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**Presenter: Major General Stephen T. Johnson, USMC, commander,  
Multinational Forces West And II Marine Expeditionary Force**

**Friday, July 22, 2005 9:00 a.m.  
EDT**

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### Defense Department Special Briefing

(Note: The general appears via video conference from Iraq.)

BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): General Johnson, this is Bryan Whitman. Can you hear me?

GEN. JOHNSON: Bryan, I can hear you fine.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, good morning, and thank you all here in the press -- in the briefing studio for joining us this morning. And General, thank you for joining us.

Our briefer today is Major General Stephen T. Johnson. He is the commander of the II Marine Expeditionary Force Forward and commander of the Multinational Forces West. General Johnson and his forces are responsible for the ongoing operations in western Iraq, including the cities of Fallujah and Ar Ramadi. He's going to provide us with a brief operational update of what's going on in his area of responsibility and then is going to entertain some questions from you.

We've got a good picture of you here, General. As a reminder to the press corps here, while we can see General Johnson, he can't see us, so if you'd just identify yourself when it comes time to the questions.

And with that, General Johnson, why don't I turn it over to you and you can start us off.

GEN. JOHNSON: Okay. Thank you. Good afternoon to all of you.

Before we get into some of your questions, I'd like to take a few minutes to lay the groundwork about who we are and what we're doing here. Multinational Force West is comprised of a number of different forces built around, as Bryan said, II Marine Expeditionary Force. But we're very grateful and pleased to have the support of soldiers, sailors and airmen from a number of our -- from all of our different services and our coalition forces. All of it together is aggregated as Multinational Force West.

Our area of operation encompasses the provinces of Al Anbar, Karbala and Najaf. The population in those provinces is about 2-1/2 million people. And they're focused in roughly the 300 miles of the Euphrates River Valley that runs from up -- from down near Najaf, up to Karbala, west of Fallujah, Ramadi and even further

west, to the Syrian border and the Jordanian border. That's a huge area, as you can tell if you look at a map, and various different types of vegetation and not -- and -- but generally very harsh.

For the citizens of those provinces, the period following the January 2005 elections has been one of considerable progress, in my view. Through an increasingly Iraqi-led partnership, a security environment is being created that fosters the development and growth of governments and ultimately a healthy economy for the Iraqis in this diverse and very difficult region.

There's been some challenges, certainly, and progress has been slow at times, but it's still progress, nonetheless, in my opinion. And we're also seeing a lot of evidence that the people of the region are getting very tired of the violence, the intimidation, the murder, and those things that are brought to them by the insurgents, and they want something better.

Multinational Force West's mission is to create a security environment that facilitates the development of the Iraqi security forces and enables the support of the growth of Iraqi self-governance and self-reliance. With that in mind, we currently have approximately 30,000 U.S., Azerbaijani and Bosnian coalition forces, and we're partnered with and train with and fight with 10,000 -- approximate -- Iraqi soldiers. There's 10,000 today, and there'll probably be more -- there will be more in the future.

In addition, in our area we have new emerging police forces. They've been vetted; they've been trained, and they're starting to report now to various cities throughout the region. In addition to that, we are involved in construction of police forts in the cities, continuing to try to give the police forces a secure facility and a place from which they can conduct operations and support their communities.

Through a steadily strengthening partnership, the capability and competence of the Iraqi soldiers is improving, and they continue to play an increasingly important role in all the operations that we do, and in some cases recently, even taken the lead in some smaller operations.

The efforts of this coalition and Iraqi team have set the conditions for positive change in growth in this area of operations. All three of our provinces have active, elected provincial councils, and they're stepping forward and actively taking part in the reconstruction of their communities and the growth process. Many of our key cities have elected mayors and elected councils. More are scheduled to hold elections in the coming months. These municipalities are seeking political solutions to their problems. They're engaging the systems, and they're also providing services to their people.

Despite the inherent danger of the insurgent retaliation, throughout these three provinces we have religious, tribal and political leaders urging their followers to step up and vote in the upcoming referendums and also the elections. Ar Ramadi, the provincial capital of Al Anbar province, has aggressively taken the lead in improving the essential services to its citizens and tackling some of the serious reconstruction challenges. The current governor took office without hesitation following the kidnapping and death of his predecessors at the hands of insurgents, and insurgent activity has not deterred him from what he sees as his duty.

