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Presenter: Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, Lawrence Di Rita and Deputy Director for Regional Operations J-3, Brig Gen Carter Ham **October 06, 2005 3:10 PM EDT**

News Briefing with PDASD for Public Affairs Lawrence Di Rita and Maj. Gen. Carter Ham

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MR. DIRITA: Good afternoon. I don't have any particular remarks before we take some questions, but General Ham has one or two updates for you. I think you heard from General Lynch this morning or, if not you, he did brief reporters in Baghdad on some of the ongoing operations.

Hello. Thank you.

And that information is available. And I think General Ham has a few comments. Then we'll be happy to take some questions.

GEN. HAM: Thanks, Mr. DiRita.

Over the past several days, senior leaders from the Joint Staff, Central Command and Multinational Forces Iraq have addressed the improving capabilities of the almost 197,000 Iraqi security forces as they increasingly assume responsibility for security operation across their country.

There continues to be similar growth among the Afghan security forces, and today there are about 78,000 trained and equipped Afghan personnel working alongside U.S., other coalition and NATO forces, representing more than 40 nations, throughout Afghanistan.

As in Iraq, the Afghan National Army units are aided in their training and their operations by embedded training teams who live and work daily with these brave Afghans. Every day the Afghan security forces grow in capability and experience, and they are assuming a greater role in providing security for their own nation.

In Iraq, operations with Iraqi and coalition forces continue across the country. This morning, as some of you may have heard, Major General Lynch discussed Iraqi coalition operations in the Euphrates River Valley and the preparations to provide security for the upcoming constitutional referendum.

The operations by Iraqi and Afghan security forces are indicative of the progress of so many Iraqis and Afghans, and the great sacrifice and service of our American and other coalition soldiers, sailors, airmen and

Marines, and that ought -- make all of us very proud. This is an incredibly talented, brave and dedicated group of young people who are making our country safer while helping to nourish the seeds of freedom in Iraq and Afghanistan.

And if I may, just a quick note, update on military support to relief operations in Southeastern United States. There are still approximately 1,350 active duty and about 24,500 National Guard forces continuing to provide support in the Katrina and Rita operations area. The USNS Comfort continues to provide medical services in the Port of New Orleans. Federal, state and local authorities continually assess the requirements for military support and remain quite proud of all those in uniform who have worked so hard to help their fellow Americans.

Thank you, sir.

MR. DIRITA: Thank you, General.

Charlie?

Q Larry, Japanese media in Tokyo are saying that the secretary has decided -- the secretary planned to go to Japan, they say, this month, and he's decided not to go because the issue has not been settled of Futenma and Okinawa. And you-all have issued a statement saying that yes, he will not be going immediately, there's no reason to go because the issue is still up in the air. I wonder if you could comment on that, why he's not going, and what the issue is with Futenma.

MR. DIRITA: Well, first of all, to clarify some of the reporting that I saw on it, the secretary has no plans to go Japan. Some reports indicated that there was a planned trip that was cancelled, and that's not accurate. There are no plans to go. And at the moment, given the status of the discussions regarding the posture realignment in Japan, it just didn't seem like an appropriate time to be planning for such a trip. So there won't be a trip.

With respect to the individual aspects of what's being discussed, I think it's not something that I'm going to be able to get into in any detail because they are ongoing discussions and it's not helpful to those kinds of discussions to be opining on them from the podium. But there is no -- there is no plan -- no trip contemplated. And at the same time, these discussions are taking place.

Q Well, wasn't there some effort to try to get an agreement ready for President Bush when he visits later this year?

MR. DIRITA: I'm not aware of any -- we would very much like to be able to resolve these kinds of issues as quickly as they can be resolved. They're complicated issues. They involve discussions about our evolving global posture realignment that's taking place throughout the region, not just in Japan. But I'm not aware that there's been anything tied to anybody's -- any U.S. official's trip, including the president's. They will be concluded when they're concluded, and they're not done for the purposes of providing deliverable results for trips. That's just not -- I mean, if there's a serendipitous conclusion of such negotiations when officials do visit, it's nice to be able to conclude those kind of things, but that's not the intent of these discussions, to my knowledge.

