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**Presenter: Lt. Gen. John Vines, commander, Multinational Corps Iraq and Commanding General of the VXIII Airborne Corps**

**January 13, 2006**

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## News Briefing with Lt. Gen. John Vines

(Note: Gen. Vines appears via video teleconference from Iraq.)

**BRYAN WHITMAN:** (Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense) Good morning General Vines. This is Bryan Whitman, can you hear me?

**GEN. VINES:** I can hear you perfectly, sir. How are you?

**BRYAN WHITMAN:** I'm doing fine, and welcome, and welcome to the press corps here in the briefing room. Lieutenant General John Vines is no stranger to all of you. This is about the fourth time -- it is the fourth time -- that he has spoken to you in this forum. He is the commander general of the 18th Airborne Corps and for the last year now has been the Multi-National Corps commander in Iraq.

We appreciate you making the time to do this on at least four occasions over the last several months. But just as importantly, on behalf of all of us here, I'd like to thank you for making your subordinate commanders available to us on a regular and reoccurring basis from Iraq.

It is extremely helpful for all of us to get the perspective from the commanders on the ground and you have been very supportive, not only yourself, but also in providing your subordinate commanders for this forum. So thank you very much.

General Vines is at Camp Victory in Baghdad talking to us today. And as usual, he has a few things that he'd like to open up with and then is prepared to take some of your questions. General Vines.

**GEN. VINES:** Good afternoon to all of you from Baghdad. It's good to be with you. 2005 has been an historic year in Iraq and it marks the rebirth of a nation. Iraq, of course, is rich in resources. It has water, oil, but most of all, it's got a courageous and educated people. But for over 30 years, Iraq has been devastated by war and a brutal dictator. The last three years in Iraq have been unprecedented. Saddam Hussein has been deposed and is currently undergoing trial by rule of law.

In January of last year a national election was held and power was peacefully transferred to a transitional government. An assembly was seated and the most democratic constitution in the Arab world was drafted. That constitution was ratified by national referendum in October. And less than one month ago, a national

election was held and the results of that election, which have not yet been announced, will determine the make up of the new government to be seated later this year.

Iraqis defied threats, intimidation and violence and turned out to vote in ever increasing numbers. In fact, the percentages of their turnouts exceeded almost all western democracies. The just-completed national-election turnout was approximately 70 percent. Terrorists tried to stop the election. They failed. They tried to intimidate those who would participate in the political process. They failed. Iraqi Security Forces are increasingly competent and in the lead and over 35 infantry battalions are responsible for leading operations in the areas in which they're assigned. They're accomplishing every tactical task they've been assigned and over 50 percent of Baghdad is under Iraqi Security Force control.

Iraqi army and border elements have reestablished presence on the Syrian border. Unfortunately, all of this has been accomplished at a terrible price. Over 800 coalition soldiers have been killed and more wounded. Over twice that many Iraqi Security Forces have been lost. Many would question whether or not it's worth it, but terrorists have shown that they have both the intent and the capability to attack us here and at home. The reason that they have been unsuccessful is because the security forces at home and abroad have been relentless in protecting us, pursuing them, denying them sanctuary, detaining them and when necessary, killing them.

There is much that remains to be done. We must stay on the offensive against terrorism here in Iraq and other places. Here in Iraq we must continue to develop security forces and the ministries. We have to assist the Iraqis in consolidating the democratic gains that they've made and help them rebuild democratic institutions and a unified government by and for Iraqis.

I'll be happy to take your questions now.

MR. WHITMAN: Will, go ahead.

Q General, this is Will Dunham with Reuters. What level of violence do you anticipate that Iraq will experience in the coming months? And why is that the three elections held to date -- in January, October and December of last year -- do not yet appear to have diminished the intensity of the insurgency in a lasting way?

GEN. VINES: There were two questions and I'm not sure I understood the second. I'll answer the first and I would ask you to restate the second. The question, as I understand it, was what level of violence do we anticipate? We anticipate that jihadists and religious extremists will continue to attack the Iraqi Security Forces, their government and any other coalition forces in the area because they want to impose their view of law and life on Iraqi citizens. And no outcome will be acceptable to them. They view democracy as abhorrent. They think they've got the right to impose their values on the rest of their citizens. And would you restate the second question, please?

Q Why is it that the three elections held to date do not yet appear to have diminished the intensity of the insurgency in a lasting way?

GEN. VINES: Well, it's important to understand that those three elections all took place in a single year. And the transitional government, which is currently in power, was that -- a transitional government. The nature of the final government, of course, we can't know. These things take time. It is worth making the point that some period of time passed between the end of our American Revolutionary War and the formation of our final government. So it takes some time. I think the nature of the government will determine the level of violence, quite honestly.

Q General, can we come back to the first question, which is, what do you anticipate the level violence

will be in the coming months? You said you expect it to continue, but do you think because this is such a critical period that we may actually see an increase in violence over the coming months?

GEN. VINES: We know that jihadists will attempt to attack the institutions of governments -- probably when the results are announced -- to show their disdain for the democratic process. Again, they think they have the right to impose their views on other Iraqis. So it's very likely that we would see violence as the results are announced.