The city of Fallujah, likewise a site of a significant defeat of insurgent forces in November, and its progress since then has become a symbol of Iraqi perseverance and determination and a symbol for really what's possible in the future of Iraq, I believe. Even with insurgents attempting to reenter the city of Fallujah, it continues to grow. They have a democratically elected city council, and with assistance from Baghdad, they're aggressively pursuing reconstruction efforts and working towards improving the quality of life for their citizens and the community.

In closing, we're increasingly seeing Iraqis take the forefront in their country, and coalition support forces continue to support them in a number of ways. Local grassroots support for upcoming -- for the upcoming

constitutional events is on the rise, and Iraqis are feeling more and more empowered to take their place in this new nation.

And in closing, I've got to tell you that I'm -- after my brief four months here, I'm optimistic about the future of this country. I see optimism in a number of places -- in the Iraqi security forces and in their emergence over the last four months, and their willingness and enthusiasm and dedication to stepping up to the plate. I see optimism in the fact that the people have accomplished a lot in what I think is a short period time, under very difficult circumstances, and they want something better. They want progress.

And I also think that we see optimism very clearly in the eyes and the faces and the actions of our countrymen who come over here to serve and to fight with and to support this emerging nation. When you go out and see these young people -- every day -- doing the hard things that they do, doing the selfless things that they do, you can't help but be optimistic about the future.

So with those comments, I'm prepared for your questions.

MR. WHITMAN: General, thank you very much for that overview, and we'll go ahead and get started here, and start with you, Charlie.

Q General, Charlie Aldinger with Reuters. The Syrians -- we have a story out of Damascus yesterday that Syrians are claiming, in a letter sent to different embassies, that U.S. and Iraqi troops have fired at Syrian border guards across the border. They're not clear on how, when, where, or how, they just say -- they seem to suggest that these border guards, the Syrians, were behind dirt berms or something. Have you anything on that? Any cross-border fire involving Syrian forces and U.S. and Iraqi forces?

GEN. JOHNSON: Charlie, I haven't seen that article, and I certainly haven't had any recent reports of any cross-border firing at those sites up there in our area of responsibility. We'd had a couple in the past, but they've been investigated, and we were unable to determine where the violence came from. But nothing on this latest incident that you speak of.

Q How long ago, sir, were the previous incidents?

GEN. JOHNSON: It's been -- so, it's been -- it was right after we got here, and that was in March.

Q Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: Burns, go ahead. Go ahead.

Q General, this is Bob Burns with Associated Press. You mentioned briefly Fallujah. I didn't quite catch what you said about returning insurgents. Could you give us a picture of to what degree that is a situation that troubles you? And also, the return of the residents of Fallujah -- how far along are you in returning the city to normalcy?

GEN. JOHNSON: Well, I'll take the second part of your question first, Bob. I think the population now is roughly about 150,000. I think a lot of people have returned there to their homes. We've stopped kind of tracking that. Early on, there was some tracking going on of how many people were coming back and in and out every day. We stopped doing that because life is back to -- getting back to normal there.

There's commerce starting again; there's reconstruction going on with the monies that the Iraqi government has provided to help the people restore their homes and businesses. There is -- the schools are open, there's -- I mentioned to the reconstruction. So really those businesses -- life is coming back to Fallujah.

They elected their city council and a mayor, and so the fact that there are reports of insurgents coming back into town -- that's probably normal.

Fallujah was the site of a fairly significant crushing defeat for them, it's a symbol for the insurgents. And it's probably logical that they would attempt to come back. It's also a symbol for the Iraqi people of success, progress, and that's what the insurgent wants to take away. So we're not going to let them do that, and the Iraqi people are not going to let them do that. So I don't see that -- it's certainly not a problem right now.

