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**Presenter: Brigadier General Augustus L. Collins, USA,
Commander, 155th Brigade Combat Team**

**Friday, December 9, 2005 9:09 a.m.
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DoD News with Brigadier General Augustus Collins

(Note: General Collins appears by teleconference from Iraq.)

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

GEN. COLLINS: Yes, sir. I can hear you.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you for joining us, and good afternoon. And good morning to the press corps here, and thank you for joining us and braving the elements this morning here in Washington to be here at this early hour.

Today we have General -- Brigadier General Augustus Collins, who is the commander of the 155th Brigade Combat Team that is currently deployed in Iraq and operating as part of the Multinational Force West.

For nearly the past year, General Collins and his troops have been responsible for ongoing security operations in north Babil, Karbala, as well as Najaf provinces. He's prepared, as our other presenters have been in the past, to give you a brief overview of what his unit has been doing and then will take some of your questions.

So I know we got started just a tad bit late, so let's get right into it. General, I'll turn it over to you.

GEN. COLLINS: Thank you, Mr. Whitman, and thank you, ladies and gentlemen of the press, for allowing me to come and spend some time with you today and tell you a little bit about the 155 Brigade Combat Team.

Of course, we're a brigade combat team that's primarily based out of Mississippi, but we also have soldiers from Arkansas, Vermont, Utah, Iowa and Puerto Rico. We also have soldiers from the active component. We have a squadron, the 2nd Squadron of the 11th Army Cavalry Regiment, from Fort Irwin, California, that's subordinate to our brigade.

Our headquarters is the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Force. That's located out in the Al Anbar province.

We arrived in theater in January of last -- of this year, January '05, and we actually had our transfer of authority at the first week of February.

We have approximately 4,200 soldiers that make up this brigade combat team, and as Mr. Whitman said, we're located in Najaf, Karbala, north Babil. And we also have one task force that's in the eastern Al Anbar province.

Since we've been in Iraq, we've conducted many operations. A lot of those operations have been combined with Iraqi security forces. To date, we've conducted eight brigade-level operations, 21 task force battalion-level operations and more than 500 company- and platoon- level operations. These operations have been designed to capture or kill the insurgents or disrupt their operations as they try to inflict pain and suffering upon the people of Iraq.

We've been able to capture more than 1,500 terrorists during that period of time. We've seized 28,000 weapons. We've seized more than 18,000 pounds of munitions, to include 8,000 pounds of explosives.

We've worked very close with the citizens of Iraq to try and make a better way of life for them through their essential services. We've completed many construction projects. We've provided clean drinking water for the citizens in places where they did not have that prior to us getting here. The electrical services have improved. The sanitation and sewer projects have increased the quality of life that the citizens now have in our areas.

We've done a number of health care projects, renovating hospitals and building health care clinics in some of the rural areas of Iraq, to help people who live outside the city and don't have access to medical care. One thing we've also done with our doctors and our nurses and medics is we've done medical civil affairs projects, where our doctors and nurses would actually go out in some of the rural areas of Iraq and provide medical checkups to some of the citizens, and also some dental repairs that have been done during this period of time.

Also, humanitarian aid projects, to include food and clothing, have been issued to some of the less fortunate people of Iraq.

One of the things we're very proud of is our work with children and with the schools here in Iraq. When we first got into the country, I gave the order that each company would adopt at least one school. To date, we have 35 schools that we've adopted in our area of operations. When school started back this fall, we were able to deliver 26,000 backpacks to those children. Each of those backpacks were full with pens, paper, rulers, things that children need in order to be able to get started in school and off on the right foot.

We were also able to provide desks, chairs, tables, chalkboards for the instructors to also help them do a better job as far as educating children. Also, we've renovated 49 schools in our area of operations, so not only did we provide some of the equipment for the children to get a good education, we've increased the ability of the facilities to provide a good place for them to learn.