In the longer term, I believe those who feel like that they are at risk in the democratic process -- whether or not they're adequately represented -- may express those concerns violently. So it is important that this be an inclusive government by and for all Iraqis, not for sects.

Q General, Lolita Baldor with the Associated Press. There's been a lot of discussion about some of the gradual drawdown of the troops over the coming months. Does this increase in violence have any impact on that and do you see any changes to any of the plans that have been announced as yet or anything in the future that -- in order to counter some of this increase in violence over the last several weeks?

GEN. VINES: Well, certainly the level of violence would be one of the things that we would take into account as we make a force level determination. General Casey will consult with his commanders in the field and make recommendations to our secretary of Defense and the president. And violence is one element of that.

The capabilities of the Iraqi Security Forces and the capabilities of the government to sustain those forces, of course, will be another part of that as well.

Q General Vines, Jim Miklaszewski with NBC. We keep seeing increasing reports about insurgent-on-insurgent violence. Red-on-red as some of the military describe it. Can you help us better understand what's going on here? Who's fighting whom for what reason? And how is the U.S. military either involved or trying to exploit those splits between the terrorists, the insurgents in Iraq?

GEN. VINES: I think it is probably not accurate to talk about red on red. What we see are increasingly Sunni, in particular, rejecting terrorism and rejecting the presence of al Qaeda in Iraq. They realize that al Qaeda is not interested in their welfare, but they intend to impose their values on all Iraqis. And while they had received some level of support previously, many Iraqis, particularly Sunni, recognize the threat that al Qaeda poses to them and increasingly are rejecting their presence and they're no longer supporting them. And we think that is a very good thing indeed.

Q And how is the U.S. military trying to exploit those splits? There have been also reports that U.S. military is, in fact, talking to some of these insurgents. Is that underway? And what other ways is the U.S. military trying to exploit that?

GEN. VINES: Well, it's not so much the U.S. military attempting to exploit it. It is making clear the Iraqi citizens what these terrorists are doing to them and what their goals are. And making those terrible assaults on innocent civilians, making them plain to Iraqi citizens, I believe, has made it clear to them that they're at risk, that they're willing to murder innocent men, women and children whose sole offense was belonging to another religious sect or going to a market in a sector that was predominately Shi'a.

So consequently, both Sunni and Shi'a are repelled by this violence. Now this is a Hajj, a very religious and spiritual period for all Muslims and they are repelled by the violence they see that al Qaeda has inflicted on fellow Iraqis.

Q Hi, General. It's John Hendren at NPR. Could you talk a little more about some of the specific

signs you're seeing of the Sunnis sort of coming more into the coalition fold? For instance, are you getting intelligence from people who were formerly allied with insurgent groups? And if I could just tack on a related question, Paul Bremer wrote an op-ed in the Washington Post today talking about the mistakes he'd made. And one of the things he said was that he -- it was not a mistake, the de-Ba'athification program that he initiated -- but the implementation of it was flawed because it took too long. And I'm just wondering if for you, battling these same elements even today, whether that's sort of the understatement of the year?

GEN. VINES: Well, no it's not the understatement of the year. Sunnis need to feel like they have a place in this government. They need to feel like that they have an opportunity to be a part of the great Iraq -- economic opportunity and to participate in the political process. And if there was a perception that they had no place in the various governance and economic development of the country, they certainly would feel at risk.

So of course we're happy to see Sunni involvement. They voted, particularly in Al Anbar and sectors, in exponentially greater numbers than they did in the national election in January. We think that's a very good sign. They recognize that their future is through the democratic process, not through violence. And we, of course, are heartened by that.

Q And can I just follow up? Are you getting intelligence from some of these groups that you were formerly fighting against?

GEN. VINES: Well, certainly, they have expressed interest to the transitional government and other elements that they would like to part of the political process, so it's not so much intelligence. But they've expressed in interest in participating in the political process and, of course, that is a very good thing.

So yes, we have indicators that many who we believe may have been involved in violence are seeing that they can and must reject that violence so that they can be a full participant in government.

Q General Vines, Bret Baier with Fox News. Can you share with us a little bit of the right seat, left seat as you get ready to hand over your post? Some of the lessons learned, some things that may have changed during your tenure at that command as you get ready to hand it over to General Chiarelli?

GEN. VINES: Well, General Chiarelli, as you know, commanded the great 1st Cavalry Division here in Baghdad and he left less than a year ago. And so he's returning. He's an enormously competent, charismatic leader and he'll do a brilliant job. So he doesn't need a lot of mentoring about what goes on in Iraq.

There has been significant change. Iraqis are increasingly in the lead. There is increasing level of sovereignty. They direct many of the operations. They control many of the operations. So the capacity of the Iraqi Security Forces is exponentially greater than when he departed and so that's something he's familiarizing himself with. And of course, that's a very good thing.

The level of coordination that's required with the Iraqi government has increased because they have additional competence in their ability to govern and to see to their own future, which is also a very good thing. Al Qaeda is increasingly in disarray and we have pursued, captured and killed a large number of them and so that also is a very positive thing.

