



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

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Presenter: Larry Di Rita, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs and U.S. Army Brigadier General Carter Ham, Commander, Multinational Brigade-Northwest

**Wednesday, August 3, 2005 11:06 a.m.
EDT**

Defense Department Regular Briefing

MR. DI RITA: Good morning. I first want to welcome General Ham back down to the briefing room. He's been down here a couple of times in his new iteration in the joint staff -- not so new any longer. We welcome him, and we welcome you sir, and we're grateful for you being available.

I wanted to draw your attention to a release you'll be seeing soon from the Multinational Force Iraq. Some of you may already have seen it -- that reports that the Joint Commission for Conditions-Based Transition that we discussed last week -- Ambassador Khalilzad had a press briefing in Baghdad on the 23rd of July -- held its first meeting today, the 2nd of August. They developed a work plan on how they're going to conduct their activities. They'll meet -- they'll have a smaller working group that will meet twice weekly. They expect to report back to Prime Minister Ja'afari with recommendations by the 26th of September. Participants -- membership in the commission -- just as a reminder, includes the minister of Interior, the minister of Defense, the national security advisor of Iraq, Ambassador Khalilzad, the U.K. ambassador to Iraq, and the commander of the Multinational Force in Iraq. So it's a senior-level commission that meets -- that will discuss the way forward in a way that has been going on at various levels for quite some time.

But it's an attempt, and a good one -- initiative for the Iraqi government, the transitional government to help focus the development of the ministries a little bit better and to develop a work plan going forward. So it's a useful exercise. As I said, they agreed to meet at a working-group level twice a week. And I think we'll be seeing more activity out of them as we move forward, and I wanted to just draw your attention to it. You'll see a release. And maybe some of you have already seen it.

General Ham I don't know -- if you have a couple comments; then we can take some questions.

GEN. HAM: I do, thank you sir.

This morning at about 06:30 local time in Iraq, a mounted U.S. Marine element operating near Hadithah was attacked by an explosive device. Initial reports are that 15 personnel were killed in the attack: 14 United States Marines and one interpreter. One Marine was wounded and has subsequently been medically evacuated from the scene. Multinational Force West, which you know is the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Force Forward, is investigating this incident. Notification of next of kin is underway, but has not yet been completed. The attack this morning occurred in the same general area as an attack, which occurred yesterday in which six U.S.

Marines were killed.

Our thoughts and prayers this morning are with those Marines and their families; with the family of Mr. Steven Vincent, who was murdered in Basra, and with all our servicemen and women serving at home and around the globe in this war on terrorism.

Thanks.

MR. DI RITA: Thank you, sir.

Charlie?

Q General, I wonder if you could -- could you give us any detail at all on the attack? For instance, what kind of vehicle was it? Was it apparently an improvised mine that it ran over? Or was the blast from the side? And we understand that those killed were members of the same Marine battalion based in Ohio that -- who were killed on Monday.

GEN. HAM: The attack of course occurred just a few hours ago, so --

Q I understand --

GEN. HAM: So the investigation is ongoing. The information is very preliminary at this state. It would be premature to talk about the specific unit that is involved until the next-of-kin notification process is underway and completed.

I can tell you that they were -- it was a unit that was moving in an amphibious assault vehicle, which is their normal vehicle to move in. It is an armored vehicle that they use in the conduct of their normal operations.

Q Again, was it -- do you have any information on whether it was a mine, improvised mine? In other words, was it rolled over, or was the thing from the side?

GEN. HAM: The report this morning only is that it was an explosive device, so -- not yet sure of whether it was a mine or whether it was command-detonated. We just don't know those details yet.

Q General, what do these attacks over the past couple of days, in which 20 -- actually, 21 Marines were killed, because there was another Marine from that same unit who was killed by an IED two days ago -- what does that say about the state of insurgency in that region? What information do you have about the status of the insurgents, what they're up to there, and what the U.S. Marine Corps has been trying to do over the past couple of months in trying to root them out?