Bob?

Q General Ham, you mentioned the training of Afghan forces. What's the target level that you're shooting for in terms of the total number? And when do you expect to get there?

GEN. HAM: Let me drag my notes while I answer that. But it is also important to note that the growth and development of security forces in Afghanistan started from a much lower level than it did in Iraq. So the

development has been very deliberate, very positive, but a bit slower. Ultimately, 132,000 is the eventual goal, and that is still several years, perhaps four years.

Q Four years?

GEN. HAM: Yes.

Yes?

Q General Ham, I wonder if I could ask you the latest in what you see in both Iranian and Syrian efforts across their borders to affect the situation in Iraq. Specifically, with Iran, the British prime minister today said he saw evidence of Iranian weapons coming into Iraq, being used for various attacks there. What is the latest you're seeing in cross-border influence coming in from Iran and also in from Syria and not the diplomatic efforts? What's the military doing about it?

GEN. HAM: For Iran, first, you'll remember about a month ago, Iraqi border security forces discovered a shipment of devices from Iran into Iraq, so, I think, that's perhaps indicative of the nature of the problem and the concern. It is principally, as we would expect, an Iraqi issue to secure their own border with Iran. We have a responsibility to help them, both in terms of training and with technology, to improve their border forces. It remains very clearly an area of concern, particularly for Multinational Division Southeast, which is perhaps why the British are also very concerned about that.

On the other side of the country and the long border with Syria, the concerns are similar of how do you secure that very long, open border. Many of you have seen that. You know what it looks like. You know how it -- how porous it can tend to be. One of the operations that I suspect Major General Johnson from Multinational Force West will talk about tomorrow and General Lynch talked a bit about it today -- one of the operations that is ongoing in the vicinity of al Qaim is focused specifically to that purpose, to help establish security along the Syrian border with Iraq, to deny specific towns and villages to be -- that have previously, we believe, been used by facilitators.

Q Right. Now it's sort of on the policy level, but sort of on the ground, what are you seeing? Are you seeing nowadays still Iranians come across the border? Are you seeing weapons shipments come into Iraq? And what level of Syrian people are you seeing come across from Syria?

GEN. HAM: The most recent I'm familiar with in Iran is the one about a month ago. I'm not aware of anything specific since that particular incident that the Iraqis found, though it remains of concern.

In Syria, there has been evidence of the movement of individuals. We believe some of them to be foreign fighters, and efforts to interdict those flows -- the flow across the borders is a very specific focus of the current operation. It was a part of the operations -- the military operations conducted by both the coalition and Iraqi forces in Tall Afar, again, to get to those nodes that the insurgents are using to facilitate the move -- the cross-border movement from Syria into Iraq and the money -- and that's movement of individuals, of materiel, weapons and the movement of monies as well.

Q How are you getting to the nodes of the Syrian side of the border?

GEN. HAM: It's not on the Syrian side; on the Iraqi side.

Go ahead.

Q I'd press you a little bit on that, General, on the Iranian part of that. The prime minister said or indicated that sophisticated explosives have been tied to either Iranian elements or Hezbollah, and a British

official on background said infrared devices and armor-piercing explosives. Can you give a little bit more granularity as far as what they're seeing in southern Iraq that might be tied to Iran?

GEN. HAM: Again, other than that one specific incident, I'm not aware of any --

Q I'm talking about the timers --

GEN. HAM: Yeah, there's that one specific case of the materials that were intercepted. There are reports, there are indications that there is more than that that is transiting the border. And clearly, the Iraqi border forces and coalition forces are focused on trying to establish the security measures to prevent that; to find it if it is happening, to deter it if they can, to intercept it if deterrence fails, to prevent those materials from coming across the border.

We have seen an evolving capability of improvised explosive devices. It's important -- we talk about this a lot, and you all recognize this -- that this enemy is very imaginative, very adaptive, and very lethal. And as we refine our IED countermeasures, they are also adapting their measures. So we are seeing greater degrees of sophistication, different techniques, different technological approaches. And that's a great challenge for us.

