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**Presenter: Commander of Multinational Division, Baghdad, Maj. Gen. William G. Webster Jr.**

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**News Briefing with Maj. Gen. William G. Webster Jr.**

News Briefing with Maj. Gen. William G. Webster Jr.

MR. JIM TURNER (Pentagon spokesman): Welcome to the Pentagon briefing room again. Our briefer today is Major General William G. Webster Jr. He is a commander of Multi Divisional Baghdad -- Multinational Division Baghdad and commander Task Force Baghdad. General Webster and his troops are responsible for the ongoing security operations in Baghdad. He is here today to provide us with an operational update. Today's briefing is on the record. And please give your name and organization when you're asking your questions.

And with that, I'll turn it over to you, sir.

GEN. WEBSTER: Okay. Thanks. And good morning to you in Washington. Good evening here in Baghdad.

We're responsible for operations in and around Baghdad to include the rural area that surrounds it and responsible for training the Iraqi security forces in the capital city and the surrounding area. I'd first like to recognize the Iraqi security forces supported by the multinational forces on their successful security operations this last weekend during the constitutional referendum. Thirty thousand Iraqi security forces supporting 20,000 policemen, backed up by our 30,000 multinational forces soldiers allowed the people of Baghdad to vote in record numbers with relative ease. We had a coordinated plan to secure the city, and the Independent Election Commission of Iraq conducted the referendum in a secure environment.

But the fight is not over. The insurgents, we believe, will continue to try to kill enough innocent Iraqi civilians to dissuade them from continuing to support democracy and their growing government. The enemy thrives on chaos and will try to strike at the Iraqi people, the Iraqi security forces, the multinational forces and all others with violent attacks, kidnappings and assassinations in the next few weeks. We will do our best to stop them.

Millions of Iraqis just want to get on with their lives and raise their families in freedom and peace, and we attribute much of the success of this last weekend's operation to the development of the Iraqi security forces, particularly the Iraqi Army. Whereas we had one battalion of the Iraqi Army defending the polling stations in Baghdad in January, we now have 18 battalions that were not only securing the elections in Baghdad, but are conducting day-to-day fighting operations against the insurgents.

And with that, I'll open it up to your questions.

MR. TURNER: Charlie?

Q General, Charlie Aldinger with Reuters. I wonder if you could tell us what the level of violent attacks is in Baghdad now, and how does that compare with, say, a week ago or a month ago?

GEN. WEBSTER: Well, Charlie, let me say that the attack levels ebb and flow. Generally, since last spring, they have been increasing at the rate of about one to two attacks a day, to the point where in August there were 27 attacks a day in Baghdad by the enemy, 28 attacks a day in September. And just last week it was still about 28 attacks a day until the few days prior to the referendum, when it spiked at about 53 and 54 attacks for the two days prior to the referendum.

The attack levels are now back down to about 20 to 25 a day. But I might add that on referendum day, there were only 12 attacks in Baghdad, 12 attacks by the enemy.

Last year, of course, as you recall, on the 30th of January there were 103 in a much smaller space than what we were securing -- so 10 percent of what the violence had been in the January 30th election in about twice the battle space in and around Baghdad.

The other interesting point along those lines is that only about 15 percent of these attacks are successful. And that is, by "successful," we say the enemy is successful if he causes damage or if he injures somebody.

So while the number of attacks has risen steadily, their effectiveness has declined. And we attribute that mostly to the fact that we are killing and capturing a number of Iraqi insurgents, and we are disrupting their ability to conduct these operations.

Q General, Lolita Baldor with the Associated Press. Are you seeing any reaction there in Baghdad to the reports that U.S. soldiers burned the bodies of Taliban in recent days? Are you seeing any -- is there reaction in the city?

GEN. WEBSTER: Well, we've not seen nor heard any reaction from Iraqis or any of our soldiers. Any act of abuse or violation of the Geneva Convention is unacceptable. And I'm sure the command will -- the command there in Afghanistan will investigate this thoroughly and properly, and will hold accountable anybody who did something wrong.

So that's about all I can add, because that's all I know at this point.

Q General, I'm Gerry Gilmore with the American Forces Press Service here at the Pentagon. Sir, to what do you attribute the reason why the insurgents didn't directly attack the polling places on the day of the election for the referendum on October 15th? Was the security simply too robust for them to break through? Would they have lost too much in the effort?

GEN. WEBSTER: Great question. I think it's partially attributed to those who have been participating in or supporting the violence in the past, and it's partially attributed to the tremendous success of the Iraqi security forces as they get better. Now I use that title "Iraqi security forces" because here in Iraq it's not only the Iraqi army that is securing the people, as well as the police departments in each of the cities, but there are special police, sort of paramilitary forces that are also present here in Iraq and work for the minister of Interior. So it's a combination of all of those.

We knew that the insurgents were going to try to step up the level of violence to overthrow the

government or at least discourage people from participating in the referendum, and they were not successful in doing so partially because we have conducted a high level of operations over the past several months to get ready for this referendum.

