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Presenter: General Peter Pace, USMC, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

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DoD News Briefing by General Peter Pace, USMC, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

GEN. PACE: Well, thanks for your time this afternoon. I just spent a fabulous week in the Gulf region with our troops, and I thought I'd come down and share some thoughts about what I saw and then answer your questions.

And first of all, the traveling team was not only U.S. military folks but also some great Americans who volunteered their time, as USO participants, to go with us to show the troops overseas that they are cared about back home. We had "American Idol" star Diana DeGarmo. We had comedian Reggie McFadden. We had country-western star Michael Peterson. And we had a true American hero in his own right, retired United States Army Colonel Jack Jacobs, who, as you all know, is a Medal of Honor recipient for his service in Vietnam.

So the four of them were able to go along with me, and we went to seven countries, first into Qatar and then out aboard ship, on board the Roosevelt aircraft carrier; then into Bahrain, then down into UAE, then up into Afghanistan, then to Iraq for a couple of days, then into Kuwait, then Djibouti; on the way home, stopped in Germany to get to the Landstuhl hospital; and then came home. And we probably saw about 12,000 or so troops who we were able to actually get up to and to shake hands and then say thank you to.

The real purpose of the trip was for me to say two very simple words to as many service members as I could, and that was "Thank you." Thank you for your service, for what you've been doing. Thank you for your sacrifice during the holidays, and thanks to their families, who serve this country as well as anybody who's ever worn the uniform, by sitting silently here at home and praying for their loved one.

They have a lot to be proud of during the course of 2005, not only in Afghanistan, where we have seen elections that have seated a parliament in a country that just three years ago was in tyranny; but in Iraq, where we've had three elections this year, two elections and a referendum this year; but also, no matter where else the armed forces of the United States have been asked to perform their mission this year, whether it's tsunami relief out in the Pacific, or hurricane relief here at home, or earthquake relief in Pakistan -- no matter what we've asked our young folks to do, they have done superbly well and made us proud.

And I was just delighted to have the opportunity to get out and look as many in the eye as I could to say thanks for that.

There were basically two take-aways that I had from talking with the troops. And I was able to have

breakfast, lunch and dinner with many of them, in addition to getting a chance to just have some time with them after each of the shows. The two things that struck me most about the folks I saw were, one, their incredibly high morale. Regardless of where they were stationed, they felt good about what they were doing; they knew they were making a difference; and they thought that their time away from home, although certainly something that is a sacrifice at this time of year, was well worth their sacrifice for what was happening where they were serving.

And the other thing that I came away with in talking with not only U.S. personnel but foreign leaders, is what I would call a quiet confidence in where we are right now, in an understanding of the process, an understanding of the way ahead, and a feeling of confidence that if we collectively stay with it, we're going to be okay.

So that's what we did. It was a great time doing it. And I was pleased and proud to be their chairman as I looked them in the eye.

With that, I'll answer your questions.

Sir?

Q: General, is the violence that we saw today in Iraq an illustration that the December 15th elections did not diminish the intent of the insurgency in Iraq, as some had hoped? And could you assess what you see as the intensity of the insurgency?

GEN. PACE: Well, especially today when there have been at least two suicide bombings, of which I'm aware, what's clear to me is that each of the elections has been a major blow to al Qaeda. In January, in October, in December, al Qaeda tried to influence the voters in each of those to not go to the polls, and the percentage went up. In January, the percentage of the people that voted was in the 50 percent mark, 50-plus. In October it was 60-plus. And in December it was 70- plus. So clearly, the terrorists failed at each of their primary missions with regard to stopping the vote. And I think what you're seeing now is their continuing attempt to disrupt the proper formation of the Iraqi government. And I'm very confident that they'll fail at this as well, because the Iraqi people will form a government that is representative of what they want to have, and it will begin functioning to the betterment of the Iraqi people.

So I see the terrorist attack as acknowledgement on the terrorists' part that this is a center of gravity and that they're losing.

Sir?

Q: General, you mentioned al Qaeda specifically when you referred to the attacks. Of course the suicide attacks are generally thought to be non-Iraqi. But is that the primary concern you have in the insurgency, is not the Iraqi side of it, the former Ba'athists?

