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**Presenter: Col. David J. Bishop, commander, 3rd Brigade, 1st Armored Division and Maj. Gen. Bashar M. Ayoub, commander, 9th Mechanized Division, Iraqi Army**

**October 14, 2005 9:05 AM EDT**

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**News Briefing with Col. David J. Bishop and Maj. Gen. Bashar M. Ayoub**

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BRYAN WHITMAN (Pentagon deputy spokesman): Colonel Bishop, this is Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon. Can you hear me?

COL. BISHOP: I can hear you, Bryan.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, good afternoon. And good morning to the Pentagon press corps that's here. And thank you both for joining us today.

Today we have two briefers. With us in Taji, Iraq, is Major General Bashar Ayoub, who is the commander of the 9th Mechanized Division of the Iraqi army, and Colonel Bishop, who is the commander of the 3rd Brigade of the 1st Armored Division. As I said, they're both joining us from Taji, which is in the Multinational Division Baghdad Sector. They're here today to provide us with an operational update as they and their units work to ensure the security of the election process which is about to take place for the referendum.

Both just have very short introductory comments, and we're going to then get right into questions. We do have another briefing right after this, and so we may end this just a few minutes early because they have just brief comments to open up with.

With that, I will turn it over to the two of you. And I believe at some points the general may ask for the assistance of a translator. So if that's the case, we'll be prepared for that.

COL. BISHOP: Okay. Well, good morning. I'll start. My name is Colonel Dave Bishop. I'm the commander of the 3rd Brigade, 1st Armored Division, here in Camp Taji, Iraq. My brigade is comprised of about 3,500 soldiers responsible for about 870 square miles in the northern region of Baghdad and the surrounding rural areas.

We're part of the 3rd Infantry Division right now, which makes up Task Force Baghdad. We conduct full-spectrum combat operations in the Baghdad area. And right now we and our Iraqi partner units are focused on securing the elections for the constitutional referendum which will occur tomorrow.

My brigade is partnered with one Iraqi mechanized brigade, which is known as the 1st Mechanized Brigade, 9th Division, which is under the command of Major General Bashar, who is with me today.

General Bashar, sir?

GEN. AYOUB: Good morning. I am Major General Bashar Mahmood Ayoub. I am the commander of the 9th Mech Division. We are now in Taji town. My division now is having the responsibility of taking security of Taji territory with the help of Colonel Bishop. We are now working as a team, both of the units. He has his own brigade, and we have the 1st Mech? Brigade is working with him. I think we are now having control of everything in Taji.

Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: Very good. Well, thank you, and we'll get into questions here. And if you would direct your questions to either Colonel Bishop or General Bashar. And if either one of you would like to add on to the other one's comment, then feel free to do so.

Let's start with Charlie here.

Q Colonel, General, this is Charles Aldinger with Reuters. I'd like to clear something up first. Colonel, you said 3,500 soldiers. Those are U.S. coalition troops, right? Those are not Iraqi troops.

COL. BISHOP: That's correct. Those are U.S. soldiers that are under the command of my brigade right now.

Q Colonel, how many Iraqi troops do you have in the sector?

COL. BISHOP: We're partnered with the 1st Brigade of the Mechanized -- 9th Mechanized Division, about 2,100 soldiers.

Q I'd like to ask you both -- I understand that tomorrow, automobile movement will be stopped during the election -- is that correct? -- to keep car bombs from -- . How are you going to do that? Are you going to set up roadblocks or fire at any car that moves? How do you keep automobiles from moving? Do you set up roadblocks or --

GEN. AYOUB: I can answer your question. I think all of the civilians right now, they knew all the orders for the elections. They have all the details. All the TV channels gave all the details and formalities for the elections. All the people know that there isn't any move or any car during the election time. That's why we won't have or we won't need to have these acts against anyone. Although, if there is any trouble we've going to have face, we can stop these cars and get them back wherever they came.

Q Do you have -- what do you have? Do you have tanks that might fire on cars in an emergency?

GEN. AYOUB: We have tanks. We have APCs, but we don't have to shoot them. There is some orders. All the people, they knows about them. The civilians, the military, most of the Iraqis, they know. All the acts of the army, all the signs, they were written and were put in the front of each checkpoint. That's why we won't have to shoot anyone, only to give them a warning for that.

Q Thank you.

COL. BISHOP: Both units, U.S. and Iraqi, have surged quite a few forces out into the battle space in

order to have a lot of troops on the ground. And so if there are vehicles moving on the roads tomorrow, they'll be stopped and questioned. And if they have a valid reason and justification and are authorized, they'll be allowed to proceed. If they're not, the soldiers on the ground will separate them from their vehicle and send them on their way through other means.

