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**Presenter: Major General Joseph J. Taluto, Commander,
Multinational Division North-Central Iraq, Commander, Task Force
Liberty**

**Friday, July 15, 2005 9:00 a.m.
EDT**

Defense Department Special Briefing on Security Operations in Baghdad

Via Video Conference From Iraq

BRYAN WHITMAN (Pentagon spokesman): Well, good morning.

General Taluto, can you hear me? This is Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon.

GEN. TALUTO: Yeah, I can hear you very well, Bryan.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you for joining us today. As everybody here knows from the announcement, that our briefer today is Major General Joseph Taluto, who is the commander of the Multinational North-Central -- Multinational Division North-Central, and commander of Task Force Liberty. He's also the division commander of the 42nd Infantry Division.

General Taluto and his troops are responsible for the ongoing security operations in the areas that include Balad, Kirkuk, Tikrit and Samarra. He's going to give us a brief operational update in his area, and then be prepared to take some questions from you. As usual, you can see him; he can't see us. So when we get to the questions, if you could just identify yourself, that would be helpful to him because he knows some of you, I think.

And with that, General, we'll let you get started.

GEN. TALUTO: Okay, thank you, Bryan.

And a very good day to all of you there in Washington. As commander of Multinational Division North-Central Iraq, I'm pleased to be here today with you and speak to the American people.

Before I take some questions, I want to take about five minutes and give you a brief overview of North-Central Iraq. Our area includes four very diverse provinces north of Baghdad with more than 6 million Iraqi citizens. Task Force Liberty represents nearly 23,000 soldiers who partner with our Iraqi counterparts across Kirkuk, Al Sulimaniyah, Diyala and Salahuddin provinces. Combined, our area is roughly the size of West Virginia.

Our mission here in North-Central Iraq remains the building of independent and self-sustaining Iraqi security forces as we maintain pressure on the insurgency. Our work is protecting the process that will allow Iraqis to develop their new government and build their own sustainable security forces.

Like the rest of the country, 2005 is a year of transition in North-Central Iraq. Since the January 30th elections, political debate is as important, if not more important, than military operations. Real dialogue has been established across North-Central Iraq. And while few have taken notice, Iraqi regional and local elections have been held successfully over the past weeks and months. Last month saw the local elections in cities' governments across Salahuddin province, a largely Sunni region. In Diyala province the transition of the governor's office in April marked one of the first peaceful transfers of power in Iraq in decades. In Kirkuk, the provincial council is seated and moving forward as the diverse groups learn to collaborate and compromise.

A large measure of our success is the transfer of responsibility to Iraqi security forces. In recent months I have seen the contribution of our Iraqi army partners rise dramatically. Iraqi units now conduct over half of the counterinsurgency fight. They do this either independently or jointly with our soldiers. With the Iraqi Ministry of Defense establishing a clear Iraqi chain of command, our soldiers are partnering to help develop the leadership from battalion to division level. North-Central Iraq has two Iraqi army division headquarters with five army brigades. All together, our partnership includes some 50,000 Iraqi police or border enforcement officers and army soldiers.

In the past few months, all of these units have made progress toward independent operations. The Iraqis' 5th Division's 2nd Brigade conducted operations in mid-June with Iraqi police near Buhritz. This is their seventh such operation. They successfully provided brigade-level command and control for Iraqi army units for multiple battalions. This is an example of what we're seeing.

The Iraqi brigade leadership and staff responded swiftly to information reported by local Iraqis, lending (sic) to the detention of more than two dozen suspects and seizing a sizable arms cache. Our estimate is that the Iraqi soldiers and police captured enough munitions that would manufacture 160 IEDs.

As Iraqi forces such as this grow more capable and independent, they gain greater control of North-Central Iraq. We see progress every day by witnessing the cooperation between Iraqi citizens and their security forces. We see this in the effectiveness of the city and provincial joint coordination centers, translated in Arabic as min ta mims (ph), or "places of help."

