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**Presenter: Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs Lawrence Di Rita and Director, Operations Directorate, Joint Chiefs of Staff Lt. Gen. James T. Conway**      **November 03, 2005 12:55 PM EDT**

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**News Briefing with PDASD for Public Affairs Lawrence Di Rita and Lt. Gen. James Conway**

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MR. DIRITA: Good afternoon. It's good to see everybody. We'll take a few questions as soon as General Conway, who has one or two points he'd like to make us -- and we'll go from there.

GEN. CONWAY: Thank you, Larry. And good afternoon, folks.

Well, in Iraq, we continue to make substantial progress in organizing, training and equipping the Iraqi security forces. They continue to grow in capability and confidence.

There are more than 210,000 members in the Iraqi security forces that have been trained and equipped now. That represents over 90 Iraqi police and army battalions in the fight. One division headquarters, four brigades and 24 battalions actually own battle space.

In October, Iraqi security forces independently conducted 35 percent of the major operations throughout the country. And yesterday the Iraqi 9th Army Division personnel prepared for off-load of 77 T-72 tanks that have been reconditioned in Hungary and sold to the Iraqi government.

Over in Pakistan, a different kind of operation is ongoing. There are currently 933 U.S. military personnel and 24 helicopters supporting relief operations in Pakistan, with nine additional CH-47s positioned at Bagram for deployment to Qasim Air Base when space there becomes available mid this month.

To date, U.S. helicopters have completed 788 sorties, delivered 1,921 short tons of humanitarian relief and transported 8,218 personnel.

DOD engineering teams are providing assistance with 60 pieces of engineering equipment and nine more pieces en route. Six U.S. military ships have delivered a total of 115 pieces of engineering equipment, including some being used by the government of Pakistan. The 212th MASH hospital in Muzaffarabad has treated 485 patients, including 39 surgeries. Components for a second medical facility are en route and will be established south of Balakot.

With that, we'll take your questions. Charlie.

Q The general says there's substantial progress in training and equipping Iraqi security forces. But, of course, that's -- that is one of the bases for eventually being able to remove U.S. troops from Iraq, large numbers. The secretary said this week that he expected recommendations soon from the theater on troop levels, on future troop levels. First, how many troops does the United State now have in Iraq today, and when do you expect those recommendations on future troop levels?

GEN. CONWAY: Charlie, right now we're just short of 160,000. That's sort of the base line figure that we think we'll probably see on through the election period. There will be some ebb and flow of that, because we have a number of turnovers taking place in the country. So there will be some variance of that over time. But we expect that'll continue on through the election of 15 December.

And that's, I think, in part the answer to your second question. That is our next major event on the calendar, if you will. If it goes as well as previous elections have -- and we have every reason to believe that it will -- then I think probably in the wake of that we'll see the commanders, General Casey and General Abizaid, reaching decision points on future forces in Iraq.

Q Do you think you'll -- you'll go down to the 138,000 soon? That was the -- kind of a benchmark after -- if you'll remember, after the election last January. You said before the elections in January, you set pretty much a time, a firm time line on when you expected to be back down to the 138,000.

GEN. CONWAY: Mm-hmm.

Q Do you have any plans regarding the upcoming election on when you'd go back to the 138,000 --

GEN. CONWAY: I would say it would be fairly rapid in its development, those units that General Casey has extended for the election or for brief periods of time afterwards. Now, there is the issue of how we get large numbers of troops out of the country with our air capability, shipping capability and that type of thing. So we'll have to handle that surge. But if you go back and check what happened after the last election, probably within a period of a month or so we were starting to get close to those what we call steady state figures of about 138,000.

MR. DIRITA: The --

Q Do you expect -- I'm sorry. Do you expect in a month or so -- ?

GEN. CONWAY: It will depend upon the surge and the ability, again, of the Transportation Command to manage that. There will be a number of brigades coming out based upon what has been done with extensions and so forth. But I think the answer is as soon as possible. As soon as our logistics capability will allow us to do that, we will come back to that steady state.