Q If I could just shift gears real quick --

Q General, when you say "reports," do you mean intelligence reports -- I'm sorry -- intelligence reports or media reports? When you said "there are reports" of, earlier, did you mean intelligence reports or --

GEN. HAM: Well, we get our information from a wide variety of sources. But there are -- I would just leave it at that. There are reports; we are aware of reports that that is -- that that may be happening, and we take those seriously and follow up on them.

MR. DIRITA: How about we follow up with Bret now.

Q If I could shift gears. Larry, there's a Reuters report that says 200 detainees at Gitmo are now still in the middle of this hunger strike, and 21 of them are now being forced fed via tube. Can you comment on that?

MR. DIRITA: It is a fact that there have been some detainees who have voluntarily entered into this kind of activity. It's being closely monitored. The evidence of medical attention as a result of providing them sustenance is an indication that it's being very closely monitored. As I understand it, it's kind of a rolling thing; it isn't the same people. There's a rotation where some of the detainees will stop for a while, and then there will be another batch that begins this activity. So there's -- as we've discussed before, the detainees have a way of communicating with one another, they have a way of understanding how to grab the attention of the public beyond their incarceration, and it's something that we're managing our best with in a very controlled fashion. There's been -- we've talked, I think, a great deal about the number of people that have been down there to observe operations, and it's being managed in a very careful way.

Q How many -- (off mike)?

GEN. HAM: Our numbers indicate -- I've not seen the Reuters report. Our numbers indicate a couple of dozen. But again, it's on a sort of rotating basis.

Q General, this question of the smuggling across from Iran, could you be more specific on the kinds of materials that are being moved? Are you talking about explosives? Are you talking about other types of weapons? And the other thing is, who is it going to? Is it going to Shi'ite groups? It is going to Sunni groups? Is it going to Zarqawi-related people? Who's it going to?

GEN. HAM: The concern of cross-border movement from both Iran and Syria into Iraq, it is all those things that you mentioned. It is individuals who either bring a willingness to participate in anti-Iraqi, anti-coalition operations; or they are bringing expertise, they're trainers; or money can come in. The devices themselves. I mean, there is concern that the cross-border movement of the actual munitions, the actual devices, whether it's the explosives, which there's not a particular shortage of in Iraq, but triggering mechanisms and the like. All of those are of concern coming from both Iran and from Syria. And detecting that flow of material is extraordinarily challenging on those very long and open borders.

Q I guess maybe my question is, are people in Iran supplying Shi'ite insurgents as opposed to the other insurgents who have been operating there? This seems to be a fairly new development.

GEN. HAM: The intended destinations, we think, are several. Clearly, militia and former militia, not just in the southern part of Iraq but in other parts of the country as well. Clearly, there are some Sunni rejectionist elements that are interested in these devices, and there are clearly Zarqawi and his group that are interested in those devices as well.

So again, it's never quite so simple as to say it's this material from this destination to this group. It is -- it's much more complicated.

Q Does there appear to be official Iranian involvement?

MR. DIRITA: That I am not aware of.

GEN. HAM: It's not known, to the best of my understanding.

Go ahead.

Q Larry, Senator McCain, as you know, has been proposing this legislation that would formalize the Army's field manual on interrogation.

MR. DIRITA: Mm-hmm.

Q The administration's position seems to be -- and correct me if I misunderstand it -- that doing that would tie your hands, would limit to too much of a degree the capability of interrogators to be able to extract information out of people. Is that a correct description of what the administration's position is?

MR. DIRITA: The administration has issued a statement of policy with respect to amendments like this in which we've expressed our opposition to such amendments, anything that would interfere with the president's ability to protect Americans from terrorism and divert resources from the war to focus on a lot of administrative requirements. For example, one of the things we wonder about is if field manuals started being imposed in statute, how does one address changes to the field manual? And I know that the members think that there may be an easy way to do that. But they're complicated questions, and we don't want to -- it's difficult to envision how you would go about conducting -- discharging the responsibilities of the department when regulations start becoming statutory.

