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**Presenter: Army Lieutenant General John Vines, Commander of Multinational Corps-Iraq and Commander General of the 18th Airborne Corps**

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### Defense Department Special Briefing on Operations In Iraq

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

GEN. VINES: Yes, I can, Bryan.

MR. WHITMAN: General, thank you again for joining us back here to tell us a bit about what Multinational Corps is doing. It's been a couple of months since we had you in the briefing room here with the Pentagon correspondents. We have, as you know, been talking to your division commanders almost every week since we last talked to you, and they've provided a tremendous amount of insight into the operations going on in Iraq. So we really appreciate you taking the time and making your division commanders available to do this with us back here.

So as is our format, we'll shoot it over to you and let you give us a brief overview, and then we'll get into some questions here. And as we promised you, we'll get you out of here in about 30 minutes.

GEN. VINES: Okay. It's good to be with you from Baghdad this afternoon.

Before I comment on what's going on here in Iraq, let me extend our condolences to our fellow Americans who are victims of Hurricane Katrina. Over 10,000 of our servicemen and women over here call that region of America home, and our thoughts and prayers are with them and their families.

I appreciate the opportunity to be with you here on this Labor Day weekend, and I'll make some brief comments.

First, as you know, Iraq has drafted a constitution that will be submitted for a referendum, and the referendum will be held on the 15th of October. It was written by Iraqis and it will be ratified or rejected by Iraqis. It's a historic document. It's an extraordinary document. Whether or not it will be ratified, of course, we have no way of knowing. But we're seeing democracy in action and we're seeing Iraqis aggressively embrace it. They're charting their own path toward freedom and self-determination, and quite honestly, it's extraordinary to be part of a historic occasion like that.

Unfortunately, there are those who want to deprive them of the opportunity to determine their own destiny, and they'll lose violence to do it. And consequently, we expect that we will see violence used as a tool to intimidate Iraqis to keep them from participating, to deprive them of that right. So the constitutional process and democracy is in action, and we'll do everything we can to create the conditions so Iraqis have the opportunity to be heard and make their own decisions.

On an average day here in Iraq, there are over 30 operations -- combined operations conducted all -- around the country to provide stability and security and aggressively cut off the flow of foreign terrorists here into the country. We're making progress. We're making progress -- extraordinary progress in the Mosul area and the Baghdad area, and we're making progress in other areas. As you know, 14 of the 18 provinces, there is very little violence. There is an extraordinary amount of it in other parts, but it is a tough fight, one we're making progress in and one we are winning.

The Iraqi security forces continue to make progress.

At the battalion, brigade and divisional and ground force level, where I primarily interact, there is a very close partnership between coalition battalions, brigades and divisions and Iraqi units. They work together, they plan together, and in some cases, they fight together. And while the performance is not uniformly outstanding, in some cases it is very good indeed. In other cases, we still have a great deal of work to do.

The ground force headquarters was stood up fairly recently, and it is developing the capacity to command and control its forces in combat. And so that is good news indeed.

We have adjusted our posture here in country to take into account the conditions, and we've actually closed about 20 forward operating bases, consolidated coalition forces in some case.

There still remains much to be done. The success of our endeavor here in large measure is not a military solution. It is a political solution, and it is one that must be achieved by the Iraqi people, the Iraqi security forces and Iraqi government. And we'll do everything we can to help create those conditions so they can and will succeed.

And now I'll take your questions.

MR. WHITMAN: Thank you, General. We'll get right into it.

Will?

Q General, this is Will Dunham with Reuters. Can you tell us what decisions have been made regarding how much you're going to increase force levels in Iraq for the elections? I know that a lot of it is going to be accomplished by perhaps holding some folks over who may have been scheduled to leave. Can you tell us how many more troops you expect and how large the troop level will reach?

GEN. VINES: General Casey has requested two additional battalions from the 82nd Airborne Division to assist in the upcoming elections. Based on the national elections that took place in January, we anticipate that insurgents will attempt to intimidate voters and deprive them of the opportunity to vote. We think this is prudent.

There are a few units, a very few units, that we probably will have to adjust their time here in country by just a few days and in no case more than a week to 10 days. And many of them will get home exactly on schedule. But -- so we made adjustments that are only prudent in light of the ongoing conditions here in country. But it will not extend the time in country much, if at all, for any of the soldiers.