In the month of June, we saw more than 4,000 Iraqi citizens calling their coordination centers with information -- a sign of Iraqi confidence in their police and army forces and the cooperation of the Iraqi people to ensure their security. We see this progress in the aggressive attitude of brave Iraqi police officers and soldiers who train and fight to neutralize the insurgency. Our assessment is that the Iraqi security forces are greatly improved and are striving to get better every day.

While such progress has been made in all lines of operation, more remains to be done. There are a number of Iraqis and foreigners committed to preventing a new, permanent Iraqi government in North-Central Iraq. The majority of the insurgency in North-Central Iraq remains those Iraqis with ties to the former regime, or Sunni Arabs who reject their new sovereign government. Since our mission began in North-Central Iraq, we are seeing more of these Iraqis turning away from violence and participating in the political process. They know they can achieve much more as part of the process, not part of the problem.

A smaller element of the insurgency in North-Central Iraq is religious extremists and foreign terrorists. Their attacks show no regard for innocent lives, and their spectacular attacks have gained them little more than headlines in the past weeks. While killing hundreds of Iraqi civilians and a similar number of Iraqi police or

soldiers, they have failed to disrupt the progress in North-Central Iraq. The Iraqi government continues to move forward, police and army forces continue to grow stronger, and the Iraqi people refuse to bow before such intimidation. I can assure you their methods and goals are rejected by most Iraqis, and we remain committed and focused to helping our Iraqi partners neutralize them.

Progress in security means progress towards prosperity for the Iraqi people. Across North-Central Iraq, more than 950 businesses are registered with their local chamber of commerce, while business centers like the one in Kirkuk continue to seek new opportunities for economic growth. This summer also marks the completion of numerous reconstruction projects with approximately \$2 billion in total reconstruction projects across our area. Nine hundred projects are complete; 550 more are under way, and 450 more ready to start. From local schools to large-scale power plants, reconstruction is well under way in North Central Iraq.

In summary, Iraqis control and run their local and provincial governments in North-Central Iraq. Certainly we still provide security assistance where required, and that is to be expected. However, businesses are operating. Schools are open; children are receiving an education. And Iraqi security forces are providing internal security and are respected more every day. We know that our mission to defend their freedoms here is a vital part of defending our own freedoms.

With that, I'll be happy to take some of your questions.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you, General, for that overview.

And let's go ahead and start with Will here.

Q General, Will Dunham with Reuters. Could you characterize the strength of the insurgency in your region relative to the past? And what changes have you seen in it since roughly the beginning of May when there was an upsurge in insurgent violence around the country?

GEN. TALUTO: Okay the -- I would say that the insurgency in North-Central Iraq is at about a similar level to pre-election, but it has changed in its complexion. Our assessment is that many of the former regime or Sunni Arabs that were opposed to the new government and the new political process have fallen away. I think that has reduced. I think the religious extremists -- while they have not, in our view, in North-Central Iraq, grown -- they have coalesced a little bit more with national religious extremists like Ansar al-Sunnah, you know, getting involved with QJBR activities, and they are responsible for the spike in suicide bomb attacks in North-Central Iraq.

Our attacks in direct fire and indirect fire have reduced over time. And going back to last year to this year, those types and forms of attack have been reduced significantly. And those are the attacks that some of the Iraqis -- Sunni Arab rejectionists or former regime elements were conducting. The suicide bomb, of course, is the weapon of choice now for all the purposes that you know.

MR. WHITMAN: Okay.

Bob.

Q General, this is Bob Burns with Associated Press. You mentioned in your opening remarks the importance of transferring responsibility to Iraqi security forces, and you said there's been progress in that area. As you look ahead, could you say how soon you think the Iraqi security forces will be able to operate in full control without U.S. support in one or more of the four provinces in your area?