GEN. HAM: Well, it is, I think, very important to always remember that this is a very lethal and unfortunately adaptive enemy that we are faced with inside Iraq.

It's important, I think, to put this in a larger context: that if you look along the Euphrates River and the number of towns and villages along the river that have previously been locations from which insurgents have operated. Multinational Force West is conducting a number of operations in a number of those towns simultaneously, in an effort to deny the enemy freedom of movement, to deny them safe haven.

And so I think what we're seeing here is a concerted effort to assert control -- ultimately Iraqi control in those towns, and there's resistance that is coming from the insurgents in those towns.

Perhaps previously they may have had an opportunity to move. For example, if there was pressure in Hadithah, they could perhaps move someplace else. Well, now because of the simultaneity of operations that Multinational Force West is conducting, they don't have that freedom of movement, and I think that's one of the contributing causes to this -- to these number of direct contacts that are occurring.

Q But because of the U.S. military operations, has their ability to operate there been diminished? Given the events over the past couple of days, it doesn't appear to be the case.

GEN. HAM: Absolutely not. I mean, the Marines and all the personnel of Multinational Force West are conducting these operations specifically to do that, to ensure that there is -- that there are no safe havens, that multinational forces, all the coalition forces and the Iraqi forces have the opportunity to operate where they need to, when they need to.

MR. DI RITA: Let me if I can -- go ahead.

Q Can I ask -- I just wanted to make it clear because I'm not sure we're on the same wavelength here.

I think the point that I tried to make was that because of attacks over the past couple of days, it appears that the insurgents' capability to operate has not been diminished. Is that the case? Are they still able to operate pretty freely in that region?

GEN. HAM: Well, I think not. Again, they are dangerous, and they certainly have a capability. But as to whether they are not -- whether they have an ability to freely operate throughout the area, I think not. And that's specifically the focus of Multinational Force West's operation.

MR. DI RITA: And to just broaden the context a little bit more, there's a couple of factors. One is what I began with, which is -- that's one of the things we're going to be looking at increasingly -- is where are areas that are more ready for Iraqi control completely around the country. And some areas we've already discussed are; we've turned over some modest areas to be sure.

But at the same time, our objective is to continue to see the political milestones be met, and so far, we haven't missed one. And we've also said that as we get close to these milestones, we anticipate additional violence. I'm not saying that this was related to the political -- what we know is coming up next, which is the Iraqi constitution will be agreed within two weeks -- within 10 days or so, but we anticipate that there will be spikes in violence. But at the same time, the political process will continue. We're confident, the Iraqi leadership is confident that that progress will continue. And we'll have to deal with these kinds of activities. And the Marines in this particular case are working through that region to get it a little bit more under control.

Q General Ham, can you -- there have been reports by Ansar al-Sunna that they may have beheaded one of these Americans. Their bodies may have been mutilated. Can you -- number one, are all Americans and Marines at least in these operations accounted for? Is there anybody missing? And do you have any credible reports that any of the bodies that have been recovered have been mutilated, beheaded, anything like that?

GEN. HAM: We do not have any indication of the latter. And Multinational Forces Iraq has recently conducted an accountability, and now all forces are accounted for.

Q Okay. And can you also -- are Iraq --

GEN. HAM: With exception of Sergeant Maupin.

Q Are there any Iraqis involved in these operations, these simultaneous operations that are going on

in these towns, the Euphrates River Valley, in conjunction with the Marines, and if so, can you describe those?

GEN. HAM: The Iraqi security forces are involved. They were not specifically involved in this particular operation in Hadithah, but in the next town to the northwest, if you will, in Rawah, the Iraqi security forces have been significantly involved. On the 1st of August they discovered with -- based on local tips from a local Iraqi, they discovered a fairly sizeable weapons cache in that area. So the Iraqi security forces are clearly operating in that area, as they are throughout the country.