Q Sir, Gordon Trowbridge from the Army Times papers. I wanted to ask you about a couple of items that your predecessors from I MEF were dealing with, and progress that you have may have made on those items since then. The first on Fallujah: 1MEF folks were very interested in getting sewer, water and electrical services back up and running in the city. Wonder if you can give us an overview on how that is going? And also you mentioned briefly the police forces in Anbar province. I MEF basically had to disband the police, particularly in Ramadi. Wonder if you could talk a little bit more about trying to rebuild that, and what progress you might've made in that area?

GEN. JOHNSON: Okay. The first question was the progress that's been made for on the -- some of the services in the infrastructure in Fallujah. A considerable amount of money's been spent on some of the improvements; somewhere in the neighborhood of -- I want to say \$55 million has been invested in water improvement projects and so forth. The water lines have been hooked up, there is -- the water lines are charged, and the only thing that remains to be done is to get the water from the main lines into the people's houses. That's what's ongoing now, trying to get that work done, because the infrastructure that was there was pretty rudimentary, and some of it was destroyed. So that's on track.

Also, electricity -- large portions of the city have electricity back. There is electricity in the lines. And again, the main -- not concern but the main effort right now is to get the transformers and get the electric from the pole into the people's houses. That's one of the responsibilities of the local government. They're working on that. They got local crews working it, and it's moving along successfully right now.

With respect to -- so there's the second -- second part was --

Q Police forces.

GEN. JOHNSON: Police forces. Right. As you pointed out, I MEF discovered that a lot of the police forces were not suitable. They were actually working against us, against the coalition forces in many ways. There was a lot of corruption. And for the most part, they were -- all the police were pretty much let go.

Since that time, we've started to send -- screen. There was a rigorous screening process put together by the Iraqi government. They've chosen new candidates. We've sent them to school. They've gone to school in a major school in Jordan. We also run police academies here in Al Anbar province.

Right now there's about close to 400 police that have gone through this program and are back in the streets in Fallujah and in the surrounding area. We got a ways to go on that, but the schoolhouses are filled, the vetting process continues, and this -- police will make a major difference in the environment, in the security of the environment of these communities. So we're eager to support the Iraqis in this effort.

MR. WHITMAN: Let's go here to Joe.

Q General, this is Joe Tabet from Al Hurra TV. Let's go back to -- about the Syrian-Iraqi border, how could you describe the situation now on the Syrian-Iraqi border? And what about the Syrian request to install a radar monitoring system and night vision system on the border? And request was refused by the coalition.

Could you tell us why?

GEN. JOHNSON: Could you repeat the last part of your question? I didn't understand the system that you were talking about.

Q General, I told you that there is a Syrian request to install a radar monitoring system and night vision system on the border. And this request was refused by the coalition.

GEN. JOHNSON: Okay. I have no knowledge of what that -- that request from one government to another. I don't know anything about that, haven't heard anything about it.

And the first part of the question was about the border in general. That's a huge border up there. We have approximately 1,100 kilometers of border in our area and in the area that we -- the border of the Al Anbar province. We recognize that it is porous, that there are people who come across there, smuggling and so forth. And that's why the Iraqis are very interested in restoring control of their border. We're supporting them in that effort in a number of different ways: through training, through construction, through transportation. We're trying to get -- help them get control of their side of the border.

And also I know the Iraqi government and the U.S. government are asking the Syrian government to redouble its effort on its own side of the border.

Q Just to follow up, is there any monitoring system, a radar monitoring system on the border or night vision system now?

GEN. JOHNSON: I have no comment on that right now.

Q We can say no?

GEN. JOHNSON: I'm not going to comment on the security aspects of the border. The specific question that you asked me about earlier I have no knowledge of. And I'm not going to comment on what is out there or not out there in terms of security equipment.

MR. WHITMAN: Julian.

Q General, Julian Barnes from U.S. News and World Report. I wondered if you could comment on what percentage or give us a sense of how many of the 10,000 Iraqi soldiers you have that can operate on their own without the direct supervision of your Marines?

GEN. JOHNSON: Well, right now we don't -- we are still in the fairly early stage of partnering with the Iraqi forces that are assigned to us. Al Anbar was one of the -- was a little bit later in getting some of the influx of some of the newer Iraqi forces. So we've only been at it for a few months, and at this point in time, we don't have any forces that are ready to stand up and conduct independent operations on their own. But that's okay because they're making great progress in their development.

