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Presenter: Commander, Multinational Division North-Central of Task Force Liberty, Maj. Gen. Joseph J. Taluto **October 28, 2005 9:00 AM EDT**

News Briefing with Maj. Gen. Joseph J. Taluto

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(Note: The general appears via video teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq.)

BRYAN WHITMAN (Pentagon spokesman): Well good morning, general, and welcome again to the briefing room.

And welcome this morning to our Pentagon press. I think you all know our briefer is Major General Joe Taluto. He's the commander of the 42nd Infantry Division and Task Force Liberty. His troops are responsible for the ongoing security operations in North-Central region of Iraq. That's the area that includes Balad, Kirkuk, Tikrit, Samarra. And he -- it wasn't that long ago that he was speaking to you -- I think it was in August -- where he gave you an operational date. He is in Baghdad today. And this is probably his last time to talk to you from Baghdad as his unit is getting ready to transfer authority to the 101st Airborne Air Assault Division in the coming days.

So, general, if you'd like to give us a bit of an overview. I know that it's been a tremendously successful year for your unit there, and we certainly look forward to hearing that and asking you a few questions.

GEN. TALUTO: Okay, Bryan. I don't know why you used the word "probably" the last from Baghdad. We are headed out. I'm just joking.

Good morning, everybody. As Bryan mentioned, the 42nd Infantry Division and the most part of Task Force Liberty is about to redeploy. We have been focused forward each and every day since our mobilization some 18 months ago, and we remain looking forward to ensure the safe departure of our task force soldiers.

Soon we will be able to fully reflect on what has occurred during our watch in Multinational Division North-Central. One thing we are certain of: progress in every line of operation has been realized. I frequently describe our mission in north-central Iraq this year as one of transition. The role of the Rainbow Division Task Force in Iraq has been to protect the democratic process while building up the capabilities and sustainability of our Iraqi partners. Let me offer you some of the most significant overall areas of progress.

First and foremost, substantial progress has been made in organizing, training and equipping Iraqi

security forces. In February, when we TOA'd with the First Division, we had one division headquarters, four brigades and 14 battalions. Today we have two division headquarters, five brigades and 18 battalions. In February, we were issuing rifles and uniforms and training troops at squad and platoon levels. Today each brigade has had three CPXs with their organic battalions and can conduct company- and battalion- level operations. In fact, they have completed some brigade-level operations quite successfully. Nearly half of our operations in MND North-Central are led by or conducted only by Iraqi army forces. They are equipped with over 85 percent of their organizational equipment and are working towards sustainment capabilities.

I could describe to you numerous successful operations and events that the Iraqi security forces have conducted -- more than our time would allow. Suffice to say, these forces are on the rise. We must now continue to grow their readiness by building sustainment capabilities which will move them further toward independent operations.

Another achievement that does not get enough visibility, in my view, is the reduction of coalition force bases. During our time, we have been able to close 10 U.S. FOBs -- forward operating bases -- turning most of those over to Iraqi army units, therefore reducing coalition force presence. In fact, soon, the former palace complex of Saddam Hussein in Tikrit, once the headquarters of Task Force Liberty and the 42nd Division, will be turned over to the people of Iraq.

Turning to important progress in the governance line, here, too, there has been remarkable progress. In February, the provincial governments were elected but not functioning. Now they are fully functioning with provincial councils; local city governments have been elected, and for the most part are up and running effectively. These governments have been in charge of prioritizing and contracting projects in their provinces through a collaborative Iraqi process. We have seen Iraqi-elected leaders grow into their positions, becoming more confident, visible and forceful. This is significant, as they have taken on more and more responsibility for solving problems; in other words, Iraqi solutions to Iraqi issues.

Another government capability that has progressed is the Joint Coordination Centers. They have grown and become extremely effective. They are located throughout all provinces and local municipalities. Their planning, and the execution of that plan by Iraqi security forces, produced a highly safe and secure referendum vote on October 15th.

Another impressive improvement has been the growth of the Iraqi media capability in North-Central. Print media, radio, local TV and now a satellite television station in Tikrit has given voice to the Iraqi people. I can tell you that they are excited about it.

I can go on and on; however, suffice to say real, measurable progress has been made this past year. Yes, the insurgency continues, but the march to democracy is in full stride.

Let me end my comments by saying to the American people I wish that they could see what I have seen over the past 11 months. And it's not about the progress we made or even the bona fide relationships we have established with the majority of the Iraqi people; it's about the American soldiers that serve their country. I cannot adequately describe their courage, their resiliency, their balanced warrior spirit or their commitment to duty. It is truly inspirational and a thing of beauty. Each and every American can take pride in their soldiers because they are America's sons and daughters.

And with that closing comment, we can start our questions.

MR. WHITMAN: As is the case normally, the general can't see you, so if you could identify yourself for him, that would be helpful. And we'll start with Charlie.