Q General, do you know how long this particular unit had been operating in Hadithah, how long these operations in Hadithah had been going on?

GEN. HAM: I don't know off the top of my head.

Q General, the details of the six who were killed, the snipers, is still sketchy. Can you fill in any blanks about what happened? Was it an enemy force that found their location, or was it perhaps some people that were thought to be friendly forces that ended up killing the Marines?

GEN. HAM: There's certainly no indication of the latter. As you might understand, I'm not desirous of talking about specific tactics, techniques and procedures that are employed by various units. But I think, as you all understand, we have a variety of capabilities, ranging from very small units to very large units. This was a unit that was properly prepared, trained and equipped for their operation. They came under attack, and as we know today, that the six U.S. Marines were killed in that attack.

Beyond that, we don't really know much at this point. Multinational Force West is conducting an investigation as to what happened in that circumstance. But today we just don't know the details of how this all transpired.

Q But you're kind of ruling out that they thought they were Iraqi friendlies and then were killed by them?

GEN. HAM: What I think I said was there's no indication that that was the case.

Q Okay, last housekeeping thing. There is an Islamic website claiming that an American senior military commander has been killed in Fallujah. Anything on that?

GEN. HAM: Not to my knowledge; no such report.

MR. DI RITA: Brian?

Q Sir, have any troops been moved into that Euphrates River valley? And can you talk a little bit, for people who might not understand that area, of that line that runs from Baghdad all the way up to al Qaim, how important that is to you and your goals in Anbar province?

GEN. HAM: Well, certainly western Anbar province has been an area of concern for a very long time. And the Euphrates River and the towns and villages along it are likely locations for the movement of insurgents either cross-border from Syria or inside Iraq itself. There have been additional forces that have deployed from other parts of Iraq, and specifically from Multinational Force Northwest, to assist in this effort along the Euphrates River.

Q Can you describe like how many forces, what the -- I mean, is this a -- I mean, I understand Operation Sword had been going on and that was completed. I mean, is there a name for this operation? Are

there -- is this, you know, running from, you know, Hadithah all the way out to the border? You have a large operation that's going on right now, and can you tell us how many troops are involved?

GEN. HAM: I don't know in their entirety. It's about a battalion strength from Multinational Force Northwest that is assisting in this effort, and they have -- I'm trying to -- at least a battalion strength of Iraqi army with them.

Q This is just in the Hadithah corridor area, or is this going all the way out to the border?

GEN. HAM: This is all the way out to the border.

MR. DI RITA: Jamie?

Q Larry, I wanted to ask you about a report in The Washington Post today about the death of an Iraqi general who died in U.S. custody back in November of 2003. The case is subject of a courts martial just coming up, and I want to be clear that I'm not asking you about the circumstances of that court-martial. But there have been numerous investigations into prisoner abuse and what interrogation techniques were approved and not approved. And a couple of questions are raised by this article, and I just want to go over them quickly.

Was there ever a time -- did any of the investigations so far -- have they determined whether anyone at any time authorized the beating of prisoners in order to elicit intelligence from them?

MR. DI RITA: First of all, let me just make the general point, and that is that this is the result of a criminal investigation. It's the result of the death of this Iraqi general. And it's been -- we've discussed it at some length, to the detail we were able to discuss it, because it is the subject of an investigation.

The procedures that have been approved for the purposes of interrogations we've publicized. For the most part, they come under the Army's standard Field Manual for interrogations, which do not include anything that would constitute physical abuse, obviously. We'll just have to see how this investigation goes.

We have, as I said, publicized the procedures that are generally in use and the procedures that were approved for the specific purposes in Guantanamo Bay that were isolated to Guantanamo Bay. So I mean, I -- it is -- there is -- there are no procedures in the Army Field Manual that would permit people to beat detainees, I mean, if that's maybe a different way to put it.