We have them -- all of our army forces partnered with Marine or U.S. Army forces. And in the last six or eight weeks, we have started to see some great results from this partnering and from the training and from the efforts of the Iraqi soldiers. We've had them in a number of operations; we've taken -- they've been in the combat with our forces, side by side. They fought bravely, they fought effectively, and they've bled for their own country.

Moreover, we've now gotten to the point where our confidence in them and they in us and their training,

and we're able to put -- we've put them -- what we call strong points; we've left behind strong points in various cities after these major operations. A strong point consists of a unit of Iraqis and its unit of -- its partnered unit. They stay there even after the bulk of the forces have pulled out. What that does is establish a presence in the city. And we're getting great results from that. We're getting an increase in tips on what goes on. Just the other day we got one in one city where they identified a man as he was going to get into a car that had an IED in it. And were it not for the security forces being there, we wouldn't have -- they recognized something that the other folks there didn't. So they're getting better intel, more tips, and I think there's a greater confidence that comes when the people see their own forces partnered up like a good cop on the street. I think they appreciate that and it provides confidence.

So we're making great progress in these security forces, and we intend to continue to work that way. But this summer, by the end of the summer, we'll have an Iraqi division here in Al Anbar, and then, later on in the fall, greater numbers of forces will come in as their training is completed.

Q General, just as a quick follow-up, based on the progress that you're seeing, do you anticipate that by next year you will be in a position to recommend that the American forces can sort of shift their bounds and have fewer American infantry and rifle companies, and more logistics and advisor units that are primarily focused on aiding the Iraqis?

GEN. JOHNSON: I believe that's a fair statement. Next year, in 2006, by then some of the forces that are here now I believe will be ready to assume battle space on their own. And some of the forces that will -- that we will be fortunate to have partnered with us in the fall, I think later on, in 2006, they will step up to the plate after they've had time to train and mature and be able to do the same. So I think your statement is fair. I'm not going to get into the numbers and so forth. But that certainly is very probable.

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead.

Q Sir, Gordon Trowbridge again from Army Times. You mentioned preparations for elections. Anbar was sort of a trouble spot during January's voting, very low turnout, and disorganization with the Iraqi electoral commission. I wonder if you could talk about, first, what if any coordination you're doing with the electoral commission to resolve some of its logistical problems from the last time, and second, if you have any goals in terms of turnout or participation for October's election in Anbar.

GEN. JOHNSON: Well, I'll take the last part of your question first. My goal is to ensure that there is a safe place for people to go and cast their ballot in the referendum and also the election.

We haven't put a big -- we haven't a put a number on it. We are planning for -- based on population, we're planning for a good turnout, but we haven't put a number on it or set a goal on that yet.

The fact that the folks in this province did not vote in January's election is well-known. And -- but I think that'll change this time, for a couple of reasons. One is that I believe the people have seen that that was probably a major mistake, that the train left the station and they weren't on it. And they learned that that process is very important.

The anecdotal information and the man in the street interviews are that when you talk to folks, virtually everyone tells you that yes, people will vote in this election.

I think also that there is greater confidence among the people in the cities, in the major population centers now, in the governments that they have elected, the local governments that they have elected and in the security forces that are here and will be here by the time the election ends. That confidence translates into willingness to vote, I believe.

And the third thing I guess I should add is that the -- as I pointed out earlier, a number of the leaders, tribal leaders, the religious leaders and the political leaders have all come on the -- come up on the 'net and said, "Hey, this is -- we need to vote. You need to get out, and you can't complain if you don't want to vote. If you don't vote, you can't complain" -- that type of thing. And I think that you'll see a very fine turnout in Al Anbar province for the referendum.

MR. WHITMAN: AI?

Q General, it's Al Pessin with Voice of America. I wanted to try to get a little more granularity on some of the earlier answers you gave. First, about the 10,000 troops, are all of them operating up to the level that you described in your answer to Julian, or if not all, can you give us an idea as to what percentage are able to operate at that level?

And with regard to the police, you gave the figure of 400. Was that just for Fallujah? And you said more would be coming in and that would have a big impact. When are they coming? And how many?