MR. DIRITA: The -- you know, the -- General Casey manages that number by working on the more or less regular flow of forces into and out of the country. We have a force rotation pattern that keeps troops there for the most part for a year. And then, as those years come up, they're -- the forces that are ordered in to replace them can be moved up a little bit, and General Casey can hold off on departures a little bit. And that's how he was able to get to this level that we had for the October 15th election. And you'll see that kind of management of the force continue through the December elections, and then we'll continue with our normal force rotations as they exist. And should he desire or determine -- he will make assessments and continue to make assessments, and after the elections will make assessments and may determine that he wants to have a higher number for whatever reason, have the same number, or have some other number. And that's just going to be an assessment he'll make -- he'll be making over time. I mean, it's just -- we'll -- we have force flow management capabilities that he'll be able to sustain some number. And if he wants more, he can ask for more, and if he wants less, he'll ask

for less.

Q But the general seems to suggest that he expects -- he expects it'll probably go down to --

MR. DIRITA: Based on the current force flows, that's how it would happen. General Casey could determine after the elections that "I want more," for whatever reason, and then he'll get more.

So I don't -- I always want to caution people, when they think that they know what's going to happen in steady state -- steady state happens to be that number that we all accept, 138,000, but I wasn't surprised that we got to 161,000 for the elections; but some of you were. And I don't want you to be surprised again when for whatever reasons, General Casey says, "I might want more," "I'll stick where I am, in steady state," or "I'll ask for less." And those are his three choices, and he'll have the full flexibility to achieve those levels or we'll provide him the capability to do that, so.

But based on current force rotations and the way the units are ordered in and will be ordered out, that's the way the number would shake out over some period of time post-elections. But I wouldn't want people to say, "Therefore, after the elections this will be the number," because you are just as likely to be wrong as right.

GEN. CONWAY: Two principles, I think, apply -- to bring it to a close. One is that it will always be conditions based, based on what the commander assesses on the ground. And secondly, the president has said it, when the Iraqis are able to stand up, then we will be able to stand down.

Q Larry, could I follow up on that question? That in addition to the question of what the steady state will be after the election, there's also the question of when or if there will be an actual drawdown, as has been referred to a number of times in the past year. So, when would that decision be made?

MR. DIRITA: Well, I can say there hasn't been a decision made on that to this point. It is based on conditions. The conditions include a lot of things. The political milestones that are being met are certainly part of those conditions, and they are being met. We'll have elections in December, and General Casey will have that much more understanding of how he feels.

How the Iraqi security forces begin to take over areas of Iraq is another condition that General Conway has already talked about. So it's an assessment that he'll make and then make -- as the secretary said, he will make recommendations on how he feels about the steady state, which is, I think, the point Charlie was asking about. But at the moment, there haven't been any decisions made on that aspect of it.

Q It would obviously be after the election, I assume; right?

MR. DIRITA: It wouldn't be before the election.

Q But it would be part and parcel of the question of where you go from the 160,000 or so? You go down to a steady state. Is that the same decision as when you begin drawdowns during the course of the year, or is that a separate matter?

MR. DIRITA: It's hard to parce these decisions. I mean, they do -- because you got units that are flowing in and it's possible to make decisions about a unit that might have thought it was go on such and such a date; you say, well, hold off. It's just too early to say. It's too early. It would not be something that you necessarily would want to segregate out as separate decisions. General Casey will kind of look at the conditions that exist, look at the conditions that exist with the Iraqi security forces, and make certain recommendations on the capability that he needs; and then how that capability is achieved is something that that's what the Joint Staff does, along with the Army and the Marines.

Q Larry, is the Pentagon finalizing plans to put a high-level general in charge of a(n) IED task force, as the Los Angeles Times is reporting?

MR. DIRITA: The -- well, why don't I let General Conway start, and then I'd be happy to add to whatever he might have on that.

GEN. CONWAY: I think probably this whole effort to defeat IEDs is one of the most important things that is taking place in the building, and with the special task force that General Votel has very capably headed. There are recommendations that have gone before the Joint Chiefs of Staff in how to further enhance what they're doing. There is no shortage of funding to the effort. There's no shortage of emphasis coming out of theater that encourages us to come to a solution. And it has been discussed, at least -- a decision has not been made, but it has been discussed that perhaps adding a three-star oversight to the effort might further enhance its ability to get things done.

Q I mean, a suggestion in the article that a one-star, however well-intentioned, just doesn't have the juice sometimes to get things done, as a three-star, is -- I mean, is that perception correct?