For example, in our multinational forces and inside the Iraqi security forces, we're conducting, just in Baghdad, over 800 offensive operations a day. The majority of those are patrols, combat patrols to gather information and to observe what people are doing or to gather intelligence. We're also conducting hasty traffic checkpoints, traffic control points, what we call snap TCPs, where we're moving down the road and a patrol will at an appropriate place set up a snap traffic control point and inspect a number of vehicles that are stopped at that TCP. And it also includes about 20 raids and other operations at night focused in gathering up high-value targets in our fight based on intelligence that we've gotten earlier. So over 800 offensive operations, about half of those being conducted with Iraqi security forces on their own or in combination with multinational forces.

We gathered -- we normally gather up about 500 detainees a month that end up in our interrogation facilities, and about half of those move on to Abu Ghraib confinement facility. In the two weeks prior to the elections, we captured and detained nearly 600, so over double the -- or more than double the rate of capture; killed 62 insurgents who put up a fight with us at the point of capture; and over 27 caches, some of them very large, with weapons and electronics and sniper rifles and scopes. That, in combination with the intense level of work that the Iraqi security forces did and the arrangements that were set up by the minister of Interior to stop traffic in Baghdad and to control the movement of the population, all together produced a very safe day for us, with less than -- with 12 attacks by the enemy in Baghdad.

MR. TURNER: Courtney?

Q General, Courtney Kube from NBC News. We're facing an impending unfortunate milestone with the 2000th death of a U.S. soldier most likely coming soon. What is your sense of when our soldiers may come home? We have this increase in Iraqi security forces helping out the U.S. soldiers. I mean, when will they come home?

GEN. WEBSTER: Well, it's hard to pick a date for sending everybody home because the enemy gets a vote. The insurgents get a vote as to when that occurs. We have got to make sure -- part of our mission -- that the Iraqi government is capable of standing on its own and that the Iraqi security forces are capable of defending that new constitution that, hopefully, their vote has approved; and if not, they'll rewrite it this year -- but to defend their constitution and to defend that government and provide the security they need. And that's hard to tell. We have a number of measures of merit that we are using to try to determine when they'll be ready to take that over. And we're working very hard to turn over security to them.

As an example, here in Baghdad, last January for the elections there was that one battalion that was controlling really about four square blocks in the oldest part of Baghdad around Haifa Street. And now that battlespace has increased 400 percent and there are two brigades with seven battalions that own their own battlespace and conduct operations there with very little support from us, and they report to me each day.

Over the next couple of months, we will stand up the rest of that division, turn battlespace over to them in Baghdad. And that's a real success story. There's a long way to go to get the rest of the Iraqi security forces able to support themselves for the long haul. But when you think about 18 battalions of the Iraqi army fighting the enemy every day in Baghdad, that's a significant improvement over the one battalion that was there for the last election. And I think we'll see similar gains over the next few months.

Q Follow-up. What would be your message to the families of those 2,000 people killed?

GEN. WEBSTER: Well, when you -- this is our second tour in Iraq with the 3rd Infantry Division, and here in Baghdad, and we've lost nearly 150 people killed in action during that period. And to those families, as I've

said to many of them -- to each of them in a letter that I write personally, and also to the families of the other soldiers who have died in this conflict, I think their service was honorable. We grieve every one of these losses. We think that their service is worth the effort. And when you talk to the majority of their brothers, the young soldiers out there fighting the fight, they want us to finish this mission. They want us to continue to serve the memory of those great soldiers who gave their lives in the defense of freedom not only of Americans, but in this case of the Iraqis who are trying to discover what democracy and freedom is all about.

I attended a memorial ceremony two days ago for one of our soldiers who died, a lieutenant colonel -- a father, a husband, a soldier, a leader. Lots of grieving soldiers there. Several of them were Iraqis, to include an Iraqi general officer who has began a "wall of honor" in honor of the American blood that has been shed alongside his soldiers to help ensure their freedom. And he thanked me for their service also, and I pass that on to the families of the deceased.

Q General, Jeff Schogol with Stars and Stripes. Can you talk about what the Iraqi security forces need in terms of supplies and other aspects to stand on their own, and how long it might take before the Iraqi security forces can fight the fight by themselves?

GEN. WEBSTER: The two brigades -- first of all, the two brigades that own their own battlespace now get very little support from us. That support is in the form of a few coaches and support personnel providing communications and contact with our headquarters, and contact with close air support, if that's needed. They also are there to provide a link to emergency logistics if it's necessary.

Probably the most telling requirement for the Iraqi army now is the ability for that battalion commander to turn around behind him and find a system that provides fuel, and ammunition, and water, and food, and repair parts, and replacement vehicles and people on a regular basis. This is ministerial-level work that has to be done. And Lieutenant General Dempsey has been tasked by General Casey to pick up that ball and run with it, and, you know, if you talk to him, he'll talk to you about some of his initiatives to get that going. But that's the primary need.

