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Presenter: Army Vice Chief of Staff, Commander, U.S. Forces in Iraq, Gen. George Casey

**December 16,
2005**

News Briefing with Gen. George Casey

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

BRYAN WHITMAN (Defense Department spokesman): There's General Casey. General Casey, this is Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon. Can you hear me?

GEN. CASEY: Hello, Bryan Whitman. How are you?

MR. WHITMAN: I'm doing fine, general. And again, thank you very much. We know that you are very busy, you have a lot of things that you have to do, and taking time out of your schedule today to spend 30 minutes with us or so here is just greatly appreciated. We have a pretty big representation of the Pentagon press corps here today, and I know they want to ask you a lot of questions.

So I know you want to start off with an overview of what happened yesterday and some of the highlights of that, so why don't I just turn it right over to you and then we can get into some questions.

GEN. CASEY: Okay, Bryan. Yeah, I just have a short statement here that I'd like to share with you and then will take your questions.

First of all, the Iraqi people had a great day yesterday. It's the third national poll that they've done this year, and in every successive event, the turnout has grown larger and the violence has grown lower. And yesterday the projections are that the turnout will be in the 65- to 70-percent range, and the levels of violence were below both January and October.

The Iraqi security forces also performed superbly across Iraq as they maintained security on the polling sites. It's the third election I've seen, and I have seen improvement in the quality of the planning and execution of the security forces every time. And in the last 10 days, I traveled around Iraq visiting the governors, chiefs of police, election officials, and everywhere that I went, I left with the feeling that we were dealing with confident and competent Iraqi leaders who had this election under control.

Lots of great stories from yesterday, but I think the one that really set the tone for the day happened in a

polling station in Kharma, which is a place between Baghdad and Fallujah. An IED blew down the wall of the polling station in the middle of the night. The Iraqis fixed it and were open for business and polling at 7:00 in the morning.

That was the spirit that led the day.

The second thing I'd like to just share with you, having been at this for 18 months now, is that what has been accomplished here -- not just over the last 18 months, but really in less than three years -- is unprecedented. And if you think about it, that Saddam Hussein was still ruling Iraq three years ago and tyrannizing the Iraqi people. In the less than three years since then, Iraqis have been liberated.

They've taken their sovereignty. They've brought in an interim government, elected a transitional government, peacefully passed power, written a constitution, approved the constitution, built an army of over -- an army and police forces of over 200,000, got them into the fight, and yesterday they elected an assembly that will form a government to lead them for the next four years -- all of this against a ruthless and resilient insurgency. So a remarkable effort here in less than three years, and every man and woman who has served here or fought here owns a piece of this success, and particularly the loved ones of our fallen comrades.

Third point I'd make is that as great a day as it was, we still have a lot of work to do in 2006. The government's got to get formed, take the reins and get on with governing. And I think as we're all -- have all been quite clear about, there is some tough political and economic challenges that Iraq has to deal with, not just next year but over the coming years.

There will be a debate in the assembly about the constitution, about whether or not to amend it. And there will be a debate, no doubt, on federalism. And I certainly expect these to be heated and probably divisive. And as all the insurgents haven't given up using violence to get their political ends, I expect that these debates will be done against a background of violence.

So lots of tough work to do here. And we should not expect the insurgency to just go away because of yesterday's great success, but we should expect it to be gradually weakened and reduced as more and more Iraqis adopt the political process, and the root causes of the insurgency are addressed by the new Iraqi government and by the coalition.

So yesterday was a day to celebrate, but we still have a way to go here.

Finally, I'd like to close just with a word to the families of the men and women of our military, State Department and other agencies of government that are serving here in Iraq. Your loved ones made history yesterday, and it's your support that keeps us going. Thanks for your sacrifices, particularly through these holiday periods. For us, helping give the gift of freedom for Iraq in these last elections will make for a pretty happy holiday season even without being with you all.

So thank you all very much for your continued support and happy holidays to everybody back there in the Pentagon.

Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you, general, for that overview. And we'll get started with a few questions here then.

Charlie?

Q General, Charlie Aldinger with Reuters. I've got three quick questions, two of them -- I think the American public is very, very interested in this. Number one, how many U.S. troops and other coalition troops are there in Iraq today? When do you expect, firm date, to get down to the baseline, 138,000 they say that will be rather quickly? And when do you expect to begin -- you might be able to begin going beyond that -- in other words withdrawing troops?

GEN. CASEY: Yeah, okay, Charlie. Right now, I think we're at about 170,000, and I think you know that we are -- we will enter into another transition process here over the next weeks. And the two extra battalions that we brought over for election security will leave in January. So we should be down to the old baseline there I'd say probably around the end of January, maybe early February. But as I said, there's another rotation that's going to take place here that'll go through February, so that the number will stay elevated as units come in and units go out.