But nonetheless, the administration has issued a statement of policy that the president's advisers would recommend a veto if there are any of these kind of amendments that would restrict the president's flexibility in defending the United States against terrorism. This has turned out to be an extraordinarily clever adversary, one which is trained in the use of our doctrine and field manuals, one which is trained in the -- in how to make astounding allegations that get a lot of media attention. And we've had to apply the same kind of careful but nonetheless innovative and aggressive types of approaches to interrogating, in some cases. And it's been done with due respect for the principles that the president established at the very beginning of this conflict. So the

administration's position remains what it is, which is that the president's advisors would recommend a veto.

Q Larry --

Q Can you put -- hang on. I wanted to actually get to the question there. The -- can you tell me what flexibility? Like can you give me an example of something that if this were law tomorrow, that you wouldn't be able to do tomorrow that you can do today? Like if this were -- what --

MR. DIRITA: I don't want to get into hypotheticals, but what we do know is that we are facing a ruthless adversary that is trained in our techniques, knows what our techniques are. The field manuals are posted on the Internet. And they've gone to school on that kind of stuff.

So to say that we can impose, with our wisdom, in the laws of the United States the answer to how an individual interrogator's going to have to, with an enormous amount of supervision and professional training -- is going to have to develop a procedure to interrogate, for example, the 20th hijacker, and that in all the wisdom of the -- of Washington, D.C., we're going to be able to encode in statute the way to handle that -- it strikes me as wishful thinking.

So that's the position that we have.

Q Larry, the president this morning in his speech said the new strategy is that there will be fights such as what are going on now in Al Anbar province, where the Marines and soldiers, after going through a city, turn it over to the Iraqi security forces. This ought to maintain law and order there.

Is that the current way it's going to be nationwide in Iraq? And is it because of the fact that the Iraqi security forces are still nowhere near able to go it alone in battle?

MR. DIRITA: The -- it's always been the objective that the coalition will assist the development -- that's been -- that's not only -- that is the strategy that we've had from the beginning, which is to develop security forces that are capable of defending that country. We've gone from zero to 197,000 of those forces.

General Petraeus spent a great deal of time laying out in some detail yesterday some discussion about how those -- how that's going. He talked a lot about areas of Iraq that are essentially under complete Iraqi security force control, including the segments of Baghdad that are.

But that being said, there's going to be some need for coalition assistance for some time, and we're providing that assistance. And as more and more security forces -- Iraqi security forces become capable, they will be assuming control of these areas. And Tall Afar is an example that the president has spoken about, that General Casey has spoken about. And that is the objective.

And I don't know if there's any more that you'd like to add --

GEN. HAM: Well, I would cite that -- a personal example in Tall Afar. You all know that while I was there, we conducted some operations in Tall Afar in the fall -- in the summer, late summer, of 2004 -- tough, tough fighting, very hard fighting. And we had Iraqi -- then Iraqi National Guard alongside us. They were nowhere near the level of training that the forces are today.

But when we concluded the operations there, which -- the combat phase of the operations, which I think were largely successful, we did not have the capacity for coalition forces to remain there, nor should we, and we did not yet have Iraqis who could come in and reestablish the security that was necessary.

They're able to do that now, a year later. Is it perfect? No. But it's so much better. It's unbelievably

better. That the Iraqis, they now have that capability, I think this ought be viewed very positively, that this is something that the Iraqis -- that the Iraqi army, in this case, has agreed to do, is trained to do and is capable of doing. At the end of it, in those cities where these operations are conducted, it is far, far better to have Iraqi security forces stay there maintaining security than it is to have U.S. or other coalition.

MR. DIRITA: Tony?

Q A kind of Navy secretary question for you and an IED question for the general. First to the general.

Stepping back from the piece parts of the IED issues, things coming over the Iranian border, can you give us the trends over the last year? Are you having more attacks, or less but more lethal attacks, against U.S. troops? And for the record, are more troops dying in '05 from IEDs than in '04? This has come up a lot where members of Congress have said IEDs are the leading cause of death among U.S. troops over there. I'd like a reality check from you if that's in fact the case.