Q General, Charlie Aldinger with Reuters. You said that Saddam's palace headquarters in Tikrit will

soon be turned over to the Iraqis. When will it be turned over? And is it currently a U.S. military facility headquarters, and will it be turned over to the Iraqi military?

GEN. TALUTO: I think I got all your question there, Charlie. It is -- the U.S. military is moving off the complex. The government of Iraq, through the minister of finance, is in conversation with the provincial government in Tikrit and they are discussing who is going to come on there. It is going to be totally and only an Iraqi presence there as soon as we leave, and we'll be leaving there this month -- or the month of November we'll be leaving.

Q Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: Lolita.

Q General, Lolita Baldor with the Associated Press. Other commanders have told us that there are problems with the Iraqi army ability to get supplies and to have replacement parts, that that's one of the things that's impeding their progress. Are you seeing that also? And does that continue to be a problem?

GEN. TALUTO: Yes. As I said in my opening statements, we now have to build the sustainment capabilities. That is not a mature system yet, their sustainment capabilities, and so things like getting parts, repairing vehicles, the list goes on with a number of logistical sustainability issues. We have -- there are systems in place. They have to improve. And that is one of the issues that I'm sure -- it is being worked on now and that is going to improve here, I think, in the near term. And especially once we get past the elections in December, I think more and more once the permanent government is in place and the ministries are solidified, I think you're going to see more improvements in that area especially.

MR. WHITMAN: Jim?

Q General, this is Jim Mannion with Agence France-Presse. Based on your experience and what you've seen, what do you think are the prospects for a significant reduction of U.S. forces in Iraq generally, or at least in your sector? And how long will it be before the Iraqi security forces are able to control that sector entirely on their own?

GEN. TALUTO: The first part of the question, I believe, the prospects are very good for, you know, coalition force presence becoming less, but it is -- we have, as I pointed out, more Iraqi army security forces and the police forces are also fairly robust in North-Central, and things are moving along to -- very well there. So I think economies, you know, can be seen there, and that's just something that our operational commanders above me will decide as they look at the total theater requirements in places like that.

The second part of the question, how long before the Iraqi Army units can take over totally. It kind of goes back to that sustainment question to some extent. But we're making progress with bringing these Iraqi army units up to a readiness level that is good enough to lead and assume operational space. The fact is that you have to be able to sustain that readiness level and in fact solidify it so that it even improves. So the sustainment piece is now the next thing. We have to make that better. We have got many of these units up to speed, and many of them are functioning very well. They're on their own, doing the counterinsurgency fight, leading most of our operations, and certainly in doing traffic control and moving out doing flash and hasty TCP work. They are virtually on every single raid we do, and most of the time they are the ones that are the predominant force in those raids.

So they're getting real, on-the-ground experience. Their training is moving up in levels. They're training now at company and battalion level. That's very sophisticated training up at the battalion level. They're doing brigade CPXs. We have conducted some brigade-level operations. So I think, you know, we're going to see some of these units emerge as being able to take over the lead, and it'll probably go in pieces. How long that

takes -- a lot of conditions are based, you know, it's a condition-based issue. Threats in that area, particular area, how well they're able to control it, et cetera.

Q General, Vicky O'Hara of National Public Radio. When you say that you think that the prospects are very good for coalition forces to become to be reduced, are you speaking of north-central Iraq, or are you speaking of the country as a whole? And my second question, is it at all possible that once the elections are over, that U.S. forces could be withdrawn from north-central Iraq, given the progress that you cite?

GEN. TALUTO: I can only speak for north-central Iraq. I mean, that's where we have worked in this past year. My other knowledge of the theater is only for situational awareness, and certainly those questions about what's possible with all that really resides, you know, with the force commander and commanders above me because they are the ones that have the full picture. So I'm only speaking about north-central Iraq, good progress in north-central Iraq. There are good battalions, good brigades, we're making great progress out there.

I think the second part of your question is about after the elections. Certainly the December election now is going to take center stage, just as the referendum did. And so our Iraqi army partners are -- have done a marvelous job in the referendum ramp-up. They're now, you know, refitting a little bit. There's some training going on. And they'll soon be getting ready for the December period of time. And so after December, I think you'll see, you know, more forceful training come into play.

The other piece is that U.S. forces are transitioning; it has been a transition that has started some time ago; it's going to go on for a while. And during that period of time, we got to get the elections over with, and then we move on into the next year. And I think -- my opinion is that speed is going to pick up with getting some of these Iraqi units even further along. And part of that goes to those sustainability issues and the ability for them to not only sustain maintenance-wise, they have to be able to sustain their personnel, which they have had no problem with getting people into army service. In fact, we have more than we need and can be choosey -- they can be choosey. You have training sustainment. You can do operations, but you always got to go back to conduct training, maintain proficiencies and certain individual squad/platoon-level types of things. So you got to go back and be able to sustain that. We want the Iraqi leaders to do that so they are the ones that can sustain themselves as the coalition draws down more and more away from supporting them.