GEN. JOHNSON: The second part of your question first. That was -- pertained to Fallujah. And we have -- there's a sequence of about -- I think it is about 250 every so many weeks, every three weeks, I believe. And there's a -- we have a schedule between now and January -- or, I'm sorry, between now and November, I believe. And by then they'll have the number that they're supposed to have. So that grows every week, or about every three weeks, I think, as they complete the cycle and another group comes out.

In answer to your question about the 10,000, that's roughly, right now, the better part of an Iraqi division. And they're at various stages of training. A couple of the brigades have been with us for some time, and they're at a different stage of training, a little higher stage, and a couple of others are at a lesser stage. So it doesn't apply across the board. Certainly we're not operating -- all of those forces are not operating in our operations, but the better trained ones are. It's a question of -- there's a number of things, not only when they were formed up and when they joined here, but also leadership and training, and so forth. So they're all coming along at a different pace.

Q Sir, just to make sure I understood that last answer correctly, do you anticipate having a complete police force for Anbar by November?

GEN. JOHNSON: No. No, that was not for Anbar, that would be -- the comments that I was making about the police dealt with Fallujah, the city of Fallujah. So Fallujah is a city in Al Anbar. The security situation in Al Anbar as a whole needs to mature a little bit more before we can start introducing police in other places. We have a plan for that, and when the conditions are a little more conducive to that, we'll go ahead and that program will begin. But right now they're going through -- the government is going through a -- the Iraqi government is going through a process of vetting and doing a quality control check on those who want to apply for working in the police forces.

So my comments were directed at Fallujah. All of Al Anbar is a little different.

Q Thank you.

Q General, Julian Barnes here again. Can you tell me a little bit about the Marines' efforts to stop the flow of foreign fighters and potential suicide bombers across Western Iraq to Baghdad?

GEN. JOHNSON: Like I pointed out earlier, we are working very closely with the Iraqi -- the border defense forces, which are the Iraqis' border guards, if you will. We are very much involved in training with them,

in supporting their construction of border forts. We have people -- we have Marines and soldiers who are partnered up with the battalions of border security forces. And we're helping them to grow the force that they need and the facilities that they need to guard their border.

As I pointed out, it's a huge undertaking and it's going to take a little time to get this -- to grow the force to the size that it needs to be to do it. So we're involved very heavily with that.

Also, again I point out that you don't necessarily have to be on the border, necessarily sitting on the border to guard the border. And a number of the operations that we've been involved in, either as a coalition force or as coalition forces and Iraqi forces, have been designed to deny and defeat some of these forces that have come across the border illegally, before they can get to some of the areas further to the east.

So those are two examples of things that we're doing to defeat the people that come in illegally for no good reasons, and head east to do things that catch the eye of the press and so forth in the big major metropolitan areas.

MR. WHITMAN: Got time for one more, I think.

Q General, this is Bob Burns again from AP. In the report that the Defense Department sent to Congress yesterday describing progress in Iraq, it was mentioned that the border guards -- the Iraqi border guards -- that there's a problem there with infiltration of insurgents into the border force. Could you give us your assessment of the degree to which that's a problem, and whether you can do anything about it?

GEN. JOHNSON: I believe that from the experience that we've had with the Iraqi border security forces out there, that the officers running that for the Iraqi side are very -- are competent officers; they're experienced. But I think over time, when they get enough training, enough facilities and the right equipment, that they will be able to make a difference in the amount of things that get smuggled across the border.

Right now, there's still -- they still have a long way to go to seal off the border or to grow those facilities along the border. There hasn't been anybody out there for a long time. So they have their work cut out for them. The border -- its security forces, I think it's going to take some time and training for them. They too are pretty new to the business. They've been recruited, sent to some fundamental training, and then sent on out there. And it's going to require more training for them, too.

Over time, I think you'll see the results will improve, and that they will get better and get more proficient, and surely be able to make a difference in controlling their own borders.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, General, we've reached the end of our time. We really do appreciate you taking this time, though, to be with us. And it really helps us back here understand what's going on in your part of the world right now. So thank you very much, and we wish you the best, and hope to see you again very soon in this briefing room.

GEN. JOHNSON: All right. Thank you very much.

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