GEN. CONWAY: Three-stars do good work! (Laughs; laughter.)

MR. DIRITA: I can say they got a lot of juice!

But let me add to that, though. The IED task force began, I think, in the summer of '04, and it was something that was more or less given its -- a lot of energy by the deputy secretary of Defense, and it has continued to be the case. First, Paul Wolfowitz and now Gordon England have made this a priority responsibility of their set of assigned responsibilities. So it is -- it has -- how this department can organize and manage the challenge that we face with IEDs has been one of signal import, reflected by the fact that the deputy secretary of Defense has made it a priority. However, as we've learned and decided that there may be additional organizational emphasis we can put behind it, there have been these proposals to maybe elevate the officer in charge, if you will. And that's -- but there's been no final decisions on that.

Q I think we all -- I think everyone understands that it's a difficult problem to solve. I just -- why is it so hard, and is it really something that you -- that you can solve, given the technology today and the advantage that the enemy has?

GEN. CONWAY: It is hard. Historically, it's been hard. If you go all the way back to the British experience in Northern Ireland, they had problems with it. The Israelis in Northern Israel and Lebanon have had problems with it. And we've tried to study what their experiences were and to learn from that.

The task force is doing marvelous work here, I think, inside the States. There's also a great deal of effort, of course, taking place inside the theater. And it's a multifaceted problem, and there are various links in the chain that I think we look to see where can we break it, and thereby reduce their effectiveness. You have to have a financier to put it all together. You have to have a bomb-maker who has the expertise to actually create the device. What we've found a lot of times is that one person will lay it, and another person will be the initiator. Then you get to force protection methods. If it's going to happen, how do we best protect our troops against it? Through their individual equipment? Through the armoring of the vehicles, which we have done? Through training that allows them to understand what the current methodologies are and those types of things?

So we're looking at that whole facet associated with IEDs because it's the only tool the enemy really has left in order to be able to take us on and cause casualties. And when we defeat that one method, you know, it's over.

MR. DIRITA: Just a final point on that, I mean, as the general said, it's intelligence, it's tactics, and it's

equipment. And on the equipment side, the IED task force has focused on what can we do, and they're doing a lot of very important work, innovative work. They've got almost a billion and a half dollars to work with this year alone. So it's been an important priority, but it's a tough problem.

Q But one of the critics in the article complained, you know, why don't they have a -- simply a level of effort equivalent to, say, the Manhattan Project?

MR. DIRITA: Yeah.

Q Would you put this on that --

MR. DIRITA: I would say what I've said. It's a challenge that -- we understand that it's a tough challenge and one that we have put a lot of institutional focus on. And let others characterize it. I personally don't like those kinds of characterizations because then it's in the eye of the beholder. What I'm just describing is the level of effort, and it's been substantial.

Yeah?

Q Larry, the parents of the missing soldier in Iraq, Sgt. Maupin, are going to be at the Pentagon this week. And I'm wondering if there's anything new you can tell us about the search and recovery effort and if you can put any sort of contours on the scale and the scope of that effort to try to find out what has happened to Sgt. Maupin.

GEN. CONWAY: No, I can only tell you that he is in everybody's mind. I had an opportunity to review an Army daily report yesterday, and there's a box there for Sgt. Maupin and the most recent information available. So he is not forgotten.

MR. DIRITA: It is one in which -- the commanders there are mindful of. They know that we have a missing soldier, and we're applying such capabilities we have to trying to resolve that and -- however it can be resolved. So it's something of importance.

Q Is there no numbers, no -- nothing you can tell us about what units, maybe any success they may have had, any leads --

MR. DIRITA: I can't, and if we have something that we might -- could, then we will. But I'm not current on the most -- I am aware that the commanders are -- as the general has suggested, there's heightened awareness of that as a priority for the commanders over there, of resolving Sgt. Maupin's status.

Q A couple of weeks ago in Iraq, their Commission on Public Integrity issued arrest warrants for about two dozen people in the Defense Ministry that was under Iyad Allawi. And that was a government that was largely appointed with help from the United States --

MR. DIRITA: Just before we get too much further into your question, it has the sound of a long one. You said that the Defense Ministry under Iyad Allawi -- I think you said that.