GEN. TALUTO: Well, we have made good progress in that area. I would be reluctant to put a timetable

on it. All I can -- because I think from an operational standpoint we stand pretty close to the vest with how ready a force is to assume control. Let me just say this. We have made steady progress toward that end state, moving in that direction at a very acceptable rate, in my opinion, and it is satisfying the people I work for, where we're going with this.

I think that many of those, as I said in my opening remarks -- Iraqi security forces are already conducting over half of the operations that we do. They're either involved with us or they're doing things with minimal coalition support. And that's a huge -- that's a huge accomplishment.

What we need to really continue to make this go in a good direction -- where they can be independent -- is we need the sustainability of the capabilities that they have. They're doing very well with personnel; they're able to sustain that. But we got to work through some of those other things that will hurt your readiness, those things like the maintenance and equipping issues and other things that you need to be able to sustain over time to be able to say that you can stand up. So we have to continually evaluate, you know, how that sustainment process is going.

MR. WHITMAN: Go to Pamela.

Q General, this is Pam Hess with UPI. I'm actually coming out there in a couple of weeks, and I'll look forward to talking to you in person a little bit more about this. Would you give us some more detail on Ansar al-Sunna and that -- the coalition you see building between them and Zarqawi? And would you also talk about whether Iraqis calling in with tips are able to give information on those kinds of organizations, or are they more focused on the former regime elements, Sunni rejectionists?

GEN. TALUTO: Okay. As you know, Ansar al-Sunna has been around for some time. They're not new to the area. And they're, I think, trying to assert themselves, you know, to become more visible and to have a greater impact on what's going on. Our -- personally, we feel that they can't really get the kind of traction they need, so they're kind of riding in on the QJBR-IO, if you will, information- type train to give themselves more visibility.

So I think there's a -- you know, we don't know to what level this coalescence is, frankly. How much they're really cooperating with each other. I wouldn't think it is a -- it's a great, you know, well-designed organization. I think there is contact and I think there's probably sharing of information and then possibly sharing of resources. So that's on that side of the house.

The second part of your question was on the calls, and I'm glad you asked that question. We think that's very significant. As the May and June timeframe -- as the insurgency will do, it will spike from time to time. And it's always -- it is spiking in concert with some of that that's going on here in Iraq, because they need to try to, you know, negate or delegitimize what's happening.

During that period of time, we saw the phone calls go up a great deal. You know, 150 percent increase in phone calls into these JCCs. And they take on all forms of information. And they're not just phone calls. I might add that we have walk-up tips where people come right up to not just their own security forces -- they come up to coalition forces. They do not normally -- they point out things that they see wrong, and it's hard to judge -- they're not in tune with religious extremists or Sunni Arab rejectionists. They see things that they don't like. For example, they point out caches -- almost eight out of the 10 caches we find now are pointed out to us by Iraqis. They'll point out, and have pointed out cars that look suspicious to them. They'll report cars that are parked, you know, on the side of the road or in a city that they don't like. You know, that car can be affiliated with a religious extremist group that's put it out there.

So they just report what they see, and we're very heartened by that because, frankly, that is becoming

more prevalent and the Iraqi security forces are taking care of more things from end to end. And I can give you an example of that very quickly.

There was a vehicle-borne IED that was parked in Kirkuk in a very busy market area. Citizens saw the car parked. They thought it was strange. They reported it to the local police that are there in Kirkuk on the street. The police reacted to that, cordoned off the area, brought in their own EOD team, had the car inspected, and sure enough, it was rigged for explosion. They defused it, they got rid of the vehicle-borne IED, and they reported it out to their media.

There wasn't one coalition soldier involved in that event, and all we did was monitor it. And that is happening more frequently.

Q Just a follow-up. What is this acronym QJBR?

GEN. TALUTO: I knew you would -- somebody was going to ask me that question. I thought you were all used to that acronym. I don't know what the Arabic meaning is, but it stands for the land between the rivers -- al Qaeda -- you know, jihad in land between the rivers. That's what it stands for.

Q That happened in Kirkuk, that car bomb?