Q Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: Jeff?

Q Good morning, General. This is Jeff Schogol with Stars and Stripes. I have two quick questions. First of all, is most of your equipment -- is that Soviet equipment that you have?

GEN. AYOUB: Yes. Yes, they are.

Q Like T-72s or --

Q T-55s.

GEN. AYOUB: No. I am equipped now with the -- for the 1st Brigade, we have MTLBs. There are infantry personnel carriers. And we have the T-55 tanks. They are also Russian. And we going to have for the 2nd Brigade the T-72 tanks. They are also Russian.

Q Do you feel that once the United States begins withdrawing, that you can finish the job with this kind of Soviet equipment?

GEN. AYOUB: Can you repeat that question, please?

Q Of course. Once the United States begins withdrawing their Bradleys and their Abrams, do you feel that you can finish the job against the insurgents with your T-55s and your T-72s?

GEN. AYOUB: For the time being, no. But in the future, after we'll finish our equipment and the training, we can be ready for that.

MR. WHITMAN: Some more questions? Drew?

Q This is for General Bashar. This is Drew Brown with Knight Ridder. General, can you comment on, you know, what sort of measures you've taken to ensure that there is -- that insurgents haven't made it into the ranks of your troops?

GEN. AYOUB: No one can give like this decision now. I know the insurgents, they are looking for any unit of the Iraqi army. So I am not -- I can't give like this decision about it. But we are ready. We are capable of handling them if they show up.

Q A question. Well, can you comment on the ethnic makeup of your division?

GEN. AYOUB: Sorry? Once again, please.

Q Can you comment on the ethnic makeup of your division? How many -- what percentage are Shi'ites? What percentage are Sunnis, Kurds, et cetera?

GEN. AYOUB: We don't have a percentage, but my division, we have all kinds of the society, the Iraqi society, and all religions. We have Sunnis, we have Shi'as, we have Christians, we have Yezidis -- of all religious

-- we have in our division.

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead.

Q General, Courtney Kube from NBC News. Can you just tell us a little bit about the morale among your troops? You know, how are they feeling going into the referendum?

GEN. AYOUB: I can give you an example. What we saw yesterday -- I'm sorry, the day before yesterday, was they started the missions to go to secure these election polls. We had the first missions for the 1st Mech Battalion, 2nd Brigade. This was their first mission outside Taji for the new location. I wish we had the chance to photo them to give you the idea how glad they were, how anxious to take control outside the Taji territory, especially in these checkpoints. You can't imagine the morale they have, how high that it was, how excited they were to have their first mission outside Taji.

I can speak also for the 1st Brigade, who is now maybe more than six months they are having missions outside Taji. They are so capable, and their morale is very, very high to have this mission.

Q Can I follow up, Bryan?

MR. WHITMAN: Certainly.

Q Colonel, the same question for you. Among your troops, what's the morale among them?

COL. BISHOP: Well, the morale's very high. They know how important this mission is, and they're very focused on accomplishing it. They know that the referendum tomorrow is a historical day for the Iraqi people. They're proud to be there. They've been working hard. We've been surging around the clock for the last couple of weeks, conducting offensive operations. We've detained up to 80 insurgents in the last month, and we've seized 16 weapons caches. So we've got a lot of success over the last few weeks leading up to this election, and the soldiers are in high spirits.

MR. WHITMAN: Charlie?

Q Colonel and General, two questions. Who is in command of the sector? Is it -- Colonel, is it the Americans, or is it the Iraqis, General?

GEN. AYOUB: I think we are combined in a mission that both of us are having the lead for this mission. So there isn't -- (inaudible) -- of the MNF -- that we are a combined task.

Q And in terms of -- sorry. Go ahead, Colonel.

COL. BISHOP: I was just going to clarify that my relationship with General Bashar is one of a partnership. Currently he has one of his brigades that's technically under my operational control in that I assign missions to; however, General Bashar is their commander, and he has the leadership and disciplinary and support roles that he plays with them and oversees their operations as well.

Q And in terms of security, we know you've increased security for the vote. Could you tell us how much you've increased the checkpoints and patrols? In other words, do you have checkpoints every three blocks or two blocks, or how many -- how have you increased those checkpoints over the normal?