Q Yeah.

MR. DIRITA: Is that correct?

Q Yeah.

MR. DIRITA: Was he the Defense minister?

Q No, no, no. When he was president -- or when he was prime minister.

MR. DIRITA: Okay. So he -- okay. Got you. So he wasn't --

Q It wasn't your Mr. Rumsfeld --

(Laughter.)

MR. DIRITA: No. Aren't we all? Aren't we all? But you did say the MOD -- Iyad Allawi --

Q Well, Iyad Allawi was not an elected leader.

MR. DIRITA: Okay.

Q He was appointed by the United States. There have been two dozen arrest warrants issued for people for fraud and corruption in the government that was under him. And I'm wondering if the billion dollars that was sort of in question there -- was that U.S. money or was that all Iraqi money? And are there any Americans that are under investigation or participating in these investigations? Because obviously, there was a heavy American presence in the CPA along with the Ministry of Defense. And what is the way forward on this? A particular interest because, of course, for the Iraqi military to be able to stand up and do this work on its own, it needs a functioning ministry of defense. So what is your understanding and your state of confidence in the current Ministry of Defense and the level of corruption?

MR. DIRITA: I couldn't speak to the -- I know that professionalizing the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Interior we've discussed. It's an important priority. It is among the many vital tasks that the U.S. government faces as it assists the Iraqi government transition. Developing a capable defense and interior ministry is right at the top of the list, because we can develop a very effective -- and are well on our way to doing so -- develop a very effective Iraqi security force, but if there isn't the kind of civil support, civil service support, bureaucratic support for acquisitions and all the other things that go along with it, then you don't have a sustainment capability.

That said, there have been -- there has been no small amount of oversight as to how funds are being spent in Iraq. We have had a -- we had the CPA inspector general, the Defense Finance and Accounting Service -- or the Defense Contract Audit Agency, I should say, has spent an enormous amount of time looking at how appropriate funds are spent. I think the special -- the inspector general for Iraq, who is what the CPA IG morphed into, has issued recent reports, including a compilation of previously issued reports. I don't think anybody should be dissatisfied with the level of scrutiny, and it's proper for the amount of money that we're talking about.

That with, respect to specific investigations, I'm unaware that there are any -- there's anybody involved in the Iraqi investigation that's going on with respect to the minister of Defense. I know, because the inspector general has talked about it, that there has been ongoing investigations of various allegations on the coalition side. And that's what his job is to do, and that's what he's doing.

So as to your specific question about whether there's coalition or Americans involved in the Iraqi investigation, I simply don't know.

Q And what about your confidence in the current government or the government to follow on, in corruption? Do you feel like this corruption --

MR. DIRITA: You're asking if we're confident in a government that doesn't exist? In other words, the people who will be the Ministry of Defense after December?

Q I'm not going to ask you that. I'm going to ask are you confident in the government currently, in the department of defense there.

MR. DIRITA: It's a tough challenge, and they're doing their best. And the people that we work with are people that for the most part are very committed to the same things that the coalition is committed to, which is the Iraqi government standing up and taking responsibility for that country. And when these kinds of unfortunate circumstances arise, they need to be fully investigated. And I've outlined for you the manifold capability that we have to investigate these things.

Yeah?

Q Back to the IED task force, are you -- in addition to putting a three-star in charge, are you also recommending that the task force itself be expanded? And are you considering making it multi-agency?

MR. DIRITA: I think that -- the last point -- it is. I mean, I think there is a lot of interagency activity. Certainly, there is -- it's a joint task force in the sense that every relevant component of this department's involved, but I think if there's more -- I mean, expanding the reach into other areas of the government that might not have been involved is certainly something that is appropriate. And I don't know to what extent it's a part of --

GEN. CONWAY: There's also some physical expansion, a few more personnel assigned, Centers of Excellence at testing facilities, those types of things. I'm hesitant to talk too much about it because it's not been briefed to the secretary fully, nor have we slapped the table.

MR. DIRITA: But again, the amount of work that's gone to date has been -- at least within the department -- very much a joint activity. I mean, it goes well beyond -- it started out as an Army concern, and Army then expanded into a joint --

Q When you say a few more people --

Q You said the task force is just now -- has the existing task force -- has it involved agencies outside of DOD?