GEN. TALUTO: The vehicle-borne incident I just described to you was in Kirkuk.

Q When was it? What month?

GEN. TALUTO: It just happened here in -- actually, it was on the 10th of July. I got it down here in front of me.

MR. WHITMAN: Let's go over here to Brian.

Q Hi, General. Brian Hartman with ABC News. I just wanted to go back to something you said earlier because I might be just a little slow here. But you said that the insurgency is about similar to where it was pre-election; the former regime elements and the Sunnis have fallen away, but the religious extremists have not grown.

How can things be staying the same when half the insurgency has sort of dropped off and the other half has stayed the same? Can you give me a little better picture of what you think the contours and size of the insurgency is right now?

GEN. TALUTO: I didn't think -- I don't think I said that I thought the religious extremists had grown, I thought they had coalesced, meaning that there was more cooperation or passing of information between a variety of groups. So I want to clarify that.

I think -- you know, I'm quantifying that for -- frankly, in the context of levels of attacks. While direct fire and indirect fire have been reduced in North-Central, we're seeing more suicide vehicle-borne IEDs of late. So there's some trade-off there. Of course the suicide vehicle-borne IEDs are mostly against innocent civilians, against soft targets -- Iraqi security forces, police and army soldiers in static positions. And so therefore, they're still trying to disrupt the process, they're still trying to intimidate people; they're trying to intimidate Iraqi security forces. These are the things that have been going on in North-Central Iraq for some time now. Of course, they failed to intimidate the people during the election time frame, and they're not doing it now. So in that aspect, I just think that we maintain pressure on the insurgency. I don't think it has grown. I don't know that I could say that it has been reduced significantly, because we still see these level of suicide attacks, but it doesn't mean it's

done by a lot of people. It's hard to quantify.

Q General, this is Vicky O'Hara with National Public Radio. I wonder if you could give us a general breakdown of the ethnic makeup of the Iraqi security forces in your area. And my follow-up question to that is, do you have enough Sunnis among the Iraqi security forces to be trusted to handle security in Sunni areas? In other words, avoiding a bloodbath by turning things over to Shi'a.

GEN. TALUTO: Right. The mix of our army forces kind of mirror the community that they work in. The majority of the Iraqi army forces in North-Central Iraq were formerly the ING. Those units were raised from areas -- community areas, like you would have a national guard. And a lot of that has maintained itself. But we have mixed throughout the force, even in -- if you're in a Sunni area, we will have some Shi'a soldiers in there because there are Shi'a that live in the area and they wanted to join the army, and they certainly can join the army.

So we have a good mix of forces, but as you would expect, if you're in Salahuddin Province, which is 80 percent Sunni, most of the soldiers are Sunni Arabs; but there are Shi'a in there, and there would be some Kurdish. If you go over to the Kirkuk Province, you're probably going to see more Kurdish soldiers and you'll see Sunni Arab soldiers because the western part of Kirkuk Province is Sunni Arab. And so they kind of mirror the demographics of the area that they work in.

MR. WHITMAN: Jim?

Q Sir, Jim Garamone with AFPS. There are two Iraqi divisions in your area. Are the commanders actually exercising command and control of their units? And how do they fit in with your unit and the chain of command that way?

GEN. TALUTO: Okay. Good question. The -- right now, the Iraqi division headquarters is not conducting operational control of the subordinate units -- the brigades and the battalions. They have administrative control. So they are learning -- first of all, they are putting their organizations together, very complex to be able to manage a division. They're developing their staffs, they're developing the process of how to work the staff. And they're doing so with administrative activities. And as a division commander, I can tell you that what division headquarters do is that they provide resources and manage the force, and that's a great deal of their work.

So they manage personnel, they manage their pay, they manage their logistical status, and they're doing a lot of that right now. They're not yet directing operational, you know, missions. And that's all part of the process. And that's going to take them, you know, somewhat longer. They're not going to be in a position to do that for a while. But, you know, some are making faster progress than others of the two that we have.

