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**Presenter: Commanding General, Multinational Force West and 2nd Marine Expeditionary Force Forward, Maj. Gen. Stephen T. Johnson**

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**News Briefing with Maj. Gen. Stephen T. Johnson**

News Briefing with Maj. Gen. Stephen T. Johnson  
Via Conference Call from Fallujah, Iraq

BRYAN WHITMAN (Pentagon deputy spokesman): Thank you for joining us this morning. And good morning to the Pentagon press corps. Many of you, I think, recognize our briefer today. This is General Steve Johnson. I think it was just a few months ago, perhaps it was July, I think, when he last visited us in this room via modern means of technology.

Of course Major General Johnson is the commander of the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Force Forward, and he is the commander of Multinational Force West. That means General Johnson and his forces are responsible for the ongoing security operations in Western Iraq, including the cities of Fallujah, Najaf, Karbala, as well as others. And as is our practice on Friday mornings, he's here to give you an update on the operations that are going on in his area -- Operations Iron Fist and River Gate. And he's going to give you an overview and then take some questions. He's speaking to you today from Fallujah.

And with that, General, thank you, and I will turn it over to you.

GEN. JOHNSON: Okay, thank you, Bryan.

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I've got just a couple of points I want to make before I take your questions.

In Al Anbar and northern Babil provinces, our fight continues to be against the locally based Sunni insurgency. It's a complex threat that's spread throughout the Euphrates River Valley; operates loosely in cells in the cities and in the countryside. It's decentralized, it's resilient. It regenerates itself and it sustains itself. Local insurgents operate largely in and around their own communities, and they can often blend in when it suits them.

Al Qaeda in Iraq is a factor in our battlespace. Al Qaeda gains synergy by using the local insurgency in developing marriages of convenience with other elements of the insurgency -- Saddamists, rejectionists, and criminals, for example.

The foreign fighter presence in Al Anbar is small, but it's dangerous. Our current operations are focused on destroying terrorists and foreign fighters and their rat lines that cross our area of operation.

The weapons of choice of the insurgents still remain to be IEDs, small arms fire and indirect fire. And our prediction that the Iraqi security forces (sic) would increase their attacks and activities in the run-up to Ramadan and to the referendum have proven to be true over the last six weeks. And we expect that that will continue as we move on towards the referendum.

Multinational Force mission has been largely unchanged. We're still creating a secure environment through the development of the Iraqi security forces in order to support the Iraqi self-governance and self-reliance. I believe we've been successful through persistent, patient efforts in a number of areas.

In Al Anbar, coalition forces and Iraqi security forces are currently engaged, as Bryan pointed out earlier, in operations focused in the western Euphrates River Valley. The intent of these operations is really fourfold: to take the fight to al Qaeda in Iraq and other insurgent groups; to enable us to establish a persistent presence in the -- in key cities in the Euphrates River Valley; to assist community leaders, Iraqi security forces and other local leaders in ensuring that there is a means for effective referendum here next week; and finally, to continue our efforts with the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior forces to help the Iraqis regain control of their border.

The Iraqi army, still partnered with Multinational Force West forces, has grown in capability and size and, in my view, professionalism. One Iraqi army division and two-thirds of another one have already -- are conducting operations in Al Anbar province with our forces. Embedded in those organizations are military transition teams that mentor, train and assist the Iraqi forces. And last month, for the first time, one of our brigade -- one of the brigades of the 1st Iraqi Division took over a battlespace for the first time on its own, and it's taken the lead in planning and coordinating and executing operations in that battlespace.

Down in Karbala and Najaf provinces, Iraqi security forces have assumed responsibility for two coalition bases, former coalition bases. They've taken the lead in counterinsurgency operations, and they've freed up coalition forces to be applied elsewhere in the area of operations. Overall, we have approximately 15,000 Iraqi army forces in our area, and that's an increase of about 5,000 since I talked with you in July.

The Iraqi police in Karbala and Najaf provinces have also demonstrated improvement in capability and maturity. In addition to providing the day-to-day law enforcement functions that they do, the police have successfully supported a number of security operations, supporting religious events and the election. These religious events, like Arba'in, Ashura and Shabaniyah, draw millions of people, and the local security forces and the police have done a great job of taking care of all the details associated with that. They coordinated their efforts with the courts, and they're bringing the rule of law back to that part of the country.