We formed a pen pal program with five schools back in the state of Mississippi. Today, those schools are writing letters to -- the children are writing letters from Mississippi to children in Iraq. We're using our linguists to translate those letters so that the children can understand what's being said, and we're hoping that that will help break down some of the cultural biases that exist between the two cultures.

As you know, in just a few days, we will have an election. This is actually the third election that we've been a part of since we've been in Iraq. We arrived just in time to be a part of the first election in January. Even though we had not completed the transfer of authority at that time, 75 percent of my brigade was on the ground

and we augmented the troops that were here during that election. And also the referendum vote on October 15th -- we were here for that. Both of those elections were very successful. We anticipate the election in December to be even more successful. Of course, we worked with the Iraqi security forces, the police and the Iraqi army, the governors and mayors of each province as well as the election commissioners, as well as the minister of health. We have a really good plan, so we don't see any problem with this election being -- (inaudible word) -- fair.

The Iraqi police and Iraqi army. We inherited a pretty good situation when we got here in that we did have Iraqi police and Iraqi army. The problem we had was that they were not as equipped as they needed to be. For the past 11 months, we've been working very hard with getting weapons, with getting uniforms, getting communication equipment and getting vehicles for them. And as of right now, I think we're in pretty good shape, as none of those equipment shortages will stop them from being able to do their jobs. We've been able to graduate 2,500 policemen from the police academy.

We think that's outstanding. So not only do we have policemen on the street who look like policemen, but they actually are acting like policemen, because the professional level of police was actually increased, because we had so many go through the academy.

We have worked very close with the Iraqi army. We have three Iraqi army battalions in our AO and two Iraqi armored brigades. We've worked with them on a daily basis. We do operations with them. We do individual as well as squad- and platoon-level training with them. And they have really increased in their abilities since we first got here.

We've done some classes - what you would probably know back in the states as the primary leadership development course. We work with the noncommissioned officer corps of the Iraqi army and help make them a more professional corps.

The city of Najaf has been in the news lately, and I just wanted to say a few things about Najaf while I have the opportunity. In my opinion, Najaf is a city that's on the move. I was in Najaf in October 2004, before my brigade actually deployed overseas. I went downtown, and a lot of the buildings down there were abandoned. A lot of the buildings bullet-ridden from the fierce fighting that had taken place in August.

I was in some of those same places just recently, and the place is -- it's entirely different now. The buildings have been renovated. The markets are open. There are people on the street. And everything is going in the right direction, as far as Najaf is concerned.

Tourism has increased. As you know, the Imam Ali shrine is located in Najaf, which is a very important shrine for -- as far as religious purposes, for the Shi'ite Muslims. And a lot of them are making their pilgrimages back to the shrine -- people who were afraid to do that under Saddam's regime.

A couple of projects that we did down there that we're very proud of:

One happens to be the Najaf teaching hospital. This hospital at one time was a -- was filled with insurgents. They had taken the hospital over. The insurgents have gone now, but when they left, they ransacked the place. They looted it, left it in a bad state of repair.

We have renovated two floors of this hospital. It's a six-story structure. And it's open, and it's treating about 400 patients per day now, but primarily on outpatients.

And our plan is to continue to work with that hospital until we get it up to 100 percent capacity.

The Najaf soccer stadium, also a very important project that we had going on in Najaf because the people in Najaf didn't really have a place to go for recreation. We renovated the soccer stadium, and about a month and a half ago, we were able to dedicate that stadium with the first soccer game between Najaf and Baghdad. About 20,000 spectators showed up for this event.

As far as the coalition forces in the city of Najaf, we're actually on the outside of the city. We had two forward operating bases in Najaf at one time. FOB Hotel, which is right on the city limits, we have turned over that forward operating base over to the Iraqi army now. And we've moved all the coalition forces out to FOB Duke, which is about a 30-minute drive from downtown Najaf.