Q The newspaper account cites documents prepared as part of the trial, in preparation for the trial, that would indicate that in some cases, prisoners were turned over to Iraqi squads for interrogation, who may have used techniques that might not have been approved by the U.S. military. Again, without commenting on the circumstances in this case, have any of the investigations to date revealed or suggested that that may have happened in some cases?

MR. DI RITA: I would say this. No investigations that I'm aware of have concluded that, for the purposes of obtaining interrogations that we were unable or unwilling to use certain techniques, we turned them over to the Iraqis so they could use different techniques. I mean, that's -- that would not be consistent with the conclusions of any investigations that I've seen.

We have seen instances where Iraqi security forces have been involved in alleged abuses of detainees. It's something we take seriously and we're concerned about. It's one of the things -- I mentioned these task forces that Ambassador Khalilzad has set up. One of them that he has set up with the Iraqi government is to manage through the transition of detainees to the Iraqis, because we're holding quite a number of Iraqi detainees right now -- the coalition is. We are involved in training Iraqi security forces, including, to some extent,

training for the purposes of detention. And, obviously, it's not going to be something that we would consider appropriate that the Iraqi security forces would apply procedures that we wouldn't ourselves apply. But at some point, it will be an Iraqi government in Iraq doing techniques and procedures across the range of activities that they determine.

But as I said, in terms of your specific question, there's been no investigation that I'm aware of that has concluded that as the component of interrogations, we took somebody, gave them to somebody else so that they could apply techniques we wouldn't apply. That just -- that wouldn't be consistent with our procedures.

Q Last question. In all the numerous investigations now that have been done into prisoner abuse, did the ones the Pentagon do examine at all the role of the CIA in Iraq, or is that handled separately? And do we know anything -- have there been any results of the investigation of what the CIA's role --

MR. DI RITA: Yeah, the answer is -- to the best of my knowledge, we don't know the results. You'll recall that the Kerr-Fay-Jones investigation was the military intelligence investigation, and there were aspects of that that were turned over to the CIA inspector general because it involved activities that we were not involved in. And I don't know the results of that. I don't know that the inspector general of the CIA has drawn conclusions yet.

But it's a fair point to emphasize once again; we said from the beginning that we were going to conduct multiple investigations and that there would be further accountability. And this article reflects precisely that; that these allegations arose, they were investigated, and there were criminal charges preferred, and now there's a court-martial.

Q Until the last couple of days, Iraqis have borne a lot of the recent casualties. Of course, the last two days there have been heavy American casualties. Does this represent any kind of change in strategy on the insurgents to target Americans more forcefully?

MR. DI RITA: To target Americans?

Q To target American troops -- a shift of emphasis?

GEN. HAM: Not that we're able to discern. We don't think so. We think the insurgent effort remains very much focused on discrediting coalition presence, and discrediting the Iraqi security forces, and discrediting the Iraqi transitional government. So I don't think -- we haven't seen a particular waiving of effort, if you will, on the insurgents that says, "Okay, now we're going to go after coalitions." It just -- we think they remain focused on each of those three entities.

Q And these recent casualties are because American troops have been in harm's way to a greater degree recently with these operations?

GEN. HAM: In this particular operation, which the operation in Hadithah was largely conducted by the U. S. Marines, I think just a -- it was just a fact of that circumstance, not any discernible change in the tactics used by the insurgents.

MR. DI RITA: John, and then we'll come over to you, Jamie.

Q General, just anything specific about this particular AAV's role. Was it part of a convoy? What kind of Marines was it carrying? Where was it taking them?

GEN. HAM: Again, this is hours old, so we just don't have that level of detail on this particular operation

yet.

Q General, there have been recurring complaints that there aren't enough troops in Anbar, basically, to deny sanctuary to the insurgents. Is any thought being given to increasing the military presence in that province?