And then, as I've said all along, Charlie, we're -- we just had the elections. We're doing our assessments, and I'll make some recommendations in the coming weeks here about whether I think it's prudent to go below that -- the baseline that you spoke of.

Q When -- excuse me -- when you say 170,000, you mean 170,000 U.S. troops, or are you talking about overall total? And could you --

GEN. CASEY: That's total, Charlie. That's -- you asked for coalition, and that's what we've got. That's the total number.

Q U.S. -- How many are U.S. of the 170?

GEN. CASEY: I'm sorry. I think we're probably about 150 today.

MR. WHITMAN: Okay. Barbara?

Q General Casey, Barbara Starr from CNN.

You've spoken a little bit about the insurgency, but what's your assessment right now? The chairman had said several weeks ago that they had the same capacity to launch attacks that they had a year ago. Do you think that is still the case? Do you think there's a turning point in the insurgency? What do you militarily expect in post-election now?

GEN. CASEY: First of all, Barbara, I think you know that the insurgency is not a homogenous group. We look at it with the terrorists and the foreign fighters, Saddamists and a larger group, the predominant group there, the Iraqi rejectionists.

Our operations over the fall here has had a great impact on that insurgency, particularly on the terrorists and the foreign fighters. I think you'll recall the operations in the north in Tall Afar, where we took away a major transit point for foreign fighters and suicide bombers coming from Syria into northern Iraq to Mosul then down the Tigris Valley.

In October, we began a series of operations in the western Euphrates Valley designed to set the conditions for the people in Anbar province to vote, and I'm very happy to report that we expect the turnout in Anbar province in these elections to be in the 45- to 50-percent range, which is a huge jump from where they had been in the past two elections.

But our operations, in addition to doing that, have also restored Iraqi control to that Syrian border, and

we have disrupted the facilitation network that al Qaeda used to bring suicide bombers and foreign fighters from the border with Syria down the Euphrates Valley and into car bombs in Baghdad.

To give you some indication of the effectiveness of that, in June -- last June, there were over 60 suicide attacks across Iraq. In November, there were 26. In December, we're averaging less than one a day. So we believe that we -- our operations out there have, in fact, have had an impact on that.

So -- now you asked what do I expect the insurgency to do after the elections. The answer is, on the terrorist and foreign fighter side, I expect them to attempt to resume attacks against civilians and us and Iraqi security forces, and attempt to discredit the process, and attempt to demonstrate that they are still strong and a factor to be reckoned with.

We will continue, obviously, with our operations with the Iraqi security forces to frustrate them in doing that.

The rest of it remains to be seen. And there was, again, good participation. And we will continue to dialogue with Sunni leaders and Sunni groups and in fact with all Iraqi groups, to continue to bring people away from the insurgency and into the political process.

Q Can I just follow up briefly? Do you subscribe to the notion that the Ba'athists entered into some sort of agreement, essentially, during the election, to reduce their violence, but yet they will continue on their own two-track strategy of both political and violent activity? In other words, do you think there is a turning point yet in the Ba'athist portion or the Saddamist portion of the insurgency?

GEN. CASEY: Barbara, I think it's too early to tell. I certainly understand why you're asking the question, and I'm asking myself the same question. But I think it's too early to tell. We'll just have to wait and see.

But I think what you'll see is folks trying to play -- use both means to achieve their ends, and not renouncing violence totally but also working within the political process. So it'll be a much more complicated situation.

MR. WHITMAN: Let's go over here to Bret next.

Q Hey, general, Bret Baier from Fox. I wanted to draw you out on another topic, if I could. The new Army Field Manual, we're told, is being circulated around. Have you seen it? And have you weighed in on it?

GEN. CASEY: I have not seen it yet, Bret.

Q Okay. Can I ask you a question about detainee operations really quickly? Do you feel that treating enemy combatants the same way, granting them the same rights as POWs, will somehow hinder the U.S. efforts to gather intelligence against terrorists?

GEN. CASEY: Bret, I think you know we treat all of our detainees with dignity and with respect. And so I understand the debate that's going on back there, but you know, I think it will help us, as an institution, particularly with the Army here, to deal with all detainees with dignity and respect.

MR. WHITMAN: Tom?

Q General, Tom Bowman with The Baltimore Sun. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about when the Iraqis can take the lead in the fight. We were first told that they could do so by the end of 2005 and then

General Abizaid amended that to the spring or summer of 2006.

And now, this new National Security Plan for Victory in Iraq says the Iraqis can take the lead in, quote, "the medium term," end of quote. How do you define the medium term? Is that one, two, three years or longer?

