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Media Availability with Secretary Rumsfeld and Iraqi President Jalal Talabani

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SECRETARY RUMSFELD: Good afternoon, folks. I certainly welcome the President of Iraq, the Honorable Mr. Talabani to the United States and to the Department of Defense. He is a great friend of our country and someone we've worked closely with.

I also would want to say how pleased we are with the progress, Mr. President, in the drafting of a new constitution for your country. That is difficult work. It has been watched with great interest, and we congratulate you on that progress and on the fact that it protects the rights and the opportunities for all people in Iraq.

The terrorists in that country are still there. They're still lethal. But the pressure is being put on them. The coalition forces and the Iraqi security forces now numbering something like 190,000 are aggressively attacking and capturing or killing terrorists and insurgents all across this country. I think a good example is what's taking place in the western part of this country, of that country today.

The terrorists have failed. They are being led basically by non-Iraqis, outsiders. They have tried to stop the elections that took place and they've failed. They've tried to stop the drafting of the constitution and they've failed. The referendum on the constitution takes place on October 15th and they're going to fail again. Then there will be an election the end of December electing a new Iraqi government under the new constitution, and the terrorists will fail again.

The skill of the Iraqi security forces is improving every week, and I find it encouraging that the numbers of people registered to vote in Iraq for the referendum is going up. The polls indicate that something like 85 percent of the people of that country intend to participate, which is encouraging.

The President of the United States and the government of the United States are absolutely determined to see this through to victory and to success, and to see the Iraqi government and the Iraqi people off on a path towards a democratic future and a successful one.

Mr. President, we thank you for coming. We thank you for your leadership. And we wish you success.

Thank you, sir.

PRESIDENT TALABANI: Thank you, Mr. Secretary.

Dear friends, we are here first to express our gratitude and thanks to the glorious American people, the President of the United States, our friends, [counselors] and for the brave American Army. We owe to those American heroes who came to liberate us from the worst kind of dictatorship. They came in a war for our liberation to end a war of genocide by Iraqi dictatorship against Iraqi people. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis buried now in mass graves were the victim of this war of annihilation launched by Saddam Hussein against the Iraqi people. Thanks to your brave Army, now Iraqi people is free. For the first time the Iraqi people are enjoying democracy, freedom, all kinds of freedom -- of expression, of parties, of journalism, of media, of everything. We have some kind of progress in economic field also, and reconstruction in many areas which is [inaudible] like Kurdistan and like south and center part of Iraq. The life is going to be normal. Unfortunately, you have problems in the west part of Iraq, but it's also reduced compared with what's happening in the past. For example in Baghdad there were daily ten car bombs -- now there is one, two. And also hundreds of terrorists arrested, hundreds of them killed, and among them hundreds of foreigners coming from our gifts of our Arab brothers in other countries sending for us.

The situation in Iraq is not all of it is black or negative. I am sorry to say that media was reluctant to reflect the real picture of Iraq.

If you look to Iraq we see about 14 [inaudible] in Iraq. You can say it's [inaudible], the life is going on. Schools are open, hospitals, reconstruction, rebuilding the country is going on. The economy was liberated from state control, became free economy, and a lot of developments happened in this field also.

But always, unfortunately, we hear only about the negative side in Iraq. Many people talking about Fallujah, but no one talking about what is going on in Sulimaniyah, in Urbil, in Najaf, in Karbala, in Nasiriyah, in other parts of Iraq. In Urbil and other parts which our people are busy to reconstruct the country, to rebuild the country, and we have many, many kinds of achievements. We hope that we will have a plan that we can help that our American friends can reduce the bombs and [inaudible] when the Americans are suffering now. We want to take this responsibility, that we Iraqis, we will take the responsibility of securing our country and we will pay the price of our freedom. You have paid your price as a glorious people. Of course the glorious people in the history always pay for others. You in United States, you have paid hundreds of thousands of your sons and girls, boys, in fighting against fascism and in liberating Asian people. Thanks to you, you liberated Afghanistan from the worst kind of reactionary regime, you liberated Iraq from the worst kind of dictatorship which was a danger on all of us and all of you.

Terrorism is not only the enemy of Iraqi people. It is becoming to an international enemy for all human being in the world. And all Arab countries started to suffer like us from the terrorist activities.

These terrorist activities are a danger for peace, stability, and they want to bring back the worst kind of reactionary regimes to the Middle East. Of course we are determined to remain your partners in fighting against tyranny, terrorism and for democracy in the Middle East.

We are supporting your new policy in Middle East. We are proud to be your friends. We are proud to be your partners in fighting against terrorism. And we are grateful to you. We hope that we will see in near future Americans are able to remove as much as they want, but not all the force because we want them for reasons you know, Mr. Secretary.

Let me tell you that we have other progress, achievements in fighting against terrorism. For example for the first time some tribes started to fight against terrorism in the west part of Iraq. In many places the local people are ready to fight against terrorism. And the people started to understand that those terrorist groups are

the enemy of Iraqi people before becoming the enemy of the United States of America. They are killing innocent Iraqis. They are attacking mosques, [inaudible], and the war of terrorists launched against all Iraqis.

I am here to repeat thanks to you, my dear friend.

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: Thank you.

PRESIDENT TALABANI: You helped us very much. Thanks.

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: Mr. President, thank you.