Q Just to follow up briefly, what's the -- what level do you expect to peak at? What numerical level do you expect to peak at?

GEN. VINES: Because units are both coming and going, I couldn't tell you the exact number on a given day, because that would be a forecast. Some units will be going home as others are coming in. So the numbers would probably go up about 1,500 to 2,000 at the maximum, but it actually may be down a bit, based on the flow out, so that there will be very little overall change in the numbers.

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead, Bob.

Q General, I wanted to ask you about -- in connection with the Hurricane Katrina, do you foresee at this point that the requirement on the Army in particular for coming to the assistance of the people down there will in some way affect the rotation of troops in or out of Iraq in the coming weeks?

GEN. VINES: That is impossible to say. We have a brigade of -- two great brigades, one from Mississippi and one from Louisiana, and the brigade from Louisiana is in the process of rotating back. And in some cases, when we can accelerate their rotation so they can go back and assist their loved ones and be there, we may be able to accelerate that by a week or so. It will not fundamentally change it, as much as we'd like to give everyone who's effected the opportunity to go home and deal with that situation. We won't be, in all cases, able to do that.

Q General, Bob Burns again, just to follow up that.

On the other side of the coin, are you -- is it possible that troops that are preparing now to go for this next rotation may be kept here to assist with the hurricane rather than deploying, or deploy later than previously planned?

GEN VINES: I couldn't answer that. That decision will be made in other places. My assumption is that the forces here will rotate at about on schedule and their replacements will arrive. It is possible that there could be adjustments, but I have no visibility on that.

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead.

Q Bryan -- sorry, General. It's Mike Mount with CNN.

Over the last week or so, there's been, I guess, a few strikes on what appears to be terrorist safe houses in western Iraq. Are there any details that you might be able to tell us about what you found, and I guess the first house that was struck earlier on this week, and any other follow up information you might have the second one? I think we had a release from the other day.

GEN VINES: We had very good information that there were insurgents, terrorists and some foreign fighters. The exact number I can't tell you, because in all cases they don't carry an identity card that proclaims them as such. But based on a variety of sources, we recognized that there were locations where they were planning, coordinating, and in some cases they were planning on conducting attacks against coalition forces. They were murdering their fellow citizens, imposing their own version of justice on citizens -- murdering people, dragging them out in the street. And when we identified locations, we have struck them with fighter aircraft.

The exact numbers would be hard to pin down. I guess my best guess is, it is probably about 70 to 75 terrorists have been killed in those strikes.

Q Can I follow up? Have you found any evidence of any leadership among those that may have been

killed? There are also reports that some civilians may have been also killed in those airstrikes.

GEN. VINES: Well, of course we take the loss of innocent life very, very seriously, and we do everything we can to mitigate it. And I regret if there were -- if there was loss of life.

I've not received that report. That does not mean it could not have happened.

Based on some information that we have, we believe that we killed a key leader out there, one who was leading operations in that part of Al Anbar province. But we don't have a positive identification that we did so. But indicators are that a key leader was killed.

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead.

Q General, hi. I'm Tony Capaccio with Bloomberg News. Excuse me if you've been asked this basic question, but what's the current force composition in Iraq, numbers, and the Reserve component percentage of that? And I have a follow-up on a separate subject.

GEN. VINES: I can get back to you on that. I don't -- that's -- when someone is here, they are active, and they fight alongside their active brothers. So quite honestly, that's -- I don't spend a lot of time asking people whether they're active or Reserve, or -- that's not something we -- I carry around in my pocket all the time. Our active and our Reserve and our Guard soldiers are doing -- and Marines are doing an absolutely extraordinary job, and I can get you the numbers on that.

MR. WHITMAN: We have the data -- this is Bryan Whitman. We have that data back here. We'll take care of that for you, so you don't have to worry about that.

Q This is a separate question. We've been reading a lot about the tensions in crafting the new Iraqi constitution and the Sunni opposition to a number of the provisions. At the tactical level, have you seen any of those political tensions translated to more insurgent attacks, more intelligence or chatter predicting attacks? Any transition from the political tension to tactical attacks?