MR. DIRITA: Do we know the answer to that, Bryan?

STAFF: (Off mike.)

MR. DIRITA: We can get that for you. I simply don't know the answer.

Do you know, General? (Off mike response.)

Yeah, we'll find out.

Q When you say a few more people involved, how many are involved now in the IED --

GEN. CONWAY: Well, I don't have the exact figures of the size of General Votel's task force, Charlie.

MR. DIRITA: We can provide all this data. I'm sure it's available. We'll get it for you.

Yeah?

Q John McCain's amendment on detainee interrogation is going to be debated by the House and

Senate Appropriations conference in the next couple days. He's likely going to introduce it next week when the authorization committee reports to the Senate floor. Can you restate or give us some insight into the policy objections that the Pentagon has for the amendment?

And General Conway, are there military objections to the reasons why the military would oppose the amendment, that your own guidelines seem to suggest -- the draft guidelines -- seem to suggest that the Geneva Convention protections are going to be elevated in your own guidelines, so it seems like it's the same thing you want to do here. But why the opposition?

MR. DIRITA: Well, first of all, the Pentagon doesn't -- does not speak on behalf of legislation. It's the administration that does, and the administration policy is that amendments of that nature, that can lead to restrictions on our ability to act with agility and act with creativity, recognizing that everybody accepts the fundamental premise that detainees must be treated humanely and that that is the policy of the United States. But within that well-accepted standard -- and it's a standard that has been promulgated throughout the force -- to take one collection of interrogation methods and say this is the way detainees must be interrogated and it now becomes a component of U.S. statute and code, suggests a certainty about how to manage detainees that the people who actually manage detainees don't necessarily share. What we learned in Guantanamo is that the detainees down there know what we do by virtue of interrogation manuals and procedures. And they are trained to resist.

And so, again, our standard is humane treatment. And we have not found -- in the multiple investigations into how we manage detainees, anybody that has concluded that anybody violated the humane treatment standard except to the extent that people have been -- have violated the U.S. Code of Military Justice and have been charged appropriately. That being said, they -- the interrogators down there asked for and received some flexibility into the way that they were able to manage the -- and -- how they interrogate detainees. We have briefed this exhaustively, as you know.

So there's a perception that the kind of rigidity that comes with these kinds of amendments could restrict the president's flexibility in the global war on terror, and anything that restricts our ability to engage in this highly agile adversary is not desirable. That's the administration policy.

Q We -- you're drafting your new Army guidelines, and they're elevating the Geneva Convention and the guidelines, according to The New York Times the other day, which --

MR. DIRITA: Yeah. There have been no decisions. There is a very serious discussion going on inside this department about what's the best way to promulgate the next version of the field manual that is under review. There's been no decision. So -- I mean, newspaper reports aren't always conclusive in what they report.

Q General Conway, can you give us some insight from the military perspective, the interrogator's perspective on why they would object to this?

GEN. CONWAY: No -- no.

MR. DIRITA: Let me very clear, Tony, because we -- I don't want to put General Conway -- it is a statement of administration policy. It's not a statement of Pentagon policy. We are part of the administration. And therefore, the Pentagon's position is that.

Q But you feed the administration position. They don't come out of thin air, they come to you --

MR. DIRITA: I have given you a very good explanation of what the general concerns are about the philosophy of let's put down in statute final decisions as though they're final. They're not final.

Q But Larry, isn't there a difference between what your position is and what the joint staff -- isn't the joint staff --

MR. DIRITA: No. We were asked a very -- I was asked a very specific question: what's the position on Senator McCain's amendment. And I have provided you the response.

Q We asked --

MR. DIRITA: The administration has spoken on behalf of the amendment.

Q But he asked specifically for General Conway as a uniformed officer, and he --

MR. DIRITA: About the McCain amendment?

Q Yeah. And the -- and the -- and it's my understanding --

MR. DIRITA: And all I'm doing was trying to caution that there is a statement of administration policy. And that is the policy of this administration.

Q But isn't the joint staff sort of a -- the independent advice to the president, and so therefore could differ from your advice to the president, or --

MR. DIRITA: I don't offer advice, and neither does General Conway. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff does.

Q Well, to your bosses.