GEN. HAM: The positioning of forces inside Iraq currently resides with Multinational Corps Iraq and Multinational Forces Iraq, certainly in concert with the major subordinate commands, both U.S. and coalition, throughout the country. And that stationing of forces around the country is not static. It changes based on the nature of this -- of the planned operations. This one is a good example, where there was a planned operation that required more forces than were normally present. So additional forces were brought in to aid in this operation. I think that's a fairly normal type of thing that we see inside Iraq. So the forces are shifted by the appropriate commanders as they are needed.

Q Well, given the casualties in this case, is -- are more -- are additional forces being brought in?

GEN. HAM: I don't know if there -- what the ramifications of this particular attack may be, in an operational sense. Certainly, in a personal sense, it's very tragic. Any time we lose any member of the military or the Iraqi security forces, for that matter. But I don't know if this is going to change in any way the conduct of the ongoing operation.

MR. DI RITA: Barbara?

Q General Ham, I want to take you back to the Monday attack with the six who were killed. The sixth man was, apparently, according to the Marines, found some -- dead, some distance away from his five colleagues. They describe it as several kilometers away. Do you yet have any insight as to what happened to this sixth man? Are you able to rule out whether he was, at some point, alive in captivity, although perhaps very briefly? Why was he found so far away?

GEN. HAM: We simply don't know. That is a question, certainly, that the commanders are asking and are investigating, but the fact of the matter today is while there are -- there's a fair amount of speculation as to what could have happened, we just don't know what happened.

Q (Inaudible.)

MR. DI RITA: Well, let me try this out.

Q Well --

MR. DI RITA: It happened a few hours ago -- but --

Q General --

Q Monday --

MR. DI RITA: A day or two ago. Fair enough.

We're 8,000 miles away. The commanders there are doing their very best to understand it. Believe me, they're as interested as you in understanding it.

Q I was just wondering if you had an update.

MR. DI RITA: And there's just -- we've provided what information we can. We could spend a lot of time saying we don't have much more for you, or we maybe -- move on to a different topic, because I just don't think we can add any more knowledge to what we've already provided to you.

Q But I mean, Larry -- sir, are you suggesting that -- I'm sorry, that these aren't legitimate questions?

MR. DI RITA: No. I --

Q I mean, you're saying you're 8,000 miles away --

MR. DI RITA: Charlie.

Q A telephone conversation --

MR. DI RITA: Charlie.

Q -- is instantaneous.

MR. DI RITA: Charlie, Charlie.

I didn't suggest that. What I said was that in fact the commanders are very interested in knowing answers to these very questions. It's just that it's not my place, or General Ham's, to make a call from 8,000 miles and say, "I need to be able to tell the press corps in the Pentagon exactly what happened right now."

They want to know it as badly as we do. And we just don't have the information. And I think our record has demonstrated that when we get the information, if it's available to be released, we'll certainly release it. There's, obviously, a lot of questions about these attacks.

Q But, I mean, General Ham, for instance, is director of Regional Operations for the Joint Staff. And you say, sir, with respect, that you don't know whether it's being considered, in the wake of day before yesterday seven deaths -- granted, the 14 deaths today are just hours old; but you don't even know if they're considering possibly increasing the number of troops in Al Anbar province, based on the seven deaths the day before yesterday?

GEN. HAM: No, what I -- there's an ongoing operation. I don't know if there is any change to that operation based on this morning's activities.

MR. DI RITA: And the tactical commanders have a lot of tactical flexibility, and they don't need our permission to do the things that they'll need to do.

So, if we can generally agree that there's just not much more knowledge we can provide you on this -- I apologize. I wish we could. We can't. Maybe we can move on to some other topics.

Q General Ham --

Q A general question?

MR. DI RITA: A general question. Why don't we get Betsy and then we'll -- we might come back to you. I betcha it's not that general.

Q Had all six of the Marines killed in the ambush on Monday been shot?

GEN. HAM: I don't know.

Q This is a fairly general question.

GEN. HAM: Okay, sure. Give it a shot.