MR. WHITMAN: AI?

Q General, it's Al Pessin with Voice of America. I want to follow up on that point and then ask a question about the Iraqi media.

You mentioned the more senior generals, and they have said that they hope to begin withdrawing substantial numbers of U.S. forces sometime next year. And I wonder, now that you're talking about your successors moving to this next stage of brigade-level training and sustainment, is that a faster process than the part that you've done at the lower levels? Is that something that you can see coming to fruition sometime between this next spring and fall, let's say, when you could begin to see some reduction in U.S. troop levels? So I'm just trying to get a sense of how much work there is to do as it relates to the timing.

And then you mentioned that the media is developing in your area. And there have been some reports in the past about the new Iraqi media as to whether they're reliable in terms of the information that they put out, whether they're helpful in terms of nation-building, or just carrying rumors that are more harmful. So what's your evaluation of the new Iraqi media in your area?

GEN. TALUTO: Okay, first part of the question, continuing now with Iraq army. We're -- as I said back in February, we were at squad/platoon level training and we weren't really conducting any operations with the Iraqi army of any substance. So that just lets you know where we were.

Building competencies at platoon and then getting it to company level, that is not a -- you know, that's a fairly -- you know, and everything's relative. If I say "fast process," what's fast? I mean, those are the building blocks. When you start getting into battalion-level operations and brigade-level operations, things -- there are just more moving parts; it's more complex in what you're talking about doing there. And so yes, we are now starting to look at brigades and how they can man and control, plan and execute operations on a brigade-level basis. And sometime next year, they're going to definitely be able to be looked at very closely with regards to being able to start conducting brigade-level operations on a continuous basis. And then it can be decided by the operational commanders whether they are to take over that particular portion of battlespace, et cetera.

So that's -- we're moving along. We're moving toward that goal. There isn't anything that's been stopping us. The training's been going fine, the operations have been going fine. It's, again, sustainment. I keep bringing that in there because you get to a certain readiness level and the readiness, you do not -- readiness goes up and down. What the key is, is that on the bottom line, on the lower limit of readiness, you don't want it to fall down below an acceptable level. You want to keep it in a band of excellence, is what we call it -- a top line and a bottom line. The top being right, you know, A-number one, ready to go; the bottom line being the minimum acceptable readiness level that you want to be able to stay at. You have to have those sustainment programs to stay in that band of excellence, even though the readiness will move up and down in there. Without sustainment, you can have a drop-off that takes you down below acceptable levels of readiness, and then that's a problem. So you have to link the two. You're building it, you're building company, battalion, brigade, and you have to start having sustainment in those formations for them to stay up on their own and keep their readiness on their own and conduct their own operations.

The second part, on the media, we've been very pleased with the media process in North-Central. And we think it's very honest. Particularly Salahuddin -- I mean, all the provinces are good. I mean, Diyala Province, Kirkuk Province, Salahuddin Province, they all have their print media, they all have their radio shows, they all have their local television shows. They bring in people, notables in their communities. They get them out there. They talk. They have discussions on TV.

The satellite TV station in Tikrit is very exciting prospects for the people in Salahuddin Province because they are going to be able to speak, and as you know, that's a largely Sunni Arab province. And I will tell you that their interest is in telling the real story about what's going on in Iraq and not some of the fabrication that goes on on other Arab channels. And I'm quoting Iraqis that are saying that.

And that doesn't mean that they're 100 percent pro. They have their issues. They want to be able to say what their issues are. They want to be able to talk about them. And that's what's really been evolving, is that they see the media as their ability to combat this insurgency, to combat certainly the greater insurgency, which is al Qaeda in Iraq, and to tell their story.

So I think it's on the move and I think it's doing well. That is my personal observations.

MR. WHITMAN: Let's go here to the back and work our way over.

Q General, I'm Carl Osgood. I work for Executive Intelligence Review. Can you talk a little bit about what the impact of all of this progress you're reporting has been on the insurgency, how has the effectiveness of the insurgency changed over time? Because it seems from back here to be as intense as it ever was.

GEN. TALUTO: The nature of the insurgency. It seems intense, and certainly is when you take into consideration the spectacular attacks, the VBIEDs, the attacks against Iraqi -- you have Palestine Hotel, the other kinds of things they do in cities, that kill innocent people. They always catch the headlines. Certainly IEDs are out there against our forces and against Iraqi security forces, and they are the leading casualty producer right now.

But a couple things that I see. Number one, I think we're getting further division between al Qaeda in Iraq and the Iraqi rejectionists or Saddamists. I don't think al Qaeda in Iraq's message is resonating very well, and I think we're seeing, at least in North-Central, we're not seeing as much of their influence in there.