GEN. PACE: There are several parts to those who are fighting against the Iraq government right now. But I think fundamentally that those who are Iraqi citizens, as they see the results of these elections, as they see their own government providing a way ahead that all of their citizens can understand as progress for their country, that those who are fighting against the government right now who are Iraqis will more and more lay down their arms and decide to become part of the future of Iraq and not the past.

It is the foreign fighters, from whom I believe most of these suicide bombers come, who are the ones who are not going to adhere to that same kind of principle because they are not Iraqi, and they are there simply to try to subjugate the Iraqi people.

Sir?

Q: If I can just go back to the first question about the intensity. Whether or not they're going to be ultimately successful, do you see this kind of intensity, with this level of attacks, with 130 people killed in Iraq today, and also a suicide bombing in Afghanistan, do you expect that level of intensity to continue throughout the U.S. stay there? Or do you see that going down over time, as some of these events you're talking about occur -- Iraqis becoming more and more in line?

GEN. PACE: I don't have a clear crystal ball on that. Clearly, though, the environment inside of which they are operating right now, as it changes, as more and more Iraqis want to have a peaceful solution to the problem, as more and more Iraqis see the benefit of their own government, there will be fewer places from which those folks who want to attack will have refuge.

So the opportunity in the future for the folks who are against the government to hide, to store weapons and the like will go down. So I do believe that over the course of the coming year, that violence will subside. However, the enemy has a vote, and the bottom line is is that we will assist the Iraqi government and the Iraqi armed forces to be able to have enough security so that their government can function properly and start providing the services to their people that they deserve.

Yes, sir?

Q: General, first of all, welcome home and happy new year.

GEN. PACE: Thank you.

Q: Will the embedding now with the U.S. -- I mean, with the Iraqi police units, what type of U.S. troops are embedded? Are they MPs? Are they special forces? A mixture? And what's the ultimate goal to train the police as SWAT teams or as cops on the beat or something in between that?

GEN. PACE: Thank you.

The -- as you know, the current embeds are with the Iraqi armed forces, and they are able to assist them in bringing in medevac and fixed-wing attack and logistics and the like.

The commando battalions that are part of the police are the ones that we're looking to have embedded people with, not the cops on the street, but these battalions that are in fact formed for operation at the battalion level to be able to do locally what some of the Iraqi armed forces have been doing regionally. So that the types of support that the police will receive will be more along the lines of what we've been providing to the Iraqi army battalions, not airstrikes and the like, but the ability to call in medevacs, the ability to help train -- train the trainers, so to speak, some of whom will be our own MPs, some will be gendarmerie from other countries, folks who can assist the police force in Iraq to understand how to function as a local police force, how to protect their citizens, but also to strengthen them where they initially won't have capacity, so they can go out and do their job.

Q: General, can I follow up on that, please? Do you plan on increasing the number of U.S. trainers in Iraq? I think there are 230 11-member teams now with the Iraqi army. Do you plan on shifting those teams over to the police, or just increasing the number of teams?

GEN. PACE: The number of teams will increase, and that's a good thing. As you've seen -- let's -- I mean, take 2005, as an example. It was an incredible year. About a year ago, there were only a handful of Iraqi army battalions in the fight. Today there are 100 battalions in the fight. A year ago, there were zero Iraqi

brigade -- operational brigades. Today, there are 31 brigades. A year ago, there were zero Iraqi division headquarters operational. Today there are eight. As they've come online, we have had eight to 10 of our individuals with them. That allows them, then, to go out and take over responsibility. So now we have about 30 of those battalions that in fact have their own responsibility, their own area of the country for which they're responsible.

So as their battalion displaces our battalion, you have perhaps 700 of our folks who are able to either do a different mission or come home, and we add eight to 10 of our folks to help them do what they're doing. So the addition of teams is a very, very healthy way of strengthening them and allowing us over time to transition to full control by the Iraqi government.

Q: Any sense how many more teams you'll create?

GEN. PACE: At this point, no. But for each of the commando battalions that I talked about, we will probably have a team, so that's 28 more. But as their individual units come online, we'll assess their needs and add what we need to do to give them the strength they need.

Q: General?

GEN. PACE: Sir?