Q Earlier, General, you talked about the enemy being adaptive. Is there any information about new techniques or tactics that the enemy is using in their use of explosive devices to increase lethality or to defeat U.S. countermeasures?

GEN. HAM: We have seen over the past few months a general decline in the number of improvised explosive attacks; in volume they've decreased, but the lethality has remained very, very high. We are seeing larger amounts of explosives. We are seeing different techniques that are being used in an effort to counter the efforts of coalition and Iraqi security forces to protect folks while they are moving; different types of penetrators, different techniques of triggering the events. I mean, again, this is a very brutal, lethal and adaptive enemy. So we are seeing those changes.

I think, as you know, we have a task force here that works very closely on trying to assist the commanders and those in the field with technological solutions to help protect the force, as well as sharing useful tactics, techniques and procedures across the force so that those who are here training have the most current information, and those who are in theater are sharing the information to the best degree possible. But the --

Q But is there any particular technique or tactic that is working well for them, that the U.S. has been unable to defeat or counter?

GEN. HAM: Well, the -- obviously we don't want to go too far down that road to say what's successful and what's not been successful. But the changing of techniques over time is a challenge for us, and that's what we're -- that's what the task force is focused on.

Q General Ham, when you say different --

MR. DI RITA: Why don't we come back to it? Let's take one more --

Q Can I just follow up very briefly? When you say different penetrators, are they -- are you seeing evidence that they are trying to structure their IEDs so they have some sort of penetrating capability into a vehicle? Is that what you're saying? I wasn't clear what you meant.

GEN. HAM: Yes. I mean, I think it's fairly well understood that coalition forces are making a concerted effort to protect personnel and vehicles throughout the country as they are moving, and the enemy is seeking ways to counter that increased protected effort.

Q Does that include the use of shaped charges?

MR. DI RITA: Let's just not discuss details about that kind of stuff. It's just not something that we really should -- we've probably gone through that.

Sorry?

Q He was just going to answer that when you butted in.

(Cross talk.)

Q General Ham, I was wondering if you could give us some insight into what's going on inside this unit that has suffered these losses. As a former commander, what kind of things is the leadership focusing on to try and get these Marines past this and through these events?

GEN. HAM: Well, I can't talk specifically about this particular unit. But any time any unit loses a member, it's hard.

But I think one of the things that we should be very proud of is that units -- that they will deal with their mission, and they will continue with their mission and accomplish their mission. There will be a time to take pause and to grieve the loss of friends and comrades, and they'll do that in an appropriate manner. But for right now, my guess is, they are very, very specifically focused on accomplishing the mission that has been assigned.

MR. DI RITA: Probably one of the things they're hoping is that nobody in Washington makes their jobs harder by the things they talk about. So --

Q Thank you.

MR. DI RITA: Thank you for that closing comment.

Q It is reported that U.S. troops in South Korea is to be relocated to the bases in the United States. Is it confirmed if --

MR. DI RITA: Excuse me? Would I comment on it?

Q Yes.

MR. DI RITA: Well, we've talked at some length about the posture alignments that are going on, on the Korean Peninsula. They've been announced. We've -- it's actually happening around the world. We made some announcements last week about some posture realignments from Germany. It's an ongoing process. I think we've got some fact sheets on it that I -- that we could provide you. I don't know that that -- there's not been any decisions made recently, beyond what we've discussed over time, that the realignment on the peninsula and then some repositioning -- we can provide that data to you. I don't happen to have it on hand.

Q Does this mean the entire troops or part of the troops will come home?

MR. DI RITA: Well, we have an ongoing relationship with South Korea -- with the Republic of Korea. That's not going to change, but it's a relationship that's transforming. It's -- we want to be able to be as flexible as we need to be, and that's -- but our relationship with Korea and our ability to respond to our alliance commitments is unchanged.

So I wouldn't want to get into the specific numbers without having them directly at hand. But I think we're going to see an American -- joint U.S.-Korean presence in the peninsula for some time.

