so far; that is, the level of the Iraqi capability. But in addition, they've got quick-reaction forces of American platoon to company size that are available to assist them. So, you know, 40 is on average in terms of the coaches that they have from day to day, and assistants, and another hundred as backups -- immediate backups if there are difficulties.

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead, Tom. Then we'll go to Al.

Q General, Tom Bowman with the Baltimore Sun. Back in March, General Abizaid told Congress that the Iraqi security forces could take the lead in the insurgency fight sometime in 2005. Two weeks ago he said, well, they may take the lead next spring or next summer. I'm wondering why the delay, first of all.

And if you could offer a little more clarity on the Iraqi forces in your own area. Of the 15,000 Iraqi army soldiers, how many or what percentage roughly are at the top tier of training and readiness?

And you also mentioned at the end of the summer the Iraqi division would be ready -- you said controlling Baghdad. Does that mean taking the lead in Baghdad or does that mean trained and ready to assist U.S. forces?

GEN. WEBSTER: Last question first. Our current plan, our current time line that we're working towards is to have the Iraqi 6th Division with its six brigades capable of securing Baghdad with the Iraqi police and the Iraqi special police and public order brigades. So in other words, Iraqi security forces securing Baghdad for the elections, with our assistance as backup.

And we think it's going to take longer, we think it's going to take -- I think -- I didn't hear what General Abizaid had to say directly, but what I would tell you is that I think it's going to be spring of '06, or so, before they're able to support themselves logistically long term. Right now their difficulties are in terms of supporting themselves in sustained operations -- supply units and maintenance units. And those are the ones that will take the longest to grow, we believe. And once they've got those, and their ministries are capable of supporting them long term, then they'll be able to take control of fighting the counterinsurgency altogether.

Our intent with the forces in Baghdad is to have them capable of planning security of the election process, with our assistance, and conducting that security hands-on, in the lead, by the October and December elections in Baghdad. I can't speak for the other division areas.

And I will tell you that we measure their readiness not to the same standards that we measure our U.S. Army units, but in the same general areas: personnel readiness and manning, equipment, training, logistics support, leadership assessments -- those kinds of things.

And I'll have to leave it there because it wouldn't be useful if I -- although I could tell you, I don't want to tell you about the levels of readiness because that would probably provide more information than I'd like to give

out.

Q You can't give us a rough estimate, a percentage of how many are at the top tier?

GEN. WEBSTER: I will tell you that all of them right now require additional logistic support for their long-term operations, because that is the long pole in the tent, if you will; that will take the longest to develop and produce.

There are two brigades that have two or three battalions, Iraqi army battalions, working for them that are currently operating out in the battlespace now. And the rest are operating at the company or battalion level in battlespace that is currently owned by U.S. Army units that work for me. So, I don't know, what's that, about 35 percent at this point?

I will tell you that, you know, one of the units that -- one of the brigades that's currently not what you might call Tier 1, not currently fully occupying battlespace in their own right, not responsible for it individually, but the 2nd Battalion of the 1st Iraqi Army Brigade is the unit that gathered the intelligence, planned and conducted the operation to free the Australian, Douglas Wood. And the U.S. team of about 10 individuals was supporting them when they conducted that operation.

MR. WHITMAN: Just over here. AI?

Q General, Al Pessin from Voice of America. Two questions, sir. You indicated there's been a reduction in the number and effectiveness of the bombings; and yet, last month was -- had one of the highest casualty rates for U.S. forces since the end of major combat. And most of those, at least it seems from the daily reports, come from some sort of explosion, roadside bomb or vehicle-borne bomb. So can you comment on the apparent discrepancy between those two sets of figures?

GEN. WEBSTER: First of all, I'm only talking about AO Baghdad and not the rest of the country. There are Marine and Army and coalition division commanders responsible for those other areas. But speaking of AO Baghdad, there were -- as you know, before we began operations on the 22nd of May, there were 14 car bombs in a single day. There was an average of 14 to 21 per week just prior to the 22nd of May. And since we've begun operations, we have cut those car bombs -- in Baghdad, again -- in half to roughly seven or eight per week.

Q Well, might I ask you, what are you doing that folks elsewhere in the country ought to be doing?

GEN. WEBSTER: We're conducting operations with our Iraqi security forces. We had a leg up, I believe, on the rest of the country's coalition forces in terms of having here the essence of several brigades in the Iraqi army before we started, and so that probably gave us a leg up on the other divisions for conducting operations. Other than that, I just say that the quality of our coalition soldiers and the quality of the Iraqi security forces that are developing has made it so that we were able to gather intelligence and conduct ops to bust up a number of cells that were delivering these car bombs.

Q Well -- wait -- but -- come on --

MR. WHITMAN: We're just about at the end of our time. Let's see if there's anybody else that has question.

Okay, I will let you finish with your third follow-up here.

Q Thank you.

General, the progress that you're reporting sounds like moving toward a military solution, so to speak, and yet we hear from various experts, up to and including the secretary, that what's really needed is a political solution. What are your thoughts on the balance between the two, a military solution to the insurgency or political? And what needs to be done?

GEN. WEBSTER: Well, I think the success that we are having -- you know, I was talking primarily about the military aspect of it, but I will also say that the Iraqi government is getting stronger all the time. And the faith of the -- the confidence of the Baghdad people in their government in the next year is overwhelmingly high. So there is a large political aspect of their confidence.

And also, as I move around the city, especially as I'm able to fly from neighborhood to neighborhood in moving between our brigades, it's easy to see that the city is prospering compared to what it was a year ago when I was last here. You can see that there is construction going on all around the city. Suburbs are expanding. There are lots of electrical appliances and lots of commerce going on on the streets. And that all shows you that there's hope for the future. And so the economic and political aspects of the solution are strong at work here in this capital city.

I might just close here with a real good-news story.

You know, there's been an awful lot of talk about our armor and the level of protection of our U.S. and coalition soldiers. Just a few days ago, it was on the 2nd of July, we had a patrol from the Louisiana National Guard Brigade, the 256 Brigade, that was out in their up-armored humvees conducting routine patrol and a search in one of the neighborhoods, looking for some IED makers.

And while they were out there conducting this patrol, off to the side of the road a sniper engaged one of our National Guard soldiers, part of this task force, hit him square in the middle of the chest, knocked him flat on his butt. The soldier quickly got up, pointed his weapon towards where the shot had come from, took cover, and then directed the rest of the patrol over towards where the snipers came from.

The rest of his patrol engaged those two snipers, wounding one, capturing both of them. And this soldier, who had been shot in the middle of his armor plate, is also a medic, and so he ended up, ironically, giving first aid to the soldier who -- correction -- the insurgent who had been wounded in taking down these two guys who had tried to kill him.

So it's a testament to our levels of training, our levels of effectiveness and the levels of protection that our soldiers from all components are currently getting. And I'd just like to say thanks to all the people responsible for providing us such great men and women and such great equipment. Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: With that, General, we'll bring this to a close. And again, we want to thank you for taking the time to spend it with us and to give us a view from the commanders' perspective on the ground, one that helps us with our situational awareness back here as we try to tell stories about it. So thank you again, and we hope to have you back in the briefing room sometime soon.

GEN. WEBSTER: I look forward to it, and my thanks to everybody back there for doing their jobs, too. Thank you.

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