Right now the security responsibility for Najaf is in the hands of Iraqi police and Iraqi army. We're still there in an advisory mode and we still conduct training with them on a daily basis, but they have done a great job as far as being able to provide a safe and secure environment for the people of Najaf.

We work very closely with the government of Najaf, Karbala and Babil Province. We've formed provincial reconstruction and development committees in each one of those provinces, which has coalition membership, it has members from the Department of State, has members from the provincial council of each one of the provinces. And we identify the needs of the people of each one of those provinces and we prioritize them. As funds come available, then we use those funds to execute contracts to provide for the needs of the people. That's worked out very well because we've had a good working relationship with the elected officials.

As for the soldiers of the 155, let me say I think I serve with the best that the United States has to offer. The sacrifice and the service of these soldiers, they make me feel good every day. I can't say enough about them. And for the families back home, I thank you for giving us loan of these soldiers for a year, and pretty soon we'll be able to turn them back over to you.

Ladies and gentlemen, I'm open for your questions at this time.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you, General. That's an enlightening overview there. Appreciate it.

Let's go ahead and start with Charlie here.

Q: General, Charlie Aldinger with Reuters.

It sounds like you're doing good things, especially on the education front, and I think you're to be congratulated for that kind of thing.

Have attacks picked up recently in your area leading up to the election?

GEN. COLLINS: No, the attacks have been pretty level recently. Actually, the attacks that we have now compared to attacks that we had when we first got here and took over our battle space in February are at least down by 50 percent. And we attribute that to, of course, the active patrols that the soldiers are doing on a daily basis, their interaction with the government, but probably more than anything, their interaction with the local people in each of the communities that we're responsible for.

When we first got here, the people didn't really talk to us that much, but now they've opened up to us, and they see that the way to peace is through this democratic idea that we're trying to share with them. So now what they're doing is actually working with us. They're helping us find the insurgents and turn them over to us to where we can arrest them and get them off the street.

Q: Have you got any -- I'm sorry, have you got any numbers on the attacks back when you started in

January-February and now?

GEN. COLLINS: Actually, when we first got here the attacks were about 200 per month, and now they're down to about 100 per month. And not only did they decrease in number, they decreased in effectiveness. And that's because, again, of the active patrols that we conduct on a daily basis. The number of caches, weapon caches that we found in all of our areas, we've taken a lot of the things that the enemy was using against us to try and hurt or kill our soldiers, so now they don't have as robust an inventory of things to use as they once did.

Q: And sorry, not meaning to press it, but these attacks, are many of them IEDs? Are you talking about Shi'a on Sunni violence, that kind of thing?

What kind of attacks are you talking about?

GEN. COLLINS: Well, the attacks -- now, obviously, the weapon of choice for the insurgency is the IED, but we were getting a lot of indirect fire attack on our operating bases when we first got here to the point that we were getting attacked at least every other day somewhere in our area. Now, those are down to about one every three weeks now, and that's because we've captured a lot of the people that were actually doing the firing on us. And the local people are actually telling us, you know, if someone takes a shot, they tell us where they live, and we go and pick them up.

We don't have a lot of documented evidence of Sunni on Shi'a violence in our AO -- not to say that it's not happening, but we don't have any documented evidence to be able to say that that's a big factor in our AO.

Q: Hi. This is Pam Hess with United Press International. On the attack numbers that you gave us, are those mostly clustered in north Babil province? And could you talk in more detail about that area because it's obviously quite different from Najaf? And then also if you would talk about Muqtada al-Sadr, his organization and if he pops up in Najaf from time to time -- what you make of him and -- with this upcoming election?

GEN. COLLINS: Ma'am, let me get you to ask the very first portion of your question one more time. I didn't get that.

Q: Could you walk us through -- north Babil province is different in threat and demographic makeup than Najaf and Karbala. Could you explain to us the difference there and what the threat is there, and perhaps if Iraqi security forces are ready to take over?