I might also add that the Iraqi army is learning about a noncommissioned officer corps, a corps of sergeants that is the backbone of the United States Army. We have begun training young, first-line supervisors and leaders to lead their men in combat and to exact discipline and accountability from them, as well as to lead them from the front and show them the way to success. So we have begun several of these efforts, and improvements in those two areas this year -- leadership and in their logistics system -- will eventually slingshot them towards success.

Q (Off mike) -- how long it will take for the Iraqi army and security forces to have a logistics system that will allow it to sustain itself?

GEN. WEBSTER: First of all, they're making do now with contract support, so there is limited ability now for their logistics system to operate if they stay in place. When you look at how difficult a logistics system can be, if we're talking about an army that can pick up and move and go out to the borders to defend the country and be able to sustain operations out in the open for a long period of time, it's probably going to be a year and a half, two years, before that system is mature enough to operate on its own. But in the meantime, the plan is to continue to turn over operations for the most part to the Iraqis themselves and for us to back away, step away from the throttle and hand it off to them so that they can begin securing their own country. And we'll continue to provide backup support as long as it's needed.

Q General, I'm Carl Osgood. I write for Executive Intelligence Review. I saw a report a week or so ago that there are Iraqi soldiers, Shi'ites primarily, who are more concerned about getting revenge on Sunnis, and that their loyalties are more sectarian than they are to any idea of an Iraqi nation. Is this something you have any concerns about?

GEN. WEBSTER: Sure, I have concerns about that. If you look at the culture here, the nature of it is very complex. There are loyalties that go back 1,500 years or more, that deal with family and tribe, religion, politics, nations and other affiliations. And some of these associations and affiliations run very deep, and some of them to include in some places, people will tell you, the religion of Islam itself talks about revenge and the death of many of the religious people who are looked up to by the Muslims. So this is a very complicated culture, and it's going to be difficult for them to overcome those differences. And that will take a generation or two.

But in the meantime, I've spoken to those soldiers who were interviewed for that article and to their commander, and the most zealous of those soldiers have been dismissed because the commander and his leaders are dedicated to an Iraqi army, not a Shi'a army, not a Sunni army or a Kurdish army. He's got a mixture of all of those inside his own unit.

The majority of the quotes that you saw were taken from a single battalion that was mostly recruited from one very strong Shi'a area, the area of Kadhimiya on the west side of the Tigris River in Baghdad. And those soldiers have very strong faith and they know that the Shi'ite people were oppressed for a long time by the Iraqi government, most of whom in power were Sunni, but not all. And we'll continue to lead the way in showing them -- teaching them about equality and about treating people fairly and about respecting all the rights of the Iraqi people as afforded by their constitution.

MR. TURNER: Any more questions?

Q General, Lolita Baldor with AP again. Do you foresee any changes in security levels or anything in the city during the coming months for the Saddam Hussein trial as a result of the recent violence and death?

GEN. WEBSTER: Absolutely. We're going to do our best to keep the insurgents off guard and to keep -- as part of that, to keep the Saddamists, those who were in support of Saddam and whose livelihood was guaranteed by him -- to keep those off guard and not allow them to disrupt the proceedings as they go forward.

And so we'll change our activities over time -- sometimes we'll change them in the same day, just to try to keep the element of surprise there -- and to continue to teach and train the Iraqi security forces to do the same themselves.

MR. TURNER: Okay. We're running out of time here. Any more questions?

One quick --

Q Okay. General, Jeff Schogol with Stars and Stripes again. Do you know of any plans for U.S. forces to leave equipment in Iraq when they -- when we start leaving and give them to the Iraqi security forces?

GEN. WEBSTER: I don't know of a plan. I know we have discussed that. Over time we've already provided a great deal of equipment to the Iraqis -- heavy weapons, light weapons, commercial trucks, some military trucks, both from Europe as well as from the United States. We're adding armor on to some of those vehicles now. And we have discussed what our ability will be in the long run to leave behind some additional equipment for them over time, so that they have the same capabilities that we do, or very nearly.

So I don't know of a plan, but I know that we have discussed that at senior levels. And we will come up with some sort of plan that makes the most sense for American soldiers, as well as Iraqi soldiers.

Q When you say "equipment," do you mean tanks, Strykers, humvees, artillery?

GEN. WEBSTER: No, I'd -- that's hard to say, because that's not my decision to make, but primarily in

terms of trucks and humvees and potentially some communications equipment, command and control equipment, those kinds of things, not -- at this point, I don't see the need.

They really have asked us for the ability to get contracts with former Eastern European nations to help them rebuild the fleet of former Soviet equipment, for the most part, that they have. They're very happy with their tanks and their BMPs and personnel carriers. And in some cases, we're providing them some convoy escort vehicles similar to some that we have. And in some cases, I know very much they'd like to have humvees. And we operate together in our own humvees sometimes.

And so I think more in the line of trucks and command and control equipment, as opposed to heavy armor.

MR. TURNER: Okay. I think we're going to wrap it up with that. General, we really appreciate what you and your soldiers are doing every day, and we hope to see you again in our briefing room soon. So thank you very much.

GEN. WEBSTER: You're quite welcome. Thanks.

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