The introduction of Iraqi police into Fallujah is having a positive influence there as well. About 900 of the projected 1,200 that will eventually be there are in the city and in communities around Fallujah. The citizens of Fallujah now have a police force that responds to its complaints and its emergencies, and it's growing in professionalism and effectiveness.

Since our arrival in March of 2005, the provinces in this region have experienced notable change and progress. The air of progress has created not only a strong intent among the people to vote in October and December, but I believe also a belief that they'll be able to vote safely, and a belief that their vote will count.

I continue to be optimistic about the future in Iraq. My optimism stems largely from the superb performance and accomplishments of the coalition force members with whom I serve, the progress and determination and the successes that I see in Iraqi security forces, and also the political process that is about to unfold next week.

And with that, I'm ready to answer your questions.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you for that overview, general. We'll get right into it here and start with Charlie.

Q General, thanks for meeting with us. This is Charlie Aldinger with Reuters. Your folks at that end issued a statement saying that 29 insurgents had been killed in this operation. I assume they meant Iron Fist, or perhaps both. Do you have any update to that? And how about U.S. troops killed, including maybe the six Marines killed yesterday, four near Fallujah and two near the Syrian border?

GEN. JOHNSON: I'm sorry, Charlie. You're cutting out on me here. I got the part about the names of those operations, but it kept cutting out. I couldn't get your whole question.

Q Can you hear me now?

GEN. JOHNSON: I can hear you now.

Q Your people have said that 29 insurgents have been killed in this operation. I assume they mean Iron Fist. Have you got an update? How about U.S. casualties?

GEN. JOHNSON: I keep losing you on that.

MR. WHITMAN: (Off mike) -- maybe our ceiling mikes here. And I'll try to paraphrase the question a little. The question had to do with the terrorists that had been killed, that were put out in a news release from your command about the 29 insurgents, and whether or not you have an update on that and whether or not they were from one operation or combined operation there, and an update on U.S. casualties involved in those operations.

GEN. JOHNSON: Okay, I gotcha.

The report of 29 casualties, I believe that was in Operation Iron Fist. The bulk of those enemy that were killed in that operation were in a building that was attacked, and the rest were largely taken out as a part of small-unit action -- snipers and small-unit action against people who were maneuvering against and observing some of our locations up there in Husaybah.

As far as U.S. casualties are concerned, in Iron Fist we've experienced thus far, in the roll-up between 1 and 7 October, we had one friendly killed in action up there and eight friendly wounded in action thus far.

MR. WHITMAN: Bob?

Q Well, how about -- I'm sorry --

MR. WHITMAN: He has a follow-up.

Q -- how about the two Marines who were killed yesterday near the Syrian border by an IED, and the four who were killed near Fallujah? You're not counting them.

STAFF: (Off mike.)

GEN. JOHNSON: Okay. No, I'm not counting those right now. Two were -- we had two Marines killed in a logistics patrol yesterday and --

STAFF: Near al Qaim.

GEN. JOHNSON: -- near al Qaim. And in Fallujah, there was an IED attack against a(n) up-armored humvee that -- four Marines lost their lives.

MR. WHITMAN: Bob?

Q General, this is Bob Burns with Associated Press. I just wanted to ask you how many Marines and soldiers are you commanding now, and is that being bulked up in advance of the referendum, and will it be further increased for the December election?

GEN. JOHNSON: The -- Bob, the number assigned to Multinational Force West has not changed appreciably. There's still about 30,000 Marines, sailors and soldiers assigned to us. Of course, a lot of those have been with us the whole time. We've just gone through a rotation period, but we've replaced units with like-sized units. So about 30,000 soldiers, sailors and Marines.

With respect to the referendum, we have not gotten plussed-up or reinforced specifically for the referendum and don't expect to be so for the election.

However, as part of the operations that are ongoing, Iron Fist, River Gate, some internal retask organization and reorganization within MNCI has given us some extra units in order to be able to conduct the operations that we have to conduct.