Q Iraqi police announced this week that they captured someone in connection with the Mosul bombing. Remember that we've asked for some more details about how that's all going. General Ham's here. Maybe there's more details that can be shared on that.

GEN. HAM: I think -- I'll have to go back and check, but I believe what the Iraqi Ministry of Interior said is that they detained a leader of the Ansar al-Sunna group, and the group is associated with the Mosul bombing. I don't know that there was a link that that particular individual was involved.

With regard to the specific attack, as I've said before, because of my personal involvement in that, I've taken a hands-off and have not asked any questions.

MR. DI RITA: Maybe we have time for one or two more.

Q General Ham?

Q A completely different subject? Oh, go ahead.

Q Yeah. I'm sorry. Actually, this is on behalf of all my colleagues actually, although they don't know it yet. (Laughter.)

MR. DI RITA: But you'll appreciate it, I'm sure.

Q Yeah, you will.

There are now -- according to a note I've been handed -- I'll just read it: Ansar al-Sunna has posted a photo of a dead man wearing Marine camo pants and belt. He appears to have been shot at close range.

This apparently is posted on a website. We certainly have not verified it, but we're just wondering if you know anything. Again, unverified, but it is now a video seen on the Ansar al-Sunna website.

MR. DI RITA: I haven't heard.

GEN. HAM: It's the first report.

Q Thank you.

Q Let me just try to go back at a question I asked earlier a little bit. Can you talk about how important that route from Syria to Baghdad through Anbar province is to the entire insurgent effort that you're fighting across Iraq; these troops that are fighting in Hadithah right now, the troops that are setting up that base in Rawah -- everything going on in that Euphrates River quarter? How important is that fight to everything you're trying to accomplish in Iraq right now?

GEN. HAM: Well, it's an integral component of a larger campaign to deny freedom of movement to the insurgents, to deny safe havens. I think there's been a thought for some time that that line has been used in transit of personnel, perhaps weapons, money, and perhaps ideology along that line as it feeds into Baghdad. And I think the effort here is to try to do the best they can to disrupt that, deny that territory to the insurgents. So it fits in a larger mosaic, if you will, of security means throughout the country.

MR. DI RITA: Let's try and wrap this --

Q General?

MR. DI RITA: Let me come -- I'll come -- have we done you, Jim, already? I think we have. Let's get Matt.

Q Maybe you can come back.

Q General?

MR. DI RITA: I did come back.

Q General, has there been evidence that has come up during the entire Iraq campaign that the Marines' AAVs are any more vulnerable or susceptible to IEDs than other vehicles, such as Bradleys or Abrams tanks, or so forth?

GEN. HAM: Well, I don't know of a specific analysis. But clearly, an AAV does not offer the same protection as a tank does. So there is -- there's clearly some difference. But nonetheless, it is an armored vehicle, and the commanders make an assessment as to what equipment is appropriate for each operation.

MR. DI RITA: Let's try and wrap this up.

Q I just wanted to ask if you could give a sense of the size of that insurgent force in that area?

GEN. HAM: I don't know a number to say that there's X number of insurgents operating in that area. I would say, though, that it is an area that has recently been of concern to the commander of Multinational Forces West, and that's why he's organized and is conducting these operations.

Q I mean, just an order. Hundreds, thousands?

GEN. HAM: I don't -- I don't have a sense to quantify it to that degree.

Q Is it because you all don't know or because you don't like to talk about these numbers?

MR. DI RITA: You know, we've talked about assessments on the sizes of the insurgency. And we've talked about the range, and the range is very low to very high. And in fact, in the ranges -- the intelligence assessments themselves, the intelligence assessments on the size of the insurgency start by saying, "we don't really know this, and the range goes from very low to very high." And then they go into all of -- a variety of assumptions that might validate the lower number, a variety of --

Q But in the specific area, not generally.

MR. DI RITA: Yeah. You got the specific answer; he doesn't know.