GEN. VINES: That is an excellent question. And I would have to say not so much attacks, but we saw demonstrations and some violence in certain areas. And it could very well have been factions that were attempting to influence those who were drafting the constitution not to concede too much to other factions. We saw that in areas such as Najaf and some other areas. There's pretty good indicators that that was in an effort to influence the drafting of the constitution. We can't know that for sure, but indicators are that that probably related directly to the drafting of the constitution.

Q (Off mike) -- potential attacks, an increase in insurgent attacks over the next month or two because of the tensions and the disagreements in the constitution.

GEN. VINES: I think it is reasonable to assume that there will be some who will attempt to suppress the turnout of vote in certain areas and others. Of course, there will be a "get out the vote," and that's in the best democratic process. But if a certain province seeks -- or elements in a certain province seek to achieve an outcome, it may be that they attempt to use intimidation and violence to prevent those who would vote a different way from turning out. I have reason to believe that that may happen, and we're taking prudent steps to counter that.

MR. WHITMAN: AI?

Q General, it's Al Pessin from Voice of America. On that last point you made -- and I wanted to go

back to your answer to Will earlier about the umbers -- with this expectation that some groups will try to disrupt the vote, did I understand you correctly to say that you only need about 3,000 additional troops overall nationwide?

GEN. VINES: Well, the primary security for this referendum and the national election, which will be 15 December, will be provided for by Iraqi security forces. And so the coalition presence in Iraq will be increased by approximately 2,000 soldiers during that period of time to provide us flexibility to adjust to conditions that might arise in one part of the country or another.

Q The types of increases that we saw in the previous election, which, if I remember correctly, were more on the order of 30,000, we're not going to be seeing those anymore because of the improvements in the Iraqi security forces? Is that what you're saying, sir?

GEN. VINES: There are a lot more Iraqi security forces available to be employed at this time than there were in January of this year.

MR. WHITMAN: Bob, go ahead.

Q General, Bob Burns. I just wanted to press that just one step further to make sure I understand correctly what you're saying about that. If there are now about 138,000 U.S. troops there, then you're saying it wouldn't go up, more likely, than to more than 140,000? Is that what it means?

GEN. VINES: That's about -- that's pretty close to the numbers, that's correct.

Q Thank you.

Q General --

GEN. VINES: (In progress) -- soldiers just on standard rotations. But yes, that would be about right.

MR. WHITMAN: General, I'm sorry, the last part of that answer got cut off, if you want to give that again.

GEN. VINES: On any given day, as troops rotate in and rotate out, the numbers can fluctuate by as many as a thousand. Some soldiers arrive before the ones that they replace leave. And so even though it is a one for one, there may be a few days spike and then it drops back down. But the number of 140,000 is probably about right.

MR. WHITMAN: Thank you.

Q General, this is Scott Foster with NBC News. I want to follow up on Mike's question earlier. You said there was a key leader killed in these airstrikes. I just wanted to see who that was.

GEN. VINES: He goes by the name of Abu Islam.

Q And can you describe his role in terms of who he was associated with? Is there any indication he's an associate of Zarqawi?

GEN. VINES: There are indicators that he has a direct relationship with Zarqawi and he was a facilitator in the Husaybah area.

MR. WHITMAN: Will?

Q General, Will Dunham with Reuters. I believe you mentioned that about 10,000 of the troops who are in Iraq right now call the region home that has been affected by Katrina. Are there any steps being taken to allow all or some or a few of them to return home to tend to their personal crises on the home front?

GEN. VINES: Well, as you know, people are not being allowed back into the devastated areas. The problem is that the security mission goes on here, and if we take some out, those that are left are at some risk; it increases their risk.

Unfortunately, we're not able at this time -- unless someone is known to have a family member wounded or injured or killed, we're not in a position to make those adjustments. We'll continually monitor that. But no, there's not a provision because someone has an uncertain situation to send them home. We, unfortunately, are not able to do that.

Q So if one of the American service members in Iraq ends up with a family member hurt or dead, that person could return, but if the situation is uncertain for that person's family, they stay put?

