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Presenter: Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld and Jalal Talabani, President of Iraq

**December 23,
2005**

News Briefing with Secretary Rumsfeld and Jalal Talabani, President of Iraq

PRESIDENT TALABANI (via interpreter): -- our friend Mr. Rumsfeld, [inaudible] in achieving stability and security in Iraq. [Inaudible] the success of [inaudible], [inaudible] the unity [inaudible]. We [inaudible] forces [inaudible] government and [inaudible] the Christmas. We wish he could stay in Iraq. Welcome.

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: Mr. President, thank you so very much. It's always a privilege and a pleasure to be with you and to be back in Iraq and to have a chance to congratulate you and the Iraqi people on the successful elections.

The period ahead, of course, is a period of great opportunities and importance and you correctly pointed out the importance of having a new government, a permanent government that is representative of the entire country and will be able to provide the leadership necessary to keep Iraq on the path of democracy and to complete the task of assuring that your security forces have the capability and capacity to continue assuming responsibility for the security of the Iraqi people.

General Casey and Ambassador Zal Khalizad and General Dempsey who are all together working on these important activities gave me briefings and I'm very pleased with the progress. I've also taken this visit to Iraq as an opportunity to thank our troops and Coalition forces for their service here in Iraq. We appreciate what they're doing for your country and we appreciate what they're doing for peace in the region.

Thank you, sir.

QUESTION (via interpreter): [Inaudible] the removal of two brigades from the American forces. Is this removal conditional on the readiness of the Iraqi forces assuming responsibility?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: The United States has been in consultation with our Coalition partners and with the Iraqi government. And because the conditions here in Iraq have evolved favorably, we've made a decision to reduce our brigades from 17 to 15, and to increase some of our assistance to the training and equipping of the Iraqi security forces.

As you know, we increased our forces during the election period up to 160,000. Our baseline had been about 138,000. The adjustments that have been announced today will modestly reduce the force level somewhat below the

previous baseline of 138,000.

Force level adjustments are based on conditions. You've had a successful election. The Iraqi security forces are increasingly capable and we are continuously passing off more and more responsibility to the Iraqis and they are doing an excellent job.

QUESTION (via interpreter): [Inaudible] tried to bridge the gaps between the political parties who [inaudible]?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: I will leave those kinds of questions to the President and the Ambassador. I'm just a visitor.

QUESTION (via interpreter): [Inaudible] the withdrawal of American forces to the readiness of the Iraqi forces. Can you allow for the training of the Iraqi army?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: There is a schedule for the training of the Iraqi military and police forces. It is a comprehensive plan. It is on track and proceeding very successfully, and because of the success we are transferring responsibility for military bases on a careful basis, and also transferring responsibility for certain pieces of real estate to the Iraqi security forces. As you know, in Baghdad alone they're managing something over 50 percent of Baghdad Province, the Iraqi Security Forces, and doing a very good job.

QUESTION (via interpreter): [inaudible] present all Iraqis [inaudible] everybody.

A question to the Secretary of Defense. [Inaudible] about the success of the Iraqi elections. [Inaudible] situation, we may be glad this is a [inaudible] for the withdrawal of American forces [inaudible]. The success of this election was based on the success of the Iraqi government and the leadership.

This is the beginning of the withdrawal, the exit of American forces, the multinational forces from Iraq. This --

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: The force levels of the Coalition countries depend on conditions, security conditions here in Iraq. And the conditions have been evolving in a manner that permits us to make the adjustments. We will make periodic assessments in the future and make decisions based on the conditions, the security conditions here in Iraq.

QUESTION (via interpreter): President Talibani, [inaudible] bridge the gap [inaudible]. They [inaudible] Iraq and the United States and Coalition [inaudible]

Mr. Rumsfeld, to the [inaudible] in the Iraqi affairs, how do you look at it? [Inaudible] Iraq from outside regional powers [inaudible]?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: Iraq is a sovereign nation. It has its constitution it wrote and it ratified. And Iraq will make sovereign decisions. As the case with most countries, if other countries leave them free to make their own decisions.

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