But in general, I'm responding to the question, "Is it because we don't know?" It's because we don't try to know. In other words, we want to understand the nature of the insurgency, we want to understand its tactics, we want to understand what we need to do to counter those -- his development of counter-tactics to us. But there are people who may be able to provide their own assessments, and it tends to be intelligence analysts. But those assessments tend to be heavily qualified, and based on a number of assumptions that if you make different assumptions, the qualifications themselves change.

So, we've had this discussion a lot. We're not going to be able to provide you any -- better enlightenment on it today. But the general point is, you can pick your assumptions and pick your qualifiers and pick a number. And it doesn't -- it just hasn't proved to be very useful, frankly.

Q Well, I mean, is it another Fallujah up there, or is this just a small group of people that you stumbled into?

GEN. HAM: Well, stumbling into it clearly is not an accurate portrayal. It is an area that was identified by Multinational Forces West was of concern, and they planned and are now conducting an operation to deal with that situation as they assess it.

MR. DI RITA: Having utterly failed to contain the interest in this thing -- and I understand it -- I'm going to probably just wrap it up here.

Joe, why don't you go.

Q On a different subject, on --

MR. DI RITA: Well, let's get Joe, and then I'll come back, and that will be the last one.

Q This week the U.S. ambassador to Iraq said that terrorists are trained in Syria and funding goes through Syria. And he said also that Syrian government media are broadcasting anti-Iraq propaganda.

Do you have any information about this? And do you think accusing Syria about the anti-Iraq propaganda is a new type of accusation?

MR. DI RITA: I didn't see the ambassador's comments. He's extremely knowledgeable. He's now been in the country. He -- I have every reason to believe that his comments are accurate. I don't know what specific things he's referring to. And if we can develop a better sense of that, we'll be happy to provide it.

I think on the general point, he's making the point we've all made, which is that there is -- there are many things that Syria could be doing to better account for the fact that they have a neighbor going through a very difficult period. And it's the general view that Syria is not doing enough.

Last question.

GEN. HAM: Let's make this the last question.

Q Shift gears here, just before you leave.

China and Russia have both announced that they'll be conducting joint military exercises later this month, fairly substantial military exercises involving more than several thousand troops. I'm just curious; is that something that is a concern to the Pentagon? If so, how much of a concern? If not, why not?

And I offer that question to either one of you.

MR. DI RITA: General, do you have anything?

GEN. HAM: Well, we are aware of the planned exercises. And the commander of U.S. Pacific Command is taking an effort to monitor the conduct of those exercises. Clearly, there's interest in anything that affects the security in the Pacific Region. So PACOM is keenly interested in that and will monitor that, to the extent possible.

I wouldn't say that that's something they're particularly worried about. But certainly as it affects -- or may potentially affect security, they're very interested.

Q I mean, is there a -- is this seen as routine, or is there a concern that China and Russia may be essentially joining forces, getting closer military ties, and that that could cause a concern for the U.S. down the

road?

GEN. HAM: I'm not sure we know yet, and that's why the interest in the monitoring.

MR. DI RITA: Thanks a lot, folks.

Q Just on Doug -- Doug Feith is leaving on Monday.

MR. DI RITA: Doug Feith -- we think he's leaving. He has announced he's leaving. He intends to leave.

Q (Laughs.)

Q Has the secretary asked the president to make an appointment of Edelman?

MR. DI RITA: You know, at this time of year, which is prior to the August recess, the long recesses, we tend to be asked for -- if there were -- if you had a list of prioritized positions that needed to be filled and a recess appointment were available, what would those positions be? In this case, one of the positions that we suggested is that position. It's not a decision that we will make; it's the president's decision, and we'll see where that goes.

But I think it's safe to say that Feith is leaving Monday, and it's equally safe to say he's in an extremely important position in this department and we need somebody in that position.

So, thanks a lot, folks.

Q Thanks.

GEN. HAM: Thank you, folks.

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