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**Presenter: Maj. Gen. Stephen T. Johnson, USMC, commanding general, Multinational Force-West and II Marine Expeditionary Force (Forward)**

**January 6,  
2006**

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## News Briefing with Maj. Gen. Johnson

(Note: General Johnson appears via video teleconference from Iraq.)

BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): General Johnson, can you hear me? This is Bryan Whitman.

GEN. JOHNSON: Yes, Bryan, I can hear you.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, good morning, and thank you, General, for joining this evening, your time.

Obviously our briefer today is Major General Steve Johnson, who's the commander of the II Marine Expeditionary Force (Forward) and commander of the Multinational Force-West. General Johnson, as you may recall, spoke to us in early October, and he's here today again to provide another update on the activities that are occurring in his region. He has a few things that he'd like to open up with and then is prepared to take some questions.

So with that, General, let me turn it over to you.

GEN. JOHNSON: Okay. Thank you, Bryan.

Good afternoon, everyone. I have just a short statement, and then I'll -- and I will take -- before taking your questions.

This afternoon I'd first like to comment on the horrific attack on the Iraqi civilians that took place yesterday in Ramadi. This attack was conducted against unarmed, innocent Iraqi registering to serve as policemen. They were willing to stand up for progress in their community and make a difference in their families and in their neighborhoods there in Ramadi. (Audio break from source) -- cowardly attack shows that the anti-Iraqi forces fear progress, and they're willing to indiscriminately kill and maim their own people to halt that progress.

For the victims of yesterday's attack, a combined effort of Iraqi/coalition forces rendered assistance and coordinated evacuations. And at several bases, coalition forces lined up for hours as walking blood banks to generously donate blood without regard for who was going to receive it.

On one hand, this attack shows the desperate, murderous nature of al Qaeda and also shows the resolve of the Iraqi people, who -- and there were dozens of Iraqis who got back in line after this attack yesterday and continued the registration process. It also showed the -- that the people of Iraqi were -- of Ramadi -- were incensed by this attack and that -- and blame Zarqawi and al Qaeda for it.

Now despite the events of yesterday, I believe 2006 is going to be another decisive year for Iraq and for her people.

They'll begin to see the benefits of the recent election and the increased capability and strength of their developing security forces.

Since I last briefed you, the Iraqis of Al Anbar have stepped forward and exercised their right to vote in unprecedented numbers. Al Anbar saw more than 250,000 Sunnis vote in the October referendum and approximately 370,000 in the December election. The people have shown their resolve by participating in a new and unfamiliar process, but one that offers hope for the citizens of Iraq.

If you look back over the past year at Al Anbar province, the growth of the Iraqi army in size, capability and professionalism has been quite remarkable. Last April, there were two Iraqi army brigades in Al Anbar province. Today, partnered with Multinational Force-West units, we have two divisions of the Iraqi army that comprise nearly 20,000 soldiers. Currently three brigades have the lead in counterinsurgency operations in their own area, and across the region, Iraqi army battalions are bearing an increasingly larger share of the counterinsurgency fight. Along the entire border with Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Syria, construction is complete on all but a few of the forts, and the soldiers of the Iraqi border forces are patrolling and providing security.

In the coming year in Al Anbar province, I think you're going to see continued progress in four key areas. First, that of presence. After the recent and successful operations along the western Euphrates River Valley, a persistent presence has been established at key points with coalition forces and increasingly capable Iraqi army forces. This presence is providing the conditions under which Iraqi police will be introduced and assist the local governments in assuming a greater role in providing services to their people.

Secondly, coalition force partnering with the Iraqi security forces will be key. Coalition partnership with Iraqi security forces for training of operations is key to their continued growth. Through this partnership, ISF forces and readiness will grow, security conditions will improve, and opportunities for good governance, reconstruction and economic development will appear.

Third, police. The reestablishment of Iraqi police in Fallujah has been a success story. With 1,200 trained police on the streets supported by limited numbers of Iraqi army and coalition forces, Fallujans are able to -- were able to vote safely and in large numbers in the recent election and the referendum. With 350 locally recruited police in training and 160 more in training -- waiting to go to training -- the force will soon reach its authorized strength of 1,700.

In other parts of the province, an assessment of conditions conducive to the introduction of police in towns and cities is under way. Police stations are being identified for repair. The local police chief has been nominated in the al Qaim region, and Iraqis are screening and recruiting potential policemen. The reintroduction of a professional police force in Al Anbar will provide local leaders with security and stability that they need to take care of their own. These police will start to be introduced over the coming months in conjunction with the completion of their training.