GEN. COLLINS: Yes, ma'am. And yes, ma'am, obviously the threat of attack in Najaf and Karbala is much less than what you will find in north Babil. Most of the IED attacks and the indirect fire attacks actually happen in north Babil as opposed to happening in Najaf or Karbala. So the area around north Babil was much more dangerous than the other two provinces. But again, we've been able to reduce the number of attacks in that area also. We were very active when we first got into our area of operations, and we engaged the local population. And like I say, that has really paid off.

As far as Muqtada al-Sadr, of course, he's down in Najaf, and to this point he really hasn't caused us any trouble. We know he's down there. Occasionally, you'll see some of the Mahdi militia out on the street.

This is normally on the Friday at prayers down at the Kufa mosque. But they're peaceful. I think that al-Sadr understands that, you know, the way to being successful in this country is you've got to maintain a peaceful attitude at least through the elections. So I don't see him doing anything that's going to cause us any problems.

Q: Clarify for me what his legal status is, because last I checked, there was an Iraqi arrest warrant out for him. What's happened with that? He was implicated in the al-Khoei murder, and they announced that in

2004, just before Najaf blew up in the spring, that there was an arrest warrant for him.

GEN. COLLINS: To my knowledge, there's no current arrest warrant for al-Sadr. As a matter of fact -- and also, he hasn't been tried or convicted of any type of crime. So as far as we're concerned, he's just another citizen down in Najaf.

MR. WHITMAN: Mr. Burns.

Q: General, this is Bob Burns with Associated Press. In your opening remarks, you mentioned the graduation of Iraqi policemen from the academy. I was wondering whether your soldiers -- in what way are they involved in the training of policemen, or do they staff the academy for the --

GEN. COLLINS: No sir, we don't staff the academy. Actually, these are academies that are established in Baghdad and also in Jordan and also down in the Babil province.

Our involvement, as far as the Iraqi police are concerned, we assist the Iraqi police in screening and actually selecting the guys that actually become part of the police force. And the only thing we really do as far as screening is, they have a physical exam, they have to have proof of education, and they have to take an actual physical fitness exam. We'll assist in that, and we'll do some background checks to make sure that none of these individuals are on a list of terrorists that we're actually looking for.

And then we provide -- help provide transportation for them to go to the academy. And when we first got here, we were actually providing transportation from the academy back to their homes. But the last three shipments of police to the academy that we've had, the Iraqi police have actually provided that security. And that's also a big story for us, a big success story.

MR. WHITMAN: Mike.

Q: General, it's Mike Mount with CNN. If we can go back to north Babil province quickly, I saw a press release a few weeks back that said the Iraqi army had actually taken over in the Babil province.

Can you tell us what level the Iraqi army or Iraqi security forces are actually operating in that province, and, too, what kind of success they're having over there?

GEN. COLLINS: Well, I can tell you that the Iraqi army in Najaf and Karbala have responsibility for those two provinces right now. We're just in an advisory and training mode as far as those provinces are concerned. In the North Babil area, we have given them a small portion of the North Babil area around the city of Iskandariyah. The rest of that battlespace up there we're still actively patrolling with our coalition forces. And that's just, I guess you could say, kind of a test to see how well they do. So far, they're doing a very good job in that area.

When we first got to the North Babil area, we only had two companies of Iraqi army in that area, and they were very understrengthed at the time. Since then, we've improved that company -- those two companies to a full battalion of over 800 soldiers. And they were green when we first got them, so we did a lot of training with them to the point now that they're ready to go out on the street and do their jobs. I see with the unit that comes in and replaces us that that battalion will get a larger portion of the battlespace because I think they're really coming along pretty fast.

MR. WHITMAN: Jeff.

Q: Hi, General. Jeff Schogol with Stars and Stripes. The Defense Department Inspector General's

Office has issued an audit to see if the soldiers in Iraq have everything they need. Do you -- excuse me -- do your soldiers have all the equipment they need, and have you had any supply problems in the past?