Q General, this is Joe Tabet with Al Hurra TV. As the commander on the ground, do you think you have enough troops to put an end to this insurgency? And if you can tell us about the insurgents, what about their tactics, how they are fighting? If you can clarify this idea, please.

GEN. JOHNSON: Yeah, I can answer both of those questions. But first of all, I do believe that we have now sufficient strength to do the missions that we've been asked to do. Our overall capability in terms of manpower continues to grow as the Iraqi security forces units begin -- are trained and join us and continue to improve in their training. As I pointed out earlier, we are about 5,000 Iraqi security forces stronger than we were in July, and every month that goes by, those battalions and brigades and those two divisions get better and stronger. That contributes to the overall capability of Multinational Force West, and we contribute to their success as well.

With respect to the insurgents, the enemy that we fight, as I pointed out in my comments, is a resilient enemy. They learn from their mistakes; they adapt. They are a thinking enemy. We recognize that, and within the parameters we respect the fact that they are adapting. We also adapt to keep ahead of them. We adapt not only in our tactics, techniques and procedures, but also in the equipment that we provide our people to fight the insurgents -- with -- to fight the insurgency.

So I think -- I believe that answers your question.

MR. WHITMAN: Okay, let's go in the back.

Q This is Sabrina Fang with Tribune Broadcasting, General. Wondered if you could elaborate a little bit more on the letter -- reports of a letter from Zawahiri to Zarqawi, and there's a conflict between those two, Zawahiri telling Zarqawi not to target mosques or behead hostages to inflame the Muslim world. Can you elaborate on the fact that maybe al Qaeda is not agreeing in Iraq with its leadership outside of the country?

GEN. JOHNSON: Well, I saw the thing in the Early Bird, I think it was, today about that article. Here you got two guys arguing over something -- both of them are liars and terrorists and killers, and they're arguing over

something like this. I don't think we can -- I don't know whether we can draw any conclusions about a rift between them.

But all I can say is that this is just more of the bankrupt stuff that we get from these people. Here they're retracting their story, they're changing their story. "We ought to change our tactics," they're saying. Zarqawi has already backed off a couple of times. Remember he told folks to kill -- Iraqis should kill Iraqis. And he felt that didn't wash too well, that wasn't too smart, he changed his story there and then he had to change it again when he decided he shouldn't tell people to kill those who had participated in the -- or were planning to participate in the election. Now they're talking about more of this.

You can't trust anything these guys say. And it just goes to show you yet again what a vicious enemy that we're fighting here, not only in Iraq but across the world, and why we got to keep taking it to them.

MR. WHITMAN: Chuck?

Q General, Jim Mannion from Agence France-Presse. Can you say whether there has been any sign of insurgents basically breaking away or making overtures to end their fight? And second thing I wanted to ask you about is I think that you said that the insurgents in your part of Iraq are centralized, and I wonder what you meant by that and if you could elaborate on that a little bit.

GEN. JOHNSON: Okay, let me take the second part of your question first. What I said was the insurgents in Al Anbar province, north Babil province, are largely locally based insurgents; that is the insurgent we fight here is from here, he's from those communities in which we are engaging them. They are generally young people, 20 to 30 years old. They are day laborers, agricultural workers. They are disaffected and there's a lot of unemployment. But they're local people and they can come and go within the community. And that's what we see the vast majority of them. We believe that they are -- become the foot soldiers, then, for the extremists like Zarqawi or the Saddamists or the rejectionists or even the criminals; they become the foot soldiers and that's how these marriages of convenience kind of take shape. So that's the intent I'm trying to convey with that comment.

The first part of the question -- I'm sorry.

Q Is whether you're seeing any -- whether there have been any indications of any insurgent groups making overtures to end the fight.

GEN. JOHNSON: Groups in our area -- we haven't seen any groups that have come forward trying to end the fight. We believe that -- among the insurgent population, we believe that there are people who you could characterize as moderates, people who have seen that the political process is the way to end the violence; that the way ahead for Iraq is a political solution; to endorse the constitution, to move ahead with elections in December and make a better life for their people.