I should have added that Mr. Talabani has been fighting against the Saddam Hussein regime I suppose almost as long as it's been around and is a courageous individual in his own right.

We'll take some questions.

Q: Mr. President, I believe in an earlier appearance today you said there would be no need for U.S. troops in Iraq within two years from now. Is that correct? And if so --

PRESIDENT TALABANI: Yes, I say is no need for huge number of American forces. But I say we need some, there will be a need for two or three small bases for frightening others -- not to interfere in our internal affairs. Not to fight.

Q: So you're not saying that within two years all U.S. forces --

PRESIDENT TALABANI: I say that within two years all American forces can leave, but we won't ask them. We'll ask some of them to stay in small bases for reason which I expressed for you.

Q: Mr. Secretary, what do you think of that plan?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: Well, what we've said all along is that our goal is to assist the Iraqi people in taking hold of their country and assisting them in developing security forces so that they can provide for their own security. And that we wouldn't want to discuss anything that might be discussable until after there's a new constitution and a new government in place, and that type of thing would be discussed, as the President indicates, in an orderly way thereafter.

You know, a number of the press people here have served, have been in Iraq and served. I see some of these faces. Some of the people against the wall, and most of the people in this building, many of the people in this building have served in your country. Even Larry DiRita was over there working. And there's Zal, the famous Ambassador who's there now.

Q: Mr. President, as I'm sure you're aware, U.S. public opinion polls suggest support for the war is slipping. What do you say to Americans who watch the daily car bombings and the violence and are now convinced that this war was not and is not worth the American blood being shed and the billions of dollars being spent --

PRESIDENT TALABANI: We say that we are sorry for American bloodshed, but we think that this war was the war of liberation of Iraq, and liberation Iraqis very important task for the Middle East. The United States as a super power and America as a glorious people who participate in promoting democracy and freedom all over the world, they paid the price of freedom. We are sorry for the American numbers of killed in Iraq, but we think that this is the responsibility of a great power like United States of America. Not to leave a very important area like Middle East in the hands of dictators like Saddam Hussein who were launching war one day with Iran,

second with Kuwait, and threatening the interests of all of the world, especially the Middle East. It's a very important area. This important area must not be left to the dictatorships. I think it is our duty to do as much as possible to take responsibility that American forces in Iraq no more pay the price of the liberation of Iraq.

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: I should add that President Talabani plans to be out at Walter Reed I believe tomorrow to meet with some of the wounded and their families.

Q: Mr. President, earlier today in an appearance in Washington you said that Syria must end its support of terrorists. What specific evidence do you have that Syria, the Syrian government is contributing to the terrorist activity in Iraq?

PRESIDENT TALABANI: We have a lot of evidence, a lot of documents, a lot of captured peoples. But we don't want to publicize it. We still hope that by [inaudible] with the Syrian government we can solve this problem. Because especially we've got promises from Syrian government that through private discussion they will end this policy and they will cooperate with us.

You know Syria at the time of opposition helped us too much. We Iraqi opposition, all of us were based in Syria, we were fighting against Saddam Hussein. For that, we want to solve problems with Syria in friendly way, not in the public and through media.

Q: Are those discussions underway now?

PRESIDENT TALABANI: Yes, discussions underway now. I have been invited by President [Basharr] to go to Syria. I wrote him a letter. I got the answer. We are discussing the measures, how to prevent the terrorist activities in Syria against Iraq, and I am hopeful that we will reach agreement.

Q: So clearly you're not satisfied with the lack of progress so far.

PRESIDENT TALABANI: I am not satisfied with the lack of [inaudible], but I hope it will happen. There are some hopes, some signs that there will be. For that we don't want to say everything what we have.

Q: Secretary Rumsfeld, would you agree with those who are coming to the conclusion that a shortcoming in the plan for the response to the Katrina disaster was perhaps an over-reliance on first responders who were not able to respond because of the magnitude of the disaster? And are you looking at ways that you might be able to streamline the military response in a future situation, again, when local and state authorities might be overwhelmed?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: Our constitution provides for a federal system. The laws, the statutes of the United States provide that the first responders in the case of a natural disaster of that type would be the state and local officials.

In this instance the natural disaster was of, as they say, biblical proportion. That means that a number of the first responders, or those who would have been first responders under our Constitution and under our laws, were in fact victims and were not able to respond. I think there is no question but that the President's indicated he intends to review how those things are arranged and what might be done.

I will say for the Department of Defense that the flow of forces that began with pre-positioning and preparation before the storm hit and before the levee broke in New Orleans, was impressive. The number of forces flowing in there from the original 3,000 to 5,000 up to a total of 70,000 committed to this effort today, both on land and sea in the distressed area, has been without question the most impressive and substantial relief effort, undoubtedly, in the history of the country in a very short period of time.

One more question.

Q: Mr. President, you said you anticipate only two or three bases in Iraq in the next two years. Can you estimate how many troops that is and if troops could start leaving before then?

PRESIDENT TALABANI: Small groups of Americans. We want American presence not with a big number, only the presence of America is enough to prevent others to interfere with our internal affairs. Not to fight, but to tell others we are here, don't interfere in internal Iraqi affairs.

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: Lest my silence indicate anything at all, which it should not -- [Laughter] -- let me simply say that the President of Iraq is free to say whatever he wishes and he has done so. And I am not President of anything and I am not free to say anything and therefore, I have not. [Laughter].

Thank you, folks.