GEN. HAM: The overall level of attacks over the past several months in Iraq has increased. The one category that had been decreasing was vehicle-borne improved explosive devices. Since about April, May, that had been going down just every month until last month, and then it started -- in September of '05 it started to come back up again. So we have seen overall an increase in the number of attacks. That shouldn't be too terribly surprising. As we've looked towards the political events that are about to occur, we expected that there would be some increase.

Compared with the same time frame of last year, the level of -- the number of IED attacks is higher September '05 than it was in September '04. Again, I think you have to look at the situation in its entirety; and while that's not good news, it's at least partially understandable as to why that is the case.

MR. DIRITA: But I think to your point on that, one thing that's been clear over the past year is that the terrorists have shifted their focus to killing innocent Iraqis. And that number has been substantial during the course of the year and that appears to be where they're concentrating. The strategy on their part seems to be to kill as many innocents as they can, and it's not hard to do that and they're being quite effective at doing that.

Q On the U.S. fatalities issue, could you address that?

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MR. DIRITA: I don't know that we have that data.

Do you have it?

GEN. HAM: Overall casualties, which is not only fatalities, but wounded in action as well; it is clear that IEDs, mines and vehicle-borne IEDs, that category is where the preponderance of casualties are -- coalition casualties are coming from.

Q Has it increased over '04 to '05?

MR. DIRITA: I don't know. That I don't know, Tony. I know the number of attacks is larger. I don't know -- and I'm sorry I don't have it here with me, the casualty comparisons with last year.

Q Yeah, on a less lethal note here, the Navy secretary-nominee, Donald Winter, today testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee.

MR. DIRITA: His confirmation hearing, right.

Q His confirmation hearing, yeah. After the hearing, McCain said that Mr. Winter has agreed to recuse himself from all major decisions involving Northrop Grumman ships, the Navy's number-one shipbuilder. Is that the case -- I didn't have a chance to ask Winter, and he kind of left the room quick, but is that --

MR. DIRITA: I've not seen Senator McCain's comments, and I'm not in a position to comment on Senator McCain's comments, if that's what you're asking me to do.

Q Well, the issue of will Mr. Winter, if he's nominated, recuse himself from any Northrop Grumman-related ship decision?

MR. DIRITA: Dr. Winter has an ethics agreement that's been -- that is consistent with requirements of the Office of Government Ethics. And one thing is certain, he will abide by that agreement. And as I understand it, that agreement may place some restrictions on his activities, which is not uncommon for officials coming from industry. I am not in a position to characterize what the nature of his agreement is to the extent that you've described Senator McCain having spoken about it. I just don't know.

Q Well, can you check that, because he has submitted to the committee some detailed, unpublicized --

MR. DIRITA: I might refer you to the Department of the Navy. They might be able to provide that information.

Q But this is a DOD issue now before he's confirmed.

MR. DIRITA: Sure. Okay, we'll do what we can. But one thing is certain, he will certainly abide by the requirements of the Office of Government Ethics, and he will have an ethics agreement. And it's not unusual for a lot of officials in this department to enter into those kinds of agreements.

Q (Off mike) -- he had to recuse himself for like a year from Northrop Grumman decisions, coming from that company, it's somewhat unusual and --

MR. DIRITA: Well, I'm not -- I can't -- I don't want to speculate on the nature of his ethics agreement because I simply don't know.

Yeah?

Q The president -- Mr. DiRita -- sorry. The president had talked about using the Defense Department if there's an outbreak of aviation -- aviation -- of bird flu to quarantine an area. Can you talk about what the Defense Department could do in such a situation, given the restrictions of posse comitatus?

MR. DIRITA: Well, I would not want to speculate on what might happen. The president's comments stand for themselves.

This department has an enormous amount of capability. We saw some of that capability that was able to be brought to bear quickly in the case of Katrina and Rita. If there are natural disasters, or disasters of a certain type above a certain threshold, this department has the ability to assist with resources and logistics in a fashion that no other department of government can do, obviously. And we will do our part, whatever that might be and whatever the president might call upon us to do.