GEN. CASEY: Charles, there a couple of dimensions to this. One is the army, and the army is moving into the lead as we speak. Today, there is one division of the Iraqi army, four brigades and over 30 battalions that are actually in the lead. And as we look at the readiness projections coming up from our transition teams and the Iraqi commanders, we expect that process to continue through the summer and into the latter part of this year. I think you'll see the smaller units, the brigades coming online in a fairly large way by the summer, and I think the divisions you'll see in the lead here probably in the late fall and end of the year. So we're making very good progress there.

The other part of this transition, though, is a police transition and putting the police in the position and bringing the security situation to the point where the police can take charge of maintaining internal security across Iraq. And that I think we're going to start seeing in the latter part of 2006 and into the early part of 2007.

Q So the bottom line --

GEN. CASEY: That's generally how I see this moving.

Q Do you think Iraqi security forces can take the lead in total probably in '07 sometime?

GEN. CASEY: It will depend on the ministerial capacity that we can build here over the next few years with the new ministers. But I wouldn't say that that is out of the question.

And I guess just so we're clear, what we say -- when we say in the lead, we mean putting them in charge, still with our transition teams and still with our enabling support. So it's different than being operating totally independently.

Q (Off mike) -- support take you. Will that be two, three, four years or longer into the future?

GEN. CASEY: I couldn't quite hear you. I'm sorry. You broke up a little bit.

Q The enabling support from the U.S., how long will that take you into the future, 2, 3 years or longer?

GEN. CASEY: Difficult to say. But what I can tell you is that you should -- we should all expect it to -- the amount of support we provide -- to progressively reduce as they get progressively better, and that's the overall plan.

MR. WHITMAN: David.

Q General, Hi. David Cloud with The New York Times. You said you're going to be making some recommendations over the next few weeks, I think, about troop reductions. Can you give us a better sense of how you're going to assess that realistically when, you know, as you say, violence may go up post-election?

How are you going to assess that, and what's the scale of the reductions you're considering?

GEN. CASEY: I'm not going to talk about the specifics of the reduction, but we continually assess the security situation in terms of the capacity of the insurgency, the capacity of the Iraqi security forces all across the country. And we will make -- we'll continue with those assessments, update them based on what we see

coming out of these elections and what intelligence we're getting in the aftermath of the elections and make our recommendations. But I'm not going to get any more specific than that here.

MR. WHITMAN: Gordon?

Q General, it's Gordon Lubold at Army Times. I just wonder if you could elaborate a little more on -- when you always talk about "in the lead" and "side by side" and all that, from a practical standpoint, when troops, when Iraqi security forces are in the lead, what does it mean in terms of the role that the U.S. forces are playing? Are they a block behind? Are they in the ready room, so to speak, like working with -- can you just kind of explain briefly like what exactly that means from a practical standpoint?

GEN. CASEY: Sure. When an Iraqi unit is in the lead, they do the mission planning; they conduct the mission. They do that with our transition teams who are supporting and assisting. If they need a particular enabler for a mission -- for example, they may do an air assault, and so we might provide them helicopter support to move them. But they are provided other enablers on a mission-specific basis. And then we have quick reaction forces that are available not only to Iraqi forces but to our forces in the area that can help them out if they get in trouble. But the important thing, I think, to take away from this is they are doing the missions with our transition team assistance, and they may operate with U.S. forces or they may operate independently.

And just to give you an example, of the 1,700 company-size or larger -- so operations involving a hundred or more folks -- that we conducted in November, of the 1,700, only 200 were U.S.-only. The rest were either combined operations with coalition and Iraqi forces, or independent Iraqi operations. So they're taking a much larger role here.

Q General, can you bring us up to date on the ongoing investigation by Admiral Van Buskirk on the information operations? And can you say whether or not any of the program has been either stopped or halted temporarily until the investigation is done with?

GEN. CASEY: Scott has, I think, about another week or so to complete the investigation. I talked to him and gave him some guidance when he started it, and he's moving out conducting the election (sic).

We did a preliminary assessment shortly after the stories came out, and we concluded that we were operating within our authorities and the appropriate legal procedures. And so we have not suspended any of the processes up to now. But Scott has the direction that if at any time through the course of his investigation he comes across something that we're doing that makes him feel uncomfortable, that he should bring it directly to me and we'll evaluate it and take appropriate action. So I'd expect to hear back from Scott here in a week or so.

Q Just to follow up, he has not yet, obviously then, brought anything to your attention to date that has caused you to suspend anything?

GEN. CASEY: He has not.

MR. WHITMAN: Jim.