I believe that as we get closer to the -- with the referendum and as we get closer to the election, you will see more moderate voices among the leaders -- the sheikhs, the imams, the tribal leaders -- more moderate voices coming forward and encouraging the people to use these processes and to be part of the system rather than to continue the endless cycles of violence that seem to prevail.

There are some that will never give up the military option. The extremists, like Zarqawi, will never give it up. But there are other moderate voices, and I believe that as time goes on, you will begin to hear more of those and they will make a difference in Iraq.

Q If I can follow; conversely, General, are you seeing -- is there evidence of the insurgency growing in your area, becoming more pervasive?

GEN. JOHNSON: We don't see a growth in the insurgency here. Since we've been here, since March of 2005, we have been engaged in this local Sunni insurgency. It's been at steady levels. The levels of attacks that we've experienced in the last six weeks have gone up, but we knew that was going to happen as the Ramadan came on and as the referendum drew nearer. So we expected that.

But seeing a growth, we have not experienced that. It's been pretty steady for the entire time that we've been here.

Q General, Brian Hartman with ABC News. Can you talk to me about the Iraqi leadership that you're working with, the Iraqi troops? At what level are they involved in the planning process? Are they at the table with you on these ops, sitting down, working on the planning, or is it the sort of thing where you're, you know, calling them up at 11:00 at night and saying we need, you know, 500 guys waiting for us at point X tomorrow morning; and we'll tell you where they're going when we get there? Can you help me understand how that works?

GEN. JOHNSON: Yeah. The planning, the ability to plan, coordinate and put operations together is one of those skills that organizations learn, and the brigades and battalions in our area are learning that pretty well. They're learning it through partnership with our battalions, and they're learning it because we have embedded with them military transition teams. So not only -- we have right now 18 battalions of Iraqi security forces -- Iraqi army forces currently working with our folks in this area. I estimate that by November about half of those will be at a level where they will be able to take the lead in such things as planning, coordinating and actually executing operations in defined areas, in their own battlespace. They -- once you -- once they learn the skills of planning, then they're able to gain confidence when they see their plan come to fruition; when they go out and they're able to execute it. And it's an iterative thing, it grows; as confidence grows, so does their ability. So we're starting to see that capability. Our battalion commanders report -- our coalition force battalion commanders report that many of them are making headway and will be able to, by November, be able to do more independent -- well, not independent so much, but take the lead in a lot of these operations.

So it's like the soldier in the -- the private in the front -- in the lines learning to use his weapon. He becomes more proficient with it the more he uses it. Same with the battalions and brigades. They're becoming more proficient with their planning tools and their ability to direct and support their forces. And we also are starting to see the link between the division headquarters and the army -- Iraqi army command forces is growing too as they learn how to do these skills as well.

Q If I could just clarify, one of the things I'm trying to get at, sir, to what extent can you now trust the leadership to talk about future operations and future movements of U.S. forces? To what extent can you trust an Iraqi commander, to say, "This is what my Marines are going to be doing tomorrow," and bring them in on the planing process, or is that something that you still have to be very sensitive about?

GEN. JOHNSON: To be honest with you, our forces are put there in the street side by side with the Iraqi security forces. The Iraqis are out there bleeding and fighting for their country. There's no secrets between the forces that are out there doing that stuff. There's trust between those units, and trust grows as they work and operate together.

You certainly have to be cognizant of some things that you say and do. We don't tell everything we know to everybody on our own side, either. But I think that you will find that there is a great deal of trust that's grown up out there. And fighters, whether they be coalition force or Iraqi security force, know they have to be able to trust the guy on their right and left flank, and they know that they if you got to be able to trust a guy watching them. And you can't develop that kind of trust without sharing information and trusting each other.

MR. WHITMAN: Jeff.

Q General, Jeff Schogol with Stars and Stripes. Can you tell me how much of our strategy to win the war depends on defeating the insurgents in the field?

GEN. JOHNSON: I think defeating the insurgents in the field is a big part of our ability to move the process along. But I believe that the ultimate defeat of this thing is a political -- will be a political solution. I think the military side of this creates an environment where governments can grow, where the economy can start back up, where people can go about their lives, and then they can turn their attention instead of to survival, to the things that make communities grow. So in the sense that we need to continue the military operations, we need to do that to create an environment where it's safe and secure for these other things to go.