Q: General, you said the embeds will be with the special commandos with the police. But isn't the problem at the local level with local police departments in Iraq? For example, in Kirkuk there is cases where several police officers launched a spate of kidnappings. What's being done on the local level to shape up the Iraqi P.D.s?

GEN. PACE: Yeah, the Iraqi government is very much aware of the fact that recruiting for both their army and their police force is their responsibility. And they have worked from the Iraqi central government with the provisional governments to go out, determine how many police are needed in a particular area, recruit to that need, and then vet the names of the individuals who've been selected through the national level to see whether or not the individual who has volunteered is a person who has some kind of a background that would not be the kind of person you'd want in the police force. That vetting is going on, and of course some people will slip through the net, and when they do, they'll be dealt with. But the training, the vetting, the recruiting is all Iraqi government responsibility with our assistance.

Q: If I could follow up on that, is it fair to say the majority of police training will still be under the purview of the Iraqi government? So it will be up to them how much training they get on human rights and abiding by the law?

GEN. PACE: Both the Iraqi police and the Iraqi army are primarily the responsibility, training-wise, for the Iraqi government. What we do is work hand in glove with the Iraqi government to recommend syllabi for the various units, to recommend how they're trained, to recommend things like human rights training.

Q: And how much of the police force do these police commandos make up? Do you have an idea?

GEN. PACE: I do not. There's 28 battalions. I can get you that number, but I don't have it off the top of my head.

Yes, sir?

Q: General, these past two days have been particularly bloody. Do you feel that this insurgency, these

terrorists, have the capacity to continue this level of violence for an extended period of time?

GEN. PACE: I think that depends on the Iraqi people. I think it depends on how comfortable these terrorists feel moving about the towns and cities in Iraq. I think if the Iraqi people demonstrate to the terrorists that they're not welcome in their cities, that they're not welcome in their towns, that murderers -- which they are -- murderers of fellow Muslims, indiscriminate murderers that they are -- are not welcome, that that will reduce the number of people.

But clearly there is enough munitions scattered around that country still that the capacity to attack will be there. The difference will be the ability of the Iraqi armed forces and Iraqi police to maintain order inside the cities and countryside, and the desire of the Iraqi people to have -- to lead a normal life.

Q: If I could switch topics, sir, this week Representative John Murtha was asked if he would join the U.S. military today, and he said no. And pressed in that ABC interview -- and I don't know if you saw it or not -- he said -- the interviewer said, "I think you're saying the average guy who's considering recruitment is justified in saying, 'I don't want to serve.'" And he said, "Exactly right." Can get your response to those statements?

GEN. PACE: You know, when I got back yesterday, one of the first questions I was asked was what I thought about that. I had not seen the clip. I did get a chance to see it yesterday.

A large segment of the clip had to do with opinion about the war, and that's not my lane. This country's strength is based on the ability of its citizens and its leadership to have divergent views.

There were two parts in what I saw that went directly to my lane in the road, which is the health of the U. S. military. One was a statement that the U.S. Army is not well trained. The United States Army is well-trained. It is the best trained army in the world. It has never been better-trained, and we will continue to make sure that it stays well- trained.

The second was a quote that you just mentioned. That's damaging to recruiting, it's damaging to morale of the troops who are deployed, and it's damaging to the morale of their families who believe in what they're doing to serve this country. We have almost 300 million Americans who are being protected by 2.4 (million) volunteer active, Guard and Reserve members. We must recruit to that force. When a respected leader like Mr. Murtha, who has spent 37 extremely honorable years as a Marine, fought in two wars, has served the country extremely well in the Congress of the United States, when a respected individual like that says what he said, and 18- and 19-year-olds look to their leadership to determine how they are expected to act, they can get the wrong message.

Q: Sir, you look and sound a little angry about this. Am I misreading that?

GEN. PACE: I would describe myself as "energized" -- (laughter) -- because we have an all-volunteer, all-recruited United States armed forces. I believe that all young people should have the opportunity to serve their country in whatever way they see fit, and that those who would elect to serve in the armed forces of the United States should be encouraged to do, especially when we're in a war where our enemy has stated intention of destroying our way of life.