GEN. COLLINS: I think our soldiers have all the equipment that's necessary to be able to get the job done -- the type of mission that we have. Obviously, as to the supply system, occasionally you may have a problem and it takes a few days to get stuff through the supply system, but none of that has ever affected our mission. We've never had to cancel any missions while we were here because of any type of equipment issues. We've always had plenty, from the very first time that we got into theater and took over our battlespace from the units that were here previous, that equipment -- the equipment that they had was handed off from them to us, so we fell in on what they had, and then we got additional equipment as we were going along.

So I don't think equipment issues have been a problem as far as us being able to accomplish our mission.

MR. WHITMAN: Courtney?

Q: General, it's Courtney Kube from NBC News. For next week's elections, you said that the Iraqi police have the role in security -- have the lead in the security. Does that mean that next week they'll take the lead in security for the elections as well? And if so, what role will the U.S. Army play in security?

GEN. COLLINS: Well, of course, up to this point as far as elections have been concerned we've been the advisers. Like I say, we've had a number of meetings with all the people who are involved with the elections, and we've come up with plans. I won't get into them, but I think we've got good plans. The Iraqi police and the Iraqi army have the lead as far as being out on the street on election day, providing security for the polling sites, as well as providing security for the ballots as they move back and forth and going back to the warehouse after the elections. And we've got 100 percent of the Iraqi police and the Iraqi army that will be involved in that mission on election day.

The coalition forces, of course, will be on the outside, will be on the periphery. We'll be in radio contact with them all day. If there's a need for our coalition forces to be involved in some type of incident, then we will. But right now, based on the last two elections, and I think the progress that the Iraqi security forces have made, we really don't anticipate having to do anything on election day.

MR. WHITMAN: We're going to need to bring this to a close.

Jim, go ahead.

Q: General, Jim Mannion from Agence France-Presse. In some areas, for example in Basra there's been problems with militia infiltrating the security forces, mainly the police. I'm wondering whether militia influence on the police is a problem in your area, and if it is, how you're dealing with it. As part of that -- or it's a related part of that, is there any evidence of Iranian efforts to infiltrate or influence these security forces that are standing up?

GEN. COLLINS: Well, obviously, there are going to be efforts to infiltrate the security forces.

But as I was mentioning before, we get involved with the Iraqi police in particular as far as the screening of the candidates for -- to be policemen. And we do background checks on each individual, as well as have the station chief there.

And the Iraqis know each other. So they know who's who in their community. So they don't allow people who are going to do things adverse to what they're trying to do, as far as security, to enter their ranks.

So I don't see it as being a problem. I won't say that we don't have any, because I can't tell you that truthfully, that we don't have any, because I don't know. But I don't see it as being a problem right now. And I'm sure, if it becomes a problem, that the district chief and the provincial police chief will handle that when it comes up.

MR. WHITMAN: General, we have reached the end of our time, and I do appreciate you taking the time this evening to talk to us and tell us about what your unit's been doing for the last 11 months.

Let me just turn it over to you to see if you have any final comments that you'd like to make before we bring this to an end.

GEN. COLLINS: Well, Mr. Whitman, thank you for allowing me to come and spend some time with you today.

I'd just like to say that for the last 11 months, I've had the opportunity to serve with the absolute best soldiers that the United States has to offer. Every day they surprise me with the level of commitment. I just want to say thank you to them for their service, for their sacrifice, as well as to their families. I know it's a great sacrifice for the soldiers to be here for a year, but it's also a sacrifice for the family to be without the soldier for a year. I'd just like to say thank you to them.

To the families of the soldiers who were killed in action over here, I'd just like to say that mere words can't express the grief that we have. Those soldiers were our friends. We fought alongside of them. We miss them, and they will always be heroes in our eyes.

Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: Thank you, General. And we wish you and your troops all the best.

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