Q Yeah, but they have JAGs of the Joint Chiefs that analyze this stuff. That's why I'm asking, General, what did your JAGs tell you about the --

GEN. CONWAY: Gentlemen, let me simply say that when a policy is administered, we will train our interrogators accordingly. That's -- we -- we depend on the people on the third deck, for the most part, to administrate that, and we'll comply with whatever --

Q Larry, one thing. You said that detainees -- there's evidence they know what the field manuals say on interrogations --

MR. DIRITA: The Army Field Manual is on the Internet. They're in the Army field manual.

Q Yeah, but how do guys in Guantanamo get access to the Internet?

MR. DIRITA: They are -- they are very well trained in our interrogation techniques. We know that as a matter of certain fact. We know that detainees that we have captured in this global war on terror are aware of how we interrogate according to our own field manuals.

Q On the detainees -- the International Committee of the Red Cross has come out and said publicly today that it's been asking the administration and -- or the U.S. government for a long time -- perhaps since 2003 -- regarding the whereabouts and circumstances of certain high-profile detainees, to which it doesn't have access. Has the ICRC asked DOD specifically about detainees to which it doesn't have access, and what's DOD's --

MR. DIRITA: I don't -- I have not seen their statement, so I wouldn't even want to speculate. I do know

that the ICRC has access to DOD detention facilities, and they gain access to detainees that we're holding. I mean, I've not seen -- you've asked a very precise thing, and I have not seen their statement, so I'm just giving you a general statement of policy.

Q On policy, then, to just nail it down -- all DOD-managed facilities have ICRC access? Is that correct?

MR. DIRITA: All of our -- all of the areas where the DOD detains -- has detainees, the ICRC has access to, and that's been an ongoing activity that we've briefed exhaustively. So --

Q Say in other facilities --

MR. DIRITA: I -- I --

Q -- where DOD might have a presence, would the ICRC --

MR. DIRITA: I -- what other facilities? I don't know what you're referring to.

Q Well, managed by other government agencies --

MR. DIRITA: Well, I would refer you to other government agencies.

Q But if DOD were to have a presence there?

MR. DIRITA: You're asking a hypothetical question. If you have a specific question, I'd be happy to try and get you an answer.

Yeah?

Q I wonder if the General could just speak a little bit to the training of Iraqi forces. I know it's event-driven, but can you talk a little bit about -- you characterized the time line or hope to get them to a level one and a top-level capability. When do you hope to get more of those done?

GEN. CONWAY: Well, the -- you know, I -- I know you all have probably seen the matrix that comes from out of theater and the four categories of Iraqi troops. But I would focus your attention to the middle two sectors, which basically talk to the ability of Iraqis to operate in the fight against terrorism. The level one is, in my mind, somewhat a misnomer, until, you know, the Iraqi army has a full logistics kind of capability, and we're in the process of building that.

Now in the meantime, does that mean that a battalion cannot fight, cannot engage alongside its American counterpart, in particular, in this fight? Absolutely not. As I mentioned, we have over 90 battalions engaged in the fight right now. So for folks to focus on a fact that there's maybe only one or two or three who are category one, I think, is a little bit of a misread or maybe even a distortion.

Q Is that where you start to get to where there's a correlation between reduction of U.S. troops -- when the Iraqi forces do get to, like, the level one, though, is that where you're going to start to have to draw a correlation between the reduction of U.S. forces?

GEN. CONWAY: No, I wouldn't hang it on that divisor on the chart. I think there's a number of impressions that the commanders on scene will be taking from Iraqis, not the least of which is leadership and experience, how do they respond after they've been bloodied, those types of things, that will help us to determine when they are able to take on a fight.

MR. DIRITA: In fact, when General Petraeus was here, I think he talked about some level two units that are now in control of their area of responsibility, and by having assumed control, American forces are no longer in control of that area of responsibility. So directly to your point, that we've turned over areas of responsibility to Iraqi units that are not at level one, so it is a much misunderstood category. But fair enough, we've discussed it ad nauseam.

We've maybe got time for two more here.

Q I wanted to ask about this escape from the detention facility at Bagram back in July. Maybe the general could explain how that happened. I mean, after all, I think that should be a maximum security facility. Was there some sort of inside, you know, cooperation or involvement? And also, the other three people who escaped, what level were they? Were they also senior al Qaeda captains?