So it -- again, it's conditions-based; it's how well the brigades are doing, how well the battalions are doing, what the threat level is, how the governance is in the area. A lot of these things have to be put together before one could decide that yes, in fact, this division commander can run this particular battle space.

Did that answer your question?

Q Yes, it did. Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: Let's go over here.

Q General, this is Scott Foster with NBC News. The foreign fighters in the area, where are they coming from? And what are you doing to stop them?

GEN. TALUTO: The foreign fighters -- the only thing that I could tell you about where they're coming from -- we have arrested or detained around 33 foreign fighters in the time we've been here. That's not a huge amount. They have been of many different ethnicities or -- you know, we have Egyptians, Sudanese, Syrian, Saudi -- to lesser extent, the Egyptians and the Sudanese seem to have -- we have detained more of those than we have the others. Where they're coming from, you know, those are the countries that they're from. You know, where they're living and how they're getting in here is all a matter of, you know, information -- intelligence information. So, you know, that's my best answer on that.

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

Q Could you put some numbers -- it's Pam Hess again. Would you put numbers on the suicide bombers? We were recently briefed in Baghdad the numbers are actually going down, but we don't have any baseline for your area. So could you tell us where they were and where they've gone to now?

GEN. TALUTO: We have experienced about, on average, prior to the election, around five to eight a month. We had -- as the election came closer -- and I was here, although not in command -- there was a spike up, you know, that reached above those numbers; up, you know, 11, 12. We had -- in May and June we had a spike in suicide vehicle bombers up in the 15 range. Now, our assessment of that is that we had a bunch of things going on in the theater. There were very aggressive operations going on in Mosul, there were aggressive operations going on in west in al Qaim with the Marines, there very aggressive operations going on in Baghdad with a squeeze play. And as is the case -- and I know General Casey said this, and I've heard many people say it, and it is true, you can squeeze them and they will move around. And it's not meaning that because we had a spike up in suicide vehicle-borne IEDs, one would not want to jump to the conclusion that that means we've had a significant new in-growth of foreign fighters.

So, for the record, it is the 15th of July, and the last I knew, we only had two vehicle -- suicide vehicle-borne IEDs in July. Again, that's our assessment of why they spiked up. But that's about the level of suicide vehicle-borne IEDs that we've witnessed.

MR. WHITMAN: Will?

Q General, Will Dunham with Reuters. Mindful of the recent incident in which numerous children were wounded, is the U.S. military taking any steps intended to reduce the chances of child casualties?

GEN. TALUTO: Are you referring to the incident in Baghdad here where they ran into the humvee where the children were around?

Q Yes.

GEN. TALUTO: Well, we have not received any special orders at all. But clearly, you know, the insurgents, the suicide bomber, the murderer is the one that chooses the place and the time to do these things. It is difficult, when you're going about your work day in and day out, you're vigilant -- and I assure you that the soldiers are constantly vigilant on what their posture is, and so on and so forth, especially in this environment. But you're in a large area. As I expressed, you know, we're in an area the size of West Virginia. You get eight vehicle-borne -- suicide vehicle-borne IEDs in a month. The percentages of this happening in one particular place or another, what is that percentage?

So, I mean, these things will happen to you, because they pick the place and the time, they pick the vulnerable target, and they're the ones that are killing the innocent, you know, people. How do you stay away from it? We've had suicide bombers, you know, step up to do a suicide bombing in front of a bank where people

were going in to cash their paychecks, knowing that they were going to be there, and just walk into that crowd and kill a bunch of innocent civilians who had their children with them.

MR. WHITMAN: General, I think we've reached the end of our time, unfortunately. We really do appreciate you taking the time, though, to spend it with us and to give us a better understanding of what's going on in your area. And we wish you the best and hope that you will come back via the modern means of technology to us real soon.

GEN. TALUTO: I appreciate it. And thank you for what you do.

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