But in the end result, in my opinion, it will be a political solution; an adoption of a constitution; a peaceful election where candidates run for office and are elected, and they come in and they do things that provide services to their people and to their nation. And so that's where the rubber will really meet the road, in my opinion.

Q General, it's Al Pessin from Voice of America. I have two questions, the first related to the last question. You said you have enough troops to do the mission that you've been assigned. Why would it not be a good idea to flood the zone with more highly skilled forces so that you could launch maybe a dozen operations like Iron Fist at the same time and secure the border and really defeat this thing, or at least bring it down to the kind of level which would even further improve the environment for the political process?

GEN. JOHNSON: Well, first of all, you know, the concept of flooding the border and so forth, there's other considerations other than just trigger-pullers out on the ground. There's logistics considerations, there's distance considerations. There's a myriad of things that preclude us from putting people across a battlespace that's the size of Utah.

The forces that we've got now, we are -- we use them -- we base our attacks on what the enemy's doing, first of all. We don't just go out there and go after places on the ground -- cities, towns. We're looking for enemy; we're following the intelligence that we have. And in that sense, I believe we have enough and we can do a systematic approach to this. We have sufficient forces. And as we get the Iraqi security forces to join us, as they are, we will have people to leave as permanent presence in these places where we go, like Haditha, where we can leave a permanent presence, where the insurgent can't come back in without -- immediately, where he knows that there is a means to coerce him if he tries to do it. That is -- that's our strategy, and that's how we're going to take care of this.

Q General, my other question, I don't know if you're aware that there was a security alert for the New York City subway yesterday and today, and the mayor said that the information came from a raid in Iraq, not in your area. But I wonder if -- and I know that you're limited in what you can say about intelligence -- but I wonder if you can tell us if you have seen any indications of connections between terrorist activity or planning in Iraq, and what they might plan to do in the United States?

GEN. JOHNSON: We have not seen any indication that -- of things that are being done here that have application in the United States. In the provinces for which -- in which we operate, we've not seen that. But two things -- two follow-up points on that, that doesn't mean that somewhere along the line it couldn't occur. These are dangerous people that we are dealing with. That's why it's so important to go after them wherever they are. And the second thing is we take intelligence very seriously, throughout our battlespace, and we go after it and go after the people that the intelligence leads us to.

So in answer to your original question, we know of nothing that is linked directly to the U.S., but we're very attuned to intelligence. And it's critical to fighting al Qaeda and killers like that around the world.

MR. WHITMAN: All right. We're just about out of time, so let's finish with Charlie, where we started.

Q General, I wonder if I might ask you again about the casualties. I think you said that there were -- in the operations so far there have been one killed and seven, as you put it, friendlies wounded. Were those U.S. troops?

GEN. JOHNSON: Those are coalition force troops. Yes, sir. The ones that I gave you. This is the roll-up I've got, 1 to 7 October in -- I thought your question pertained specifically to Operation Iron Fist.

Q Operation Iron Fist, right? One, seven.

GEN. JOHNSON: Yeah. That's what I've got right now.

Q Those are U.S. troops?

GEN. JOHNSON: Let's see, that was a Marine -- that was a Marine, yes. Yes, that was a Marine. Yes, those were U.S. Marines.

Q Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: General, we've reached the end of our allocated time here. Let me just throw it back to you in case you have any closing comments that you'd like to make.

GEN. JOHNSON: Yeah, I want to go back to that last thing. I said they were U.S. Marines, and I don't know that for a fact right now. It very well could have been soldiers who are among the wounded. So I just want to clarify that. That's the only thing I wanted to add.

As far as closing comments, I'll close pretty much in the same way I did the last time I talked with you. I just want you to know you should be extremely proud of the young people that are defending your country over here and supporting the Iraqi people. You can't find better people anywhere in the world, and they're doing a terrific job. I'm very proud to serve with them. And I hope this information is useful to you.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you, General, for joining us this morning. And we wish you the best also.

GEN. JOHNSON: Okay. Thanks very much, Bryan.

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