I will tell you a little anecdote here. Back in June we had a governors' conference, and in May and June in North-Central were the two biggest months of suicide bombing and the killing and taking of innocent life, way above our normal. Those were the only two months. Everything other than that stayed relatively, you know, straight across. They were not happy, and the governors decided in that June meeting that they were going to come out strong and condemn violence, and they all did, and they all did forcefully -- in Salahuddin, in Kirkuk, in Sulimaniyah and in Diyala province -- the governors personally, and they took this on. And I do believe since that period of time, I have seen the attitudes about killing -- Muslims killing Muslims -- that is not playing well with the Iraqi people.

Then we have the Saddamists and the Iraqi rejectionists. Looks like, from this referendum vote, that we are starting to see that the Sunni Arabs -- and I can tell you this for a fact -- they are going to participate in the political process because they saw what happened in January as not helpful to their cause. There are still -- an insurgency there that are doing things that are not helpful, and, in fact, have to be neutralized. But I believe that the Iraqis will eventually get that part solved, I think as the political process goes forward, as the issues are resolved, compromised, or a consensus comes together. It is a political process. And that's the way I see -- I see the -- I don't see a great bonding there or a coalescing, let me say it that way.

MR. WHITMAN: We have time for one, maybe two more. All right, here to Jim, and we'll finish up with Charlie, then, okay?

Q General, it's Jim Mannion from AFP again. I was wondering -- you know, you were talking about sustainment. I wonder if you could just define that, exactly what you mean by that.

GEN. TALUTO: I'm sorry, say -- I didn't quite get the -- about the what?

Q You were talking about sustainment, about the importance of sustainment. And I'm just wondering if you could define that and explain exactly what you mean by sustainment.

GEN. TALUTO: All right, sustainment -- in the functional areas we have personnel, we have logistics and we have training. In our logistics arena -- everything about maintaining and sustaining your equipment levels. So if you take a truck out, and it gets hit with an IED and it gets destroyed, how do I get my truck replaced? If my truck breaks, and I don't have parts to fix it, how do I get the parts -- the necessary parts to put it back on the road? If my weapon systems break down and I need small arms repair or heavy weapons repair, who's going to come in and do that repair? And if it's above my level, who do I send my weapon to to get fixed or where do I get new weapons? If I need leaders and personnel, and I have to have -- rotate leaders, there has got to be a system in place to -- and a thoughtful system on how they select commanders, and put in leaders, and make assignments because that sustains the personnel side.

In training, if I can conduct -- if I've got my soldiers and their marksmanship is good, their -- they know how to conduct, aim, fire, that their individual training skills are good, if I don't use those skills, they will erode. So I need to understand that I have to schedule time to go back to training at certain periodic times. I need to be able to conduct that kind of training over again to sustain their skills.

So in these functional areas, there are sustainment requirements, and you have to have systems in place. And those systems emanate from on high. In other words, it is from higher to lower that those sustainment systems come into play. So while we're making good healthy battalions that are capable, and we're putting together brigade headquarters that are capable of planning and executing operations, we have to have the sustainment programs that come from a community of that kind of support that provides those services or

trains those services. Does that explain the sustainment question?

Q That was great. Thanks.

MR. WHITMAN: General, we'll make this the last one from here before we sign off from this end.

Q General, just to clarify a couple things. Number one, Saddam's palace in Tikrit, that's not your headquarters. That's not the headquarters of the military for North-Central Iraq. That's just one military headquarters. Am I wrong?

GEN. TALUTO: It has been the headquarters. The complex itself has been a U.S. FOB, known as FOB Danger. It was occupied by the 4th Division. It was occupied by the 1st Division, and it's been occupied by the 42nd Division Headquarters. There will be no more U.S. presence at -- and there will be no more FOB Danger. So the 101st who is replacing us is going to be headquartered -- it will not be headquartered there. It'll be headquartered north of Tikrit.

Q And just one more question. You said that, I believe, that 10 -- you've closed 10 forward operating bases. You've been able to close or move away from 10 forward operating bases since June or July, as I remember. For some context, how many forward operating bases do you have in your area in order to give us a comparison?

GEN. TALUTO: We started with 27 bases when we came in, and so we're down to 17. And the prospects for closing more are there. As the 101st gets in and gets past the election, and so on, and so forth, they'll make their own assessments on where they can continue to draw down on bases.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, General, this is Bryan Whitman again. And we just want to thank you for not only taking the time today, but in your previous occasions, to talk to us and to give us updates in terms of what your unit has been doing. And by all accounts, what has been a very successful year.

We wish you a speedy and safe redeployment, and we hope to see you back here sometime.

GEN. TALUTO: Well, thank you very much. And God bless you all. I look forward to being in your time zone.

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