COL. BISHOP: That's a difficult question to answer, but it's a good one. We have surged both U.S. and Iraqi forces into sector over the last two weeks at levels that are over and above previous levels. For example, normally my brigade would average during any given week about 120 combat missions a day. We've been

averaging about 150 to 160 combat missions a day. They vary in time and duration and geography, so it's kind of hard to give you a set answer. But I can tell you that U.S. forces have gone out in great strength to assist the Iraqi army, so that we're covering roadways, infrastructure and other areas that the insurgents may want to attack, plus freeing more Iraqi army soldiers to secure the polling sites for the people.

Q Thank you. That's helpful.

MR. WHITMAN: Mike.

Q Colonel and General, this is Mike Mount with CNN. The question is for both of you. Leading up to the elections, or maybe I should say on election day, have you all had any intelligence on any level of attacks that might be coming? We all know that you are expecting attacks to rise leading up to the elections and maybe on election day. What do you think the status of Taji will be on election day?

GEN. AYOUB: Of course, we don't have a direct number or direct information, but we are ready to face any acts of the terrorists. And all our soldiers and officers are ready in each point they are occupying now to deal with the terrorists no matter which way they are going to act against us.

COL. BISHOP: And I would second that. We know that there are people out there that would very much like to impede this election tomorrow, and we are prepared for it. We do not have a specific indicator of a threat in this area; however, we're prepared for all of them.

Q Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: Carl.

Q This is Carl Osgood with Executive Intelligence Review. Could either one of you give us an indication of what the level of insurgent activity in your sector is?

COL. BISHOP: Well, since -- I'll give it a shot, and then I'll let General Bashar give you his impressions.

Since we've assumed our sector last March, our brigade has averaged about four to five enemy attacks every day. Since probably the beginning of October, we've averaged eight to nine attacks per day, and that's consistent with the enemy's paradigm for spiking his levels of attacks coinciding with certain events.

But that's not to be confused with the effectiveness of his attacks. The effectiveness of the attacks don't necessarily increase with the number of attacks. In fact, the enemy uses the IED as the primary method of attack in this area, but we find about 50 percent of them. Thus far in October, we've found 64 percent of his IEDs before he could use them against U.S. and Iraqi forces. And of the remainder that we didn't find, 80 percent of them were not effective, in that they didn't cause injury or damage to military vehicles.

And I'll let General Bashar answer as well.

GEN. AYOUB: Of course, the numbers the Colonel gave you are the exact numbers that I have. In addition for that, we have many mortars bombing, we have in some of the posts, but the casualties are none because they weren't very accurate or direct.

MR. WHITMAN: Okay, Jeff, and then I think we'll finish up.

Q General, Jeff Schogol with Stars and Stripes again. Can you talk about how you and Iraqi army units will defeat the insurgents once the U.S. military forces leave? What can you do that U.S. military forces can't?

GEN. AYOUB: For the time being now, there isn't anything much than that we are doing now. But we can't take a hold of the insurgents without the help of the coalition side now, especially the Americans. And the work we are doing now in our division, the combined missions that we're in, the American brigade and the Iraqi brigade -- we are -- because of these missions, combined missions, we are having this success. Without -- but without the help of the American brigade right now, I don't think we can achieve like these results against the terrorists for the time being.

COL. BISHOP: And if I could add, I think that the Iraqi soldiers bring some unique skills to the fight every day. These soldiers understand the culture, the language, the dialects, the people that they see on the streets every day. They can quickly identify someone that's suspicious, perhaps not from the area that they're in, and pull them aside and question them in a way that an American would have difficulty to, because it's like General Bashar would probably have trouble identifying a terrorist or a criminal in Brooklyn. We sometimes have difficulty identifying terrorists in Taji, but the Iraqi soldiers pick up on it very quickly.

Q Do you know how long it will take before Iraqi troops can stand on their own and take the war to the insurgents without coalition assistance?

COL. BISHOP: Who's that question for, please?

Q The general. Sorry.

GEN. AYOUB: Could you repeat this question, please?

Q Sir, this is Jeff Schogol with Stars and Stripes again. Do you have an idea of how long it will take for Iraqi troops to be trained and equipped well enough to be able to fight the insurgents on their own, without coalition assistance?

GEN. AYOUB: No, I can't answer you, because I don't have a difficult -- a definite time, due to many circumstances. And also this decision, it might be a decision of the minister of MOD.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, I'm going to bring this to a close. I want to thank both of you gentlemen for taking some time this afternoon to join us.

Tomorrow is another historic day in Iraq, and we wish both of you and your units the best as you carry out your missions for that very important milestone that's going to take place tomorrow.

COL. BISHOP: Okay. Thank you very much.

GEN. AYOUB: Thank you very much.

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