Q Can the DOD quarantine areas, given the restrictions of Posse Comitatus?

MR. DIRITA: It's not something I'd like to speculate about. We -- you know, the National Guard is a component of this department. The National Guard has an enormous amount of capability resident in its forces. I think everybody's so quick to rush to the law enforcement question for active duty forces when it's almost the least likely situation anybody would have to deal with. We have so many National Guard forces that have all kinds of authority and training and capability inherent in them.

What we saw in Katrina was the kinds of things that this department can do across the active and Reserve component. And it was the kinds of things people have come to expect of this department. And the president would obviously use whatever authorities he has to use this department for.

Q (Off mike) -- a remote possibility, though, you'd have to start planning and drilling and all that. I mean, are you even taking the initial steps to look at planning for such a scenario?

MR. DIRITA: You know, the commander of the -- without speaking to a particular scenario, the commander of the U.S. Northern Command has responsibility for reviewing what capabilities and resources are available for the kinds of things that he would have to be responsible for. But again, I'm not -- that is not in response to a particular type of contingency. We have a lot of capability in this department. And how we employ that capability is, in large part, determined by the -- whatever the circumstances -- arise. And you want to be able to plan for as many contingencies as possible. But I'm not speaking to your specific -- it's not something that I'm prepared to discuss.

Q General, we've seen the deployments, the extra deployments ahead of the referendum and the December election. What we haven't seen, really, is the overlap of what troops are sticking around. What's the overall number you're looking at at the referendum and the December election of U.S. troops in Iraq? Is it still going to be 150? Is it going to be 160?

GEN. HAM: There are about 152,000 U.S. in Iraq today. That's pretty much the force that will be there for the referendum. There's still some -- there's still a bit -- a bit more coming, and some that will leave. But that's a -- that's a pretty good number, I think, for where we'll be for the next -- through the referendum.

Following the referendum, then the rotation, the scheduled rotation of forces will continue, and that carries on through the December election period. And I think as you know, there's been some units that have been extended a bit so that experienced units will stay in place to provide the requisite support for the election period. But it's premature at this point to say what's going to be there in December because, we don't know the outcome of the referendum. But for the referendum, in the 152,(000) range is about where we will be.

Q Do you have some idea of the overlapping that you foresee at its max, how many U.S. troops are going to be in place in December?

GEN. HAM: Well, I'm not going to speak for General Casey or General Abizaid. I think they pretty clearly laid out that following the referendum, there will be assessments made and a determination made as to what will be then the right force to have on the ground for the December elections, and then following that, yet another --

MR. DIRITA: And we'll do our best to keep you current on that. But it is something that requires current information and not projected information.

Why don't we take a couple more and be finished.

Q General Vines, though, about three weeks ago told us it would be in the 140,(000) range. General Casey last week said he only asked for 2,000 -- two battalions, I guess, versus 12,000 earlier this year. Casey again last week said the base would be about --

MR. DIRITA: You know, Charlie, let me take that on. That's why we're not going to say now what it's going to look like in December. We'll do our best to keep current. We're at about 152,000. Go with it. That's where we are.

Q Yeah, go with it, but that's 12,000 more than Vines said --

MR. DIRITA: It's something that we are able to do, and we are doing it. And I think people shouldn't be too anxious to say, "Well, six weeks ago he said said this." That was six weeks ago We're now where we are.

Q (Off mike) -- in case there's inconsistencies.

MR. DIRITA: Here's what you should really pin down. If somebody says today they think what it looks like in December, they're likely to be wrong. So therefore, you should -- you can go backwards on that, too. Somebody who said something in July was giving his best assessment at the time, and it's just --

Q What is the logical reasons for 152,000 now versus --

MR. DIRITA: Because that's the number that's needed.

Q But I mean General Casey said from the podium this week with the secretary, said that I only need about -- I've determined I only need about 2,000, we only need about 2,000.