Q General, Jim Mannion from Agence France-Presse. Recently Secretary Rumsfeld has talked about divisions emerging within the insurgency. Can you elaborate on what he's talking about, what kinds of divisions you're seeing?

GEN. CASEY: The kind of divisions that we're seeing played out, frankly, in --Ramadi is probably a good example. Al Qaeda insurgents in the area tried to stop the local people of Ramadi from participating in the election process. Other insurgent groups came together and frustrated the al Qaeda in Iraq's attempt to halt

those elections. So we're seeing the political process, and particularly these elections, causing tensions within the insurgents.

I think you know that none of these insurgencies have common ends. The only thing they agree on is that they want us out. So there are exploitable fissures between the different elements of the insurgency.

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

Q General, this is Pam Hess with UPI.

Could you give us more detail on Ramadi -- what was it that al Qaeda in Iraq was trying to do, and how were those ends flouted by the insurgents? Would you also talk about -- something I read happened in Kirkuk, where a hospital was attacked and an insurgent was freed? I think it was a few days ago.

GEN. CASEY: Ramadi is a -- was one of our toughest cases. And we worked very hard with the operations out in the Western Euphrates and some pre-election operations in Ramadi to weaken the al Qaeda elements of the insurgency there so that the less-strong elements of the insurgency would have the opportunity to vote. I mean, al Qaeda engages in just outright intimidation and murder to keep people from participating in the political process, and they were doing that. And the -- some of the other insurgence groups -- primarily the Sunni insurgence groups -- came together and fought back against them. Our operations obviously helped. But they seemed to come together with the people and the leaders of Ramadi, and collectively they decided they were going to vote, and they were going to protect themselves during that vote.

And like I said, I'm optimistic. I'm hearing a turnout in the 45 to 50 percent range, which I believe will be a very, very positive step for the people of Anbar.

I'll also say that there was an awful good turnout in the western Euphrates Valley. And that voting would not have taken place had we not gone in and pushed al Qaeda out of the small villages that dot the Euphrates River from the Syrian border down to Ramadi.

The second question, Pam, on the hospital, I don't have a lot of information on that. The information I do have was that a group of insurgents went after a hospital and basically picked up of their own who had been wounded in an operation and took him away. But I don't have any more specifics on that.

MR. WHITMAN: We have time for just a couple more here. Let's go to Vicky.

Q General, Vicky O'Hara with National Public Radio.

Do you have -- the insurgents that you say took on al Qaeda in Ramadi in the interest of getting out the vote, have they indicated what sort of outcome they are looking for politically in order for them to leave off the violence from this point on?

GEN. CASEY: Not those insurgents particularly, but I will tell you in general the people, particularly the Sunni folks that I talk to, want a government that is seen as broadly representative of all the different ethnic and sectarian groups of Iraq.

And that is the one thing that I think that will really help pull this country -- come together in relatively short order. But we'll see how the government formation comes out. But that's what they're looking for. They need to feel that whatever government there is has their interest at heart and will represent them appropriately.

MR. WHITMAN: Mr. Hartman.

Q General, Brian Hartman with ABC News. Can you tell us a little bit about how any of Iraq's neighbors might have been meddling in the elections and just in general what Iraq's neighbors have been up to causing trouble for you and the coalition?

GEN. CASEY: Hmm. The neighbor that probably was most involved in, as you say, meddling in the elections was Iran. I don't have, you know, hard, smoking-gun type evidence, but the intelligence we get tells us that they invested fairly heavily in supporting political parties supportive of Iraq (sic) in the south. And I believe that they will continue to attempt the influence -- to influence the formation of this government over the coming weeks, to get a government that they believe is supportive of their interests. And that is worrisome, and it is a challenge for us.

On the other side, the Syrians appear to be taking some action to pick up foreign fighters and suicide bombers coming through Syria. We have indications of a few -- not a major change in their operating style -- but we have indications of a few measures that may in fact have helped limit some of the suicide bombers and foreign fighters coming through Syria. We'd clearly like to see more of that.

The other neighbors are actually fairly supportive.

MR. WHITMAN: General, we really have reached just about the end of our time, and I wanted to give you the last word here. So if you have anything that you'd like to close with, let me turn it back over to you.

GEN. CASEY: Thanks very much. And I'd just tell everyone that you could not be prouder of the men and women of the armed forces of the United States and frankly all the coalition nations over here.

What they've done here over the last -- as I said -- less than three years to bring Iraq to this point is unprecedented, and it would not have happened without the courage of the Iraqi people and leadership and the courage, commitment and drive of the members of the American armed forces.

So thank you all very much. Happy holidays to all the families back there. And we had a great day yesterday. On to 2006.

Thanks.

Q Thanks, general.

MR. WHITMAN: Thank you, general.

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