And finally, the political process. As a result of the recent elections and increased persistence -- our persistent presence in Al Anbar -- conditions are favorable for change and for providing Iraqis with an

opportunity to take advantage of the choices that are before them.

We are hearing an increasingly larger number of moderate voices. We want to give the political opportunities -- political process a chance. The people want an inclusive government that provides an alternative to the violence like we saw yesterday in Ramadi and to sectarian divisiveness. They want to focus on the needs of their community: schools, hospitals, jobs and their families.

These are the key points that I think are going to characterize the way ahead in 2006. And now, I'll be glad to take your questions.

MR. WHITMAN: All right. Let's go ahead and get started.

Will.

Q General, this is Will Dunham with Reuters. Could you give us your best estimate of the level of violence you anticipate in 2006 in Anbar province and in the Sunni Triangle? And how has the insurgency managed to maintain its level of intensity?

GEN. JOHNSON: Well, I think that we will continue to see -- we're continuing to see a Sunni insurgency in -- or an insurgency in Al Anbar province, and I think we will continue to see it manifested until the political process has time to develop. The people have gone to the polls and voted. They've elected officials. Those officials will be seated and that process will allow people to see that they have the opportunity for success, that they have the opportunity to be heard, and that there are alternatives to violence.

As that process continues to take root, as it will in the new year, I believe that that will have an affect on the insurgency. I believe it will reduce its -- the violence. I believe it will give the people a chance to see that there's an alternative to fighting, to killing and to the violence. In that sense, I think over the next year you will see a decline in violence, as the folks here realize that there are alternatives that they haven't had before.

And the second part of your question I think was, how have they managed to maintain the level of violence? (Off mike) -- correct in that?

Q That's correct. That's correct.

GEN. JOHNSON: Okay. I don't -- I think that the level of violence has gone up and down. It's cyclical in nature, and I don't -- I do not believe that the enemy has -- or the insurgents have maintained a steady level of violence. I think it has cycled up and down over the course of the last several months that we've been here, and I believe that we -- the most recent operations in Al Anbar, in the western Euphrates River Valley in particular, have taken the insurgent off of his stride. We have dealt a blow to al Qaeda and have also, by establishing persistent presence, are going to be able to reduce violence even more.

MR. WHITMAN: Bret.

Q General, Bret Baier with Fox News Channel. We heard in recent weeks that because of operations along the Iraqi-Syrian border that you had cut the number of suicide attacks in Iraq in half since the summer. Now, in the last six days, we understand there have been some 12 suicide attacks. And I'm wondering of this recent spike, whether you can pinpoint if foreign fighters are still coming across that border in significant numbers or where these suicide attackers are coming from.

GEN. JOHNSON: There are -- there is a huge number of miles of border, and the fact that -- whether or not those attackers have come across the border in this particular area, I can't pinpoint.

I do not believe that the -- that anyone who comes into Iraq from across that border can as easily make their way to places where they can conduct attacks as they could before the operations out there. Operations out there in the presence of those security forces, along with the coalition forces, have made it much more difficult to move around freely in that part of the country.

I do not draw a correlation between the number of attacks that have occurred recently and a -- some sort of a degradation of our -- of the security environment out in the western Euphrates. I don't see a linkage to it.

Q Are you capturing foreign fighters in any significant numbers along the border, since you now have presence, Iraqi presence and U.S. presence, in many of those towns?

GEN. JOHNSON: No, we've not captured a significant number of those who might be considered to be foreign. There is a lot of activity on that border, and the presence of the security forces out there, the Department of Border Enforcement forces on the border, backed up by Iraqi army forces, has had a -- has an effect on what comes across. We've had a number of incidents where we have uncovered a considerable amount of smuggling -- for example, cigarettes, eggs, things like that. But we have not picked up what would be called foreign fighters.

The detainees that we take in this province are primarily local. They are people who live in the towns in the Euphrates River Valley. We fight them in -- when we fight them, we fight them locally. That's where they live, and that's where they come from. The vast majority are local. And while there is an element of foreign fighters who influence or who try to influence the local insurgency, it's a very, very small part of the insurgency.

MR. WHITMAN: Sir?

Q General, Bob Burns with Associated Press. Recently General Casey expressed particular concern about the situation in Ramadi. He said that it appeared that the insurgents were, to use his words, pooling around Ramadi. I'm wondering if you can say whether it appears to you that Ramadi has become more of a focal point for the insurgency recently.

GEN. JOHNSON: Bob, I don't believe it has become a focal point for the insurgency. There has always been violence in Ramadi.

As far as an increase in it, I don't -- I haven't seen a notable increase in the violence. It's localized in very -- in some key places in that town.