MR. DIRITA: That was probably in response to a very specific question, what additional forces have been ordered in. And that's the answer that he gave. But that doesn't -- we've said all along that the number will be based on the ebb and flow. And we're trying to give you a snapshot, here's where we are at this moment. I think that's the number we --

GEN. HAM: That is. I mean, that's the best number that I can give you today as to what is on the ground U.S. in Iraq. And part of that is, you know, the transition is occurring. I mean, in some parts of Iraq there are two units that are executing or ready to execute their release in place. Some of that will pause for the conduct of the referendum and then resume and then other units will start up.

Q I guess the point I'm trying to make is that when the general says, "We only need about 2,000 additional troops," that implies that it's about 2,000 additional troops over the normal, routine 138,000 in Iraq, when in fact you've got 149,000 there, suggesting the situation is a lot more tenuous or worrisome than --

MR. DIRITA: You should not draw the conclusion beyond what we've given you, which is -- you probably asked a specific question and he gave you a specific answer. You can't fault us for asking your questions if they're the wrong questions. We're telling you U.S. now, what's the snapshot? We gave you the snapshot. And we really do mean it when we say anybody that thinks that they can tell us today what it's going to look like on December 15th is doing their best, they're going to assess it. General Casey did say I might -- back in March -- and General Vines said it in June -- we might have to go up or down from that. Well, at the moment, the number that he thinks he needs, based on his ability to kind of dial up and dial down, is about where it is, and it happens to be at about 152,000. And people can draw their own conclusions as to whether that reflects more or less security or more or less danger. But it's what it is. I can't do any better for you than that.

Q He said 2,000 -- did you increase from the 2,000 he talked about several weeks ago -- (inaudible) -- by 4,000 or 5,000 new, or this is rotations that are --

MR. DIRITA: It is rotations.

GEN. HAM: It's principally rotations. The additional forces that were requested and approved by the secretary of Defense have deployed and are on the ground executing operations.

MR. DIRITA: It's more flexible than I know that people think. And so if you say, well, let's hold on to this force, let's not do the turnover, let's hold off and have that force available -- he might have had a force that was going to be essentially out of the fight because they'd been relieved and has decided let's sustain that relief -- let's hold off on that relief for two weeks. And now that gives him an effective capability that's a little higher than normal. It's that kind of stuff. They have that kind of ability. And it's hard from here to do the bean counting. And I know that bean counting's important. I'm not trying to -- I mean, it is; people want to know. And so we're giving you the snapshot.

And I would only caution you, in December let's not go back and have this conversation again. We'll give you that number -- that's why I say we'll do our best to keep you current.

Q With the overlap and the additional 2,000, it's the highest number of U.S. troops in Iraq since the beginning of the war; is that not true?

MR. DIRITA: I don't think so. I think we were higher, 158,000, 160,000.

GEN. HAM: 160,000-ish, I think.

MR. DIRITA: You thought you had something there, didn't you, Bret? You never know.

Well why don't we take one last question and then we'll get out of here, because we've spent too much time.

Yeah? Right there.

Q Going back to a point you made --

Q Fruitful time.

MR. DIRITA: Fruitful, yeah.

Q -- about contrasting Tall Afar in 2004 and now and the changing capabilities of the Iraqi forces, give me a sense of does that change what you're able to do on the ground, your military strategy, whether you can be more offensive, more aggressive?

GEN. HAM: Yes, it clearly has a significant change. And the change is noted at several different levels. There is an increased tactical capability at the battalion and below level. The Iraqi security forces units are simply able to do more things and do them better than they could a year ago.

At least as important as that is that there is a growing capacity for command and control at the battalion and above levels. And that's not just in Tall Afar. General Petraeus talked about Baghdad and other places. That's probably the more difficult capacity to grow, is the command and control of larger units. And that's, I think, a noteworthy accomplishment.

Q So Tall Afar and Iron Fist -- are they representative of that being able to do more, that capacity?

GEN. HAM: Well, it's -- I think it is that we are starting to see the beginnings of their capability to exercise independently after an operation such as occurred in Tall Afar.

MR. DIRITA: Thanks a lot, folks.

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