Q: So, General, is it irresponsible of the congressman to have made those remarks?

GEN. PACE: I think I've said what I needed to say about that.

Q: May I do a follow-up on this briefly, General? The National Guard is doing some very innovative recruiting. You may have heard they have purchased pizza boxes and put recruiting slogans on the top and

distributing them free to 900 college campuses in the U.S. And just now, in 15 states we find out that if you bring a buddy in, you get a \$2,000 bonus. If the Guard is going to be this innovative and maybe turn around its lack of quota, what about the active forces? The Army seemed a little sluggish, and a lot of people feel that slogan of "An Army of One" doesn't really match today's standards. Like the Guard says, they have to turn to other means of communication rather than the established means, such as radio, TV and newspaper.

GEN. PACE: Actually, I'm kind of proud of what the United States Army has done in the last six months. You know, it was just about six months ago when they were missing recruiting goals. And the leadership of the Army looked at that, put more recruiters on the street, put more advertising out there. And for the last six months, the active Army has in fact met its recruiting goals. So I think the leadership of the Army recognized a potential problem, did what they should have done, which is apply more assets and leadership to it, and the results have been proven in the last six months. They're doing very well.

Q: General, what sense are you getting from General Casey about when he's going to make his first recommendation this year on the level of forces that could be withdrawn? Did you get any good feel for that while you were over there? And can you give us a sense of metrics now the public and you will be watching for, just kind of informally, to give an indication of whether U.S. troops actually can be withdrawn.

GEN. PACE: First of all, General Casey, as you would expect, has a review routinely of the mission he has, a determination on his part of the number of troops he needs to accomplish those missions, and what changes he sees in the next several months. And he does that, I think, basically on a monthly basis, just kind of doing an internal review. When he sees change, whether it be change where he needs something in addition to what he has, like he did before the elections, he asked for more, he got more; and then, as he was executing that additional duty, he looked to see post election and determined he would not need as many forces and came in with a recommendation to reduce the force.

So I think he looks at it at least -- no, I know he looks at it at least monthly. But he only reports back here when he sees a change on the horizon that's going to require him to either ask for more or recommend less.

Q: Well, what are some of the changes on the horizon you'll be looking for, and the American people should be kind of looking at? Certainly lower attacks would be one. But are there other less obvious metrics that will be -- that Casey will review before making a recommendation of large withdrawal?

GEN. PACE: Well, I think one thing we can all look at is the number of battalions that are -- Iraqi battalions, both army and police, that are in fact running their own areas. And that's increased from zero this time last year to about 30 right now. As more and more territory in Iraq is under the control and -- command and control of Iraqi army, Iraqi police, that would allow us to in fact look to having the U.S. or coalition forces that were doing that mission come back home.

But again, it will be conditions on the ground, not on a calendar. And we could see where we would start coming down, and perhaps something would happen and we'd have to bump up a little bit. So we will do the right thing to ensure that the security in the country is maintained.

Probably that's going to mean the ability to come down, but we should not overlook the possibility that on occasion, like for elections or some other unforeseen circumstance, that we would need more, and if we did, the commanders would do what they have been doing, which is ask for more.

I think we need -- last question.

Q: General, if you could talk a little bit about what you think the obligation of American leaders -- in the White House, on Capitol Hill, throughout the country -- what is their obligation to communicate the same thing

you're saying here about recruiting, to communicate that message to young people? We hear that from this podium repeatedly over the course of the last few years. We don't really hear that kind of message coming out of the White House, coming off Capitol Hill, coming out, really, from anywhere but this building. What do you think the obligation is of our nation's political leaders to communicate those kind of messages?

GEN. PACE: I would not tell anybody else what their responsibilities are in that regard. I can tell you what my responsibilities are, which is to be a spokesman for the U.S. armed forces, and every chance I get, in all the forums I have the opportunity to be part of, to say to the youth of America that dedicating a part of your life to the service of this country is an honorable thing to do. And to encourage that, to encourage the mentors, the leaders, the teachers, those parents and others who young folks look up to -- to encourage them to encourage their young men or their young women to consider service to this country with the understanding that it's a very, very satisfying way to spend a portion, if not all of your adult life.

Thanks very much for your time today.

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