GEN. CONWAY: I'm sorry, I do not have the details of the escape. And quite frankly, we probably wouldn't talk about it openly if we did.

Q Well, but it is kind of surprising that you have a major detention facility that is a maximum facility -- maximum security facility and yet you have at least one senior al Qaeda person -- person escaping from it. I mean, it begs for some kind of an explanation.

GEN. CONWAY: I think explanations will probably be forthcoming, but I simply don't have that information to pass to you today.

Q Larry? Do you?

MR. DIRITA: No, as I understand it, and this is all first information, there was a gap in a bulkhead or a fencing area that they were able to exploit. And it was a small gap and it's apparently been addressed by now. But they escaped. I mean, prison escapes happen. Even in tightly controlled prisons, they do happen.

Q What about the other people who escaped?

MR. DIRITA: I don't have any detailed information. I'm not sure that even if we did, we'd provide much detail. I mean, these are people that are in a detention facility and presumed to be bad people, and get regularly reviewed as to whether we think they're bad. And these are bad guys and they escaped. And it's not something that should have happened, but it did. So we can't offer much more.

How about last one, AI?

Q General, can you confirm the report that officers of the former Iraqi army are being invited now to join the new army?

Why -- if so, why was that decision made, and how concerned are you about the reliability of those folks?

MR. DIRITA: We do know that it has happened. It's a conscious and independent decision that's been made by the minister of Iraqi Defense. It could affect, we compute, as many as 350,000 Iraqi mid-grade officers, should they decide to all accept his invitation.

It has potentially some positives associated with it. I understand that there is a need, always, for experienced mid-level officers in the Iraqi army. A significant percentage of those -- I couldn't say how many -- would likely be Sunni, and that would make the army more secular, perhaps, than it is right now, would give that

segment of the population greater engagement in the governmental progress -- process. And we think that's a positive thing. So, at this point we'll wait and see how many take the minister up on his offer to re-join.

Q Do you think it was a good decision to invite these guys back? Sounds like it.

MR. DIRITA: My personal belief is that it's -- first of all, it's an Iraqi decision, but secondly, I think it probably is a good decision at this point.

Q Let me ask -- let me ask you another side of the question, then. Was it a mistake to disband the army when that decision was made, how much did that maybe hurt the development of the army and maybe help the insurgency?

MR. DIRITA: You know, we've gone around and around on that, Al. And people will be able to form their own conclusions. General Conway is free to offer his conclusions. He wasn't there, I wasn't -- actually, I was there. But, I mean --

GEN. CONWAY: I was there, too. (Laughter.)

MR. DIRITA: Okay, you -- we were both there; we've got an opinion. But to say was it a mistake is -- is -- people have their visions. You know, we've -- what -- what did happen in large part is the Iraqi army disbanded itself; in many cases, they left. But decisions were made then that seemed appropriate at the time, and now the Iraqi government is making decisions that seem appropriate to this point. And the -- you know, at some point the sort of "who shot John" gets a bit tedious. And it's a very important thing to decide here's where we are, and let's go forward. Having learned all the things we've learned, here where we sit today.

And General Conway, you're free to offer --

Q And it's partly --

MR. DIRITA: It is tedious.

Q And it's tedious for you guys. Not so much for us. (Laughs.)

MR. DIRITA You guys have a never-ending tolerance for tedium.

Q General Conway's view?

GEN. CONWAY: It's a mixed answer. Some people would tell you that there was no Iraqi army at the time when it was dismissed. I mean, we saw large numbers of those soldiers going home, et cetera, et cetera. There was concern that you could very quickly re-create the conditions, which we had just disrupted, if two senior people came back in, the Sunnis once again started -- the Sunni leadership who had control started to re-gain control. On the other hand, the Iraqi army was the most respected institution in Iraq. And so, there is advantages to having that stability, that respect that the people inherently have for their army, there to help them through what were some really tough times.

So I think it's -- I think it's a mixed bag.