Ramadi is not in flames. There are key places where there is -- there are more insurgents than are others, and we, along with our Iraqi security force partners, are going after them. But I do not see that Ramadi has become a place where they are focusing a lot more effort. I think, again, it is local people, local insurgents, primarily, who are causing the difficulties in key places, not the entire town of Ramadi.

MR. WHITMAN: John?

Q Yeah. General, John Karl with ABC News. Two questions. One, I'm wondering why you think this latest attack in Ramadi is al Qaeda, as opposed to former regime elements, and secondly, what you make of the comments by Mr. Hakim, saying that some of this recent violence should be blamed on the coalition for pressuring the Interior and Defense Ministry from, he said, doing their job chasing terrorists and maintaining the souls of innocent Iraqi people.

GEN. JOHNSON: Well, first of all, the first part of your question, we don't have any evidence that it was

al Qaeda, but the people sure believe it was and blame it. It has -- this attack has all the markings of al Qaeda: targeting of innocent people, suicide bombers, picking places where there are a lot of innocents and to -- in order to conduct an attack, so it has all the markings of al Qaeda.

As far as Mr. Hakim's remarks, I have -- I don't know what he said and not -- don't have a comment on that.

Q General Johnson, this is Pam Hess with UPI. Can you explain in a bit more detail about this re-introduction of police? Because when I was -- for each of the last three years that I've been out there, there have been police in Anbar province. So did they go away at some point and now you're reconstituting it, or what's going on out there?

And would you also talk to us, maybe using some numbers, as to how many towns in the western Euphrates Valley have an Iraqi holding presence that didn't before -- how many troops -- how many Iraqi troops are out there, that sort of thing?

GEN. JOHNSON: Well, the first part of your question, as far as the police, in -- after the war -- or after the first part of Operation Iraqi Freedom, in last year there was a lot of corruption, a lot of police were ineffective, they were influenced by insurgents, they were -- a lot of them were part of the insurgency. And in many places throughout Al Anbar province the police were disbanded, and they were no longer in position of authority in the community.

The -- one of the first communities to re-introduce police was Fallujah, and we assisted the Iraqis in introduction of the police in Fallujah starting last May. That consisted of a screening and vetting process by the Iraqi government, by the minister of the Interior, selection of qualified applicants. They got sent to school, brought back, got some more schooling here in Iraq and have been on the job equipped and trained really since -- starting in about May.

Other places in Al Anbar have not -- we have not had the security environment conducive to introducing police. Now, we are beginning to see where we have that environment, particularly in the western Euphrates River Valley, and the same process is going to be followed. The Iraqi assessment teams will go out, screen and vet people, make their selections, send people to school and then equipment -- equip them and re-introduce them into the towns. And this also goes along with the introduction of a police chief in the provincial capital for the -- all of Al Anbar, and so it is an effort to then replace policemen who formerly were not effective with those who've been trained and vetted and equipped properly to bring stability.

The second part of your question I think dealt with where we are -- where our forces are located. Could you repeat the second part of that, Pam?

Q I'm interested in where the Iraqi troops are now, how many towns they're in in western Euphrates Valley. You did a clear-and-hold operation out there, and I'm wondering how many towns are being held right now by Iraqi forces that were not being held prior.

GEN. JOHNSON: There were previously, really before September, we had no -- there were no Iraqi security forces in Al Anbar province. They were just coming out of their training, and there were very few numbers. Since then, since that time, we've had the introduction of some -- of trained forces; not only have they been trained, but they've now operated with our forces for a while.

And they're spread out in the key regions and cities all down the Euphrates. Exactly where is -- well, there's x number of key cities -- I don't know -- I don't have the number off the top of my head, but the key locations where there are people. And they're partnered up with our folks. And I wouldn't characterize it as a

holding. They're not holding. They're in the towns, in forward operating bases, battle positions -- (audio break) -- locations to where they can be seen and to where they can patrol and where they can be present to provide security and also to provide confidence to the people. And they are not -- although they are a permanent presence, they'll move around and they're not necessarily linked to one place or another.

So in all the key cities, this presence is in effect, and we'll continue to operate like this.

Q Would you just put some numbers on it? How many Iraqi ISF are out in that region, or maybe in Anbar province in general?

GEN. JOHNSON: There -- we have right now approximately two brigades worth of Iraqi security forces involved in operations out there.

MR. WHITMAN: Mike.

Q General, Mike Mount with CNN. I just want to follow up with Pam's line of questioning. Are there any regions of Al Anbar province that have full ISF control, where you've turned troops completely over -- or turned regions over to Iraqi troops fully? And if not, do you have any timetables for, say, Ramadi or Fallujah, where you might expect Iraqi troops might be able to take over completely?

GEN. JOHNSON: At this particular time, we have three brigades that are operating in a -- in their area -- not -- I wouldn't characterize it as independently, but they are taking the lead and doing the planning and operations in those particular areas.

As far as turning it over or things like that, that's -- I wouldn't characterize it as that. We are still -- our forces are still partnered with those Iraqi security forces. We still provide support -- logistics support, communication support and so forth, and we still work very closely with them. But they're taking the lead in planning in a number of areas.

Also, where and when those forces take over is a function of how long they have been together, how long their training is -- or how long have they been functioning together. Some have only come out of training since September, those in the western Euphrates primarily, and those to the east are a little more mature. One size doesn't fit all with the ISF. Some will mature more quickly, and others will take longer. I suspect within the next -- probably in the next four to six months you're going to see a number of forces who will be able to take an increasing role in the lead or increasing lead here in this area, down here in the Fallujah-Ramadi area, and it'll take a little longer for those that are newer out in the Euphrates River Valley to assume a greater role in their area. But I think in 2006 you will see a continuation and a continuing to mature of these forces throughout the battlespace.

MR. WHITMAN: Okay. Gordon.

Q General, Gordon Lubold at Army Times.

Given what you said about the kind of the four issues that you'll see progress in 2006, can you talk a little bit about how that will translate to guidance you'll give your follow-on commander? As I understand, if I'm not mistaken, you're kind of nearing the end of your command there sometime this spring. How will that translate to kind of lessons learned guidance, and how will that be different from the guidance you were given when you came aboard in Ramadi?

GEN. JOHNSON: Well, Gordon, the battlespace that we inherited was just a post-Al-Fajr battlespace. There were very few Iraqi security forces out here. They had just conducted a major operation in Fallujah.

There were no police, there were no governments, there had been no elections, and so forth.

The battlespace that our successors will inherit has changed remarkably. I've already talked about the influx of ISFs, the police situation. They've had three successful -- in the last year, two elections and a referendum. There is economic growth started to occur in some of these cities. And so our successors will come in with emphasis on those key areas, and I've provided that to the folks that are coming behind us.

The partnering with the Iraqi security forces has to continue. As they get better at what they do, the nature of the partnering will go from being basics to more complex and more difficult types of training. The introduction of the police will be a major event for our successors. 2006 has been dubbed The Year of the Police, and that will necessitate partnering teams with the Iraqi police in their various stations and districts, and that will be something that our successors will have to do as well.

I think there will be opportunities for reconstruction during the -- more opportunities for reconstruction. In our tenure here there has been approximately \$175 million put into projects here in Al Anbar. And there will be resources available in the coming year that can be applied to where they're needed. And our successors will have to work closely with the provincial reconstruction development committees, with the governor, with the local governments in the towns to apply those resources effectively and prudently.

And I think there will be continuing political -- the political process will continue to evolve. There will be local elections. Our focus, of course, in the last year has been on the national election. Well, elections in the province will be on the plate of those who come to relieve us, and they will be involved in helping that process to mature as well.

So those are the key things that I see the differences between what we inherited and what our successor will find on their plates when they get here.

Q Just to clarify, that \$175 million, that's new money that will begin in 2006 or -- I didn't quite understand. It's been spent?

GEN. JOHNSON: That was money that has been spent over the last couple of years on projects, on reconstruction projects throughout Al Anbar province. There will be other resources that will be made available for the future, and I don't have a number to attach to that yet. But the point is reconstruction will not stop just because we're leaving; it will continue on, and it's very important to building the -- to improving the conditions here in the province.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, general, we've reached the end of our time. And I want to thank you for giving us some time this evening, and just turn it back to you to see if you have any closing comments that you'd like to make.

GEN. JOHNSON: Just the last thing I'd like to close with, if I could, is that we've just come through, of course, the Christmas-New Year season, and I've been astounded at the outpouring of support that's come in the form of gifts and cards and well wishes from Americans to the folks over here.

I'm speaking right now only of my force, but I'm sure it's the same for all the other places in -- where coalition forces are serving here in Iraq. The outpouring of support from people who don't know us, who wish us well and want to -- want us to know that they're thinking of us is very humbling, and so I want to thank -- be able to thank people for doing that, because it makes a difference to our soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines over here to know that their countrymen are behind them and that they're being thought of. And we're grateful for their generosity and their continued support.

And thank you very much for the opportunity to talk to you this afternoon.

MR. WHITMAN: Thank you, General, and our best to you.

GEN. JOHNSON: Thank you.

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