The political process, of course, is a huge difference. And those three elections that took place -- one while he was still here and the two that have taken place this fall and winter -- make a very large difference because, again, it reflects the participation of Sunni in that process and I would suspect that he's quite heartened by that as well.

Q If I could follow up, sir. On the negative side of things -- things that popped up that you weren't

aware of -- can you think of anything on that side? And how do you see Iraq in five years?

GEN. VINES: Well, Iraq is an extraordinarily blessed land. Many historians refer to it as the cradle of civilization. So consequently, it's got enormous natural resources. It has got two great rivers, it's got oil in abundance, it has a very educated, competent, cosmopolitan population. And they have a lot of the skills that are necessary to administer a modern country. So that's a very good thing. I am very optimistic about their ability to do that.

Of course, the critical component of that is a government that is by and for all Iraqis, not for specific sects. So I'm optimistic.

Q Five-year question?

MR. WHITMAN: Did you want to take a crack at the five-year question, general?

GEN. VINES: No, I don't have a crystal ball. I couldn't predict five years. I think it will be much more peaceful, safer and much more prosperous than it is today, however.

Q General, Jim Mannion from Agence French Presse. You talk about the importance of having an inclusive government, but what are the prospects for that, particularly in light of, you know, given the Shi'ite majority's hardening stance on issues such as amending the constitution?

GEN. VINES: Well, I'm a bit out of my lane, so I won't comment on that. But I do know that our ambassador, General Casey worked very hard to make sure that all factions, all sects, all elements, ethnic groups are represented in that process. And I'm confident that that process will take that into account and they will be represented adequately.

So the actual mechanics of that, I think we're extraordinarily blessed to have our current U.S. ambassador here because he's extraordinary in terms of bringing groups together.

Q General, this is Pam Hess with United Press International. Americans look at what goes on on the ground in Iraq for signs of progress. And obviously, the violence that we saw over the last five or six days sort of shows the opposite. But I'm wondering from your perspective -- has there been an increase of violence or is this sort of par for the course -- some kind of cycle that goes on over there?

And in that lane give us how you're perceiving this violence? We often hear from the military that such attacks are signs of actual progress because the terrorists are nervous about the progress that they see going on in Iraq. So how do you interpret it?

GEN. VINES: Well, what you saw, of course, were a couple of spikes, and there are spikes and there are also dips. I could probably count and say the last three days have been the lowest level in three months. But those also are snapshots. The terrorists have not given up. They have not gone away. They've not gone home. Many have been killed or captured, but they will continue to attempt to intimidate and disrupt the political process and those who participate in it. So we recognize that as long as they have a presence here that Iraqi security forces enabled by the coalition will have to continue to deny them sanctuary, and if they can't persuade them to lay down their arms and participate in that process, they'll have to be killed or captured.

MR. WHITMAN: AI.

Q General, it's Al Pessin with Voice of America. We heard from you today and we've heard from other commanders about the Sunni individuals or groups coming forward who had supported violence now

saying they want to be part of the process. I don't think anybody's given us any specific instances, any details of that. Can you point to one or more specific individuals or groups that have come forward and joined the process and laid down their arms, or even expressed an interest in doing that?

GEN. VINES: I wouldn't do that. You should refer that to the transitional government and the American embassy. They are involved in that process. That is not something I normally participate in. So no, I couldn't and wouldn't.

Q Let me just follow up on that by asking, then: Even if all or most of the Sunni Iraqi part of the insurgency were to decide to support a broad-based government, how big an impact would that have on the overall picture of violence? In other words, how much of the violence is by the Iraqi groups and how much by the foreigners?

GEN. VINES: I believe that the majority is by Iraqi groups -- some who feel like they run the risk of being disadvantaged, and perhaps they're using violence as a bargaining tool to influence the political process; other insurgent groups and other terrorist groups have done that in other parts of the world, and you know them as well or better than I do. There is a portion of the Iraqi population that opposes the presence of the coalition, and they feel like that their resistance is nationalistic in basis, and they attempt to conduct operations in an effort to force the coalition presence out. So I believe it would have a very significant impact if they laid down arms and participated in a democratic process as opposed to violence.

Q General, I'm Carl Osgood; I write for Executive Intelligence Review. You may know that one of the things that Congressman Murtha has been saying about the U.S. presence in Iraq is that the U.S. troops themselves are a target of the violence and a catalyst of the violence. I wonder if you could comment on that to the degree to which you think that may or may not be true.

GEN. VINES: Without question, some Sunni -- well, in fact, some Iraqis -- do view the coalition presence as a reason to conduct violence against them. That is without question. The extent of that I could not characterize.

Q Could I follow up?

MR. WHITMAN: (Off mike.)

Q General, I'm Gerry Gilmore with American Forces Press Service. They had a lot of fighting in Al Anbar prior to the election. They said that helped to increase the Sunni participation. Where did all these terrorists go that you cleaned out? Do you have any information on that? Did they go to Baghdad? Did they go to Syria?

GEN. VINES: Some of them went to the hereafter