MR. DIRITA: I'll tell you, when Bremer announced that he had the Iraqi -- what became the core of the Iraqi Governing Council, and it represented the full range of the Iraqi cultural, social, political and ethnic religious strata, I mean, everybody was represented -- you had Shi'a, you had senior Sunni, you had secular Sunni, you had Kurd -- every one of them, when Bremer talked to them and had them in and said this is what we're thinking of doing, everyone of them said it's the right decision and it needs to be more. That went to de- Ba'athification

and the whole discussion about moving past what existed at the time.

Now, each of those individuals is free to say, "Geez, I'd have done it differently," and "I think it could have been done -- if you had done it this way and not that way." Fair enough. But the general view that this was a new beginning for Iraq, and that the CPA authority was what it was, in response to U.N. resolutions that the CPA had the obligation to make decisions, and in the best knowledge that existed at the time, this is the decision that's going to be made. And we'll leave it to historians and to people like you that never --

Q Larry, are you saying Sunnis supported de-Ba'athification?

MR. DIRITA: I'm saying everybody had a view as to whether or not it should go this far or that far. That's what I'm saying. And I'm being very careful. Everybody is free to flyspeck it, and they will and they did. But the general conclusion -- the general response he got when he announced it to all these leaders was: It's important; it has to happen. If I were you, I'd do it this way. If I were you, I'd only do it this way.

But the general view that we need a new beginning in Iraq because there's very few of the institutions that aren't tainted by Saddam Hussein. So, you know, the historians and people like you can flyspeck it forever.

Q Larry, can I just clarify one --

MR. DIRITA: We're out of time, Barbara, I'm sorry.

Q Oh, I'd like you to clarify --

Q May I clarify one thing?

MR. DIRITA: Thanks a lot.

Q It's to clarify.

Q It's a point of clarification.

MR. DIRITA: Oh, it's a point of clarification. What are the rules on that? You're our parliamentarian here.

Q It's Robert's Rules of Orders. You've got to take this point of clarification.

Q You do.

Q Because I think it's an interesting question. About the IED task force --

MR. DIRITA: Is this a clarification?

Q It is, because I didn't quite understand. From this podium, and from Baghdad, for months you have told us that IEDs are a very difficult problem, but yet that the military is doing everything it realistically can do to solve the IED problem. But we're now hearing today that the uniformed military, the Joint Chiefs of Staff -- perhaps General Conway can address this -- is looking at a series of recommendations we're hearing for the first time to do something more. So apparently the Joint Chiefs have come to some understanding, or asked for recommendations, or somebody out there in the uniformed senior leadership is saying, "Wait a minute, there's more we can do about IEDs." Can you help, either one of you, particularly you, General Conway, square it for us? Because we have been hearing all the way along you're doing everything you realistically could do. It appears not to be the case.

GEN. CONWAY: Well, I think it has been the case. I think General Votel has done a superlative job working this issue for quite some time. It started out as independent efforts. It was made into a joint effort, to make sure that there was no wasted energy, no duplication of effort, that type of thing. And none of what is being done here is in any way, I think, decrementing the job that he and his task force has done. It's just that it remains the only thing that we haven't solved, I think, in terms of the enemy capability to operate against us. And every facet of what we can do is being thrown against it.

Q So at some point, did the Joint Chiefs go back to the military? Did the secretary come to the Joint Chiefs? Why is this now being addressed?

GEN. CONWAY: Barbara, it's a continual reexamination, I think, of where we are and what else can we do.

MR. DIRITA: It's kind of evolving situation, Barbara. I mean, we learn things, and as we learn things, we apply that knowledge. It's -- I think what we've said all along is, it is a very tough challenge, and we're applying ourselves to that challenge as aggressively as we can. And as you learn more, you apply more of that knowledge. But it's not a static situation. And so to say that what we were doing today is -- should be the same as what we doing a year ago would suggest we hadn't learned anything. I mean, we've learned things. And as we learn things, we apply that knowledge. And as we apply that knowledge -- by the way, the enemy's learning too, so he's changing what he does.

So the problem -- the IED problem that existed a year ago is a different IED problem than the IED problem that exists today. We've discussed that. There's only so much about that we want to discuss. But the fact is, it's an evolving challenge. And we're learning, and the enemy's learning, and as we continue to learn, we'll apply more knowledge to it. There's our clarification.

We also had -- I guess somebody said 140 people is assigned to the IED task force -- that's just a matter of fact -- civilian and military.

Thanks a lot, folks.

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