GEN. VINES: We have gone to great lengths to identify numbers and places they can call to either get in contact with their families -- and as you're aware, that's extraordinarily difficult -- or numbers that they can find out the status in their hometowns. And hopefully everything is okay. It is a case-by-case basis, however, and commanders have the flexibility to do the right thing by the soldiers.

I have to tell you that the bureaucracy within the Department of Defense is moving at lightning speed to take into account some of the hardships that soldiers over here are experiencing and doing a lot of great things that they're, hopefully, going to be able to take care of soldiers who are deployed.

Many of those who are deployed from Mississippi and Alabama are National Guard soldiers and would normally be demobilized. And there's consideration to what options might be available there because in some cases they may not have a home to go back to.

So it's my understanding that those things are being considered back in the United States, and you'd have to direct those sorts of questions, of course, to the Pentagon or the National Guard Bureau.

Q General, this is Tony Capaccio with Bloomberg News again. General John Jumper the other day had an exit interview with reporters, and he said that it was his opinion that the role of the U.S. Air Force in Iraq to support Iraqi ground forces will continue somewhat long after U.S. ground forces are withdrawn because the progress of the Iraqi air force is not as far as long as the ground forces, and that's to be anticipated.

I wanted to get your view on that in terms of the long-term prospects for having to retain air forces in the region to provide Iraqi troops ground support.

GEN. VINES: There will be transition teams, coalition transition teams, with Iraqi units after coalition forces begin to withdraw, and those coalition teams will have access to coalition and United States airpower not only to protect the forces, but to use them to support Iraqi operations. Obviously, we have to be very careful when we use American war planes to conduct an attack against a target in another country. And so the Iraqi security forces would not be able to, by themselves, have access to American war planes to drop ordnance. That would come with the aid of coalition transition teams on the ground.

Q Are we talking hundreds or just scores of personnel in those types of teams?

GEN. VINES: Well, I won't get into specifics of the numbers of people in the transition teams. I think

there's been briefings on that back there. But a battalion would have a transition team and it can vary in number. But typically, if it was conducting combat operations, it would probably have a coalition transition team with it to give it access to airpower if it were necessary to accomplish the mission.

MR. WHITMAN: Okay, General. I think we're actually going to wrap this up a little early. As you can imagine, our folks back here are being torn in at least two directions on the stories today and the activities that are happening down in Mississippi and Louisiana and the military support to that effort.

I do want to again thank you for taking the time today and particularly for making your division commanders available over the past several weeks. And we look forward to continuing this dialogue with you. Thank you.

Q: What is the current AC/RC mix and overall troop level in Iraq?

MR. WHITMAN: Today, there are approximately 140,900 U.S. troops serving in Iraq as members of the OIF coalition. This includes approximately 15,200 Reservists from all five armed services; appx: 40,700 members of the National Guard, including the Army National Guard (appx: 39,800 personnel); and the Air National Guard (appx. 900 personnel).

Combined, the total reserve component strength in Iraq is approximately 55,900 personnel, or 40 percent of the force. The active component strength is approximately 85,000 personnel, or about 60 percent of the force.

GEN. VINES: Okay. If I could make just one comment at the end, I would appreciate that.

Occasionally we read in here that there's not been much progress, but I would remind your listeners that there's -- there was no sovereign government about 15 months ago. There was no transitional assembly. There was no draft constitution. There was no ministries of defense, electricity, oil, water, interior. Those are all in place and functioning at varying levels of capacity, but they're functioning.

Our job, of course, is to continue to develop that capacity so the government can assume responsibility for its own security. And some might question whether or not it's worth it. The actions of our armed forces and the security -- our security forces, the American security forces at home -- have fortunately protected the United States from subsequent attack, from -- since 11 September. And we've been successful enough that some may think that there's no longer a threat. I can assure you there is. There are some evil people that wish to attack us.

And 60 years ago this month, the terms of surrender were signed in Tokyo Bay. And as horrific as that war was, perhaps the direct threat to the continental United States was not as great as it is today.

So young men and women over here and other parts of the globe are protecting America and indeed other countries from terrorists who wish to attack us and, if given the opportunity, will.

So I'm proud to serve with them. I'm proud of what they do, and I hope your listeners are, too. Thank you. Good afternoon from Baghdad.

MR. WHITMAN: Thank you, General, for that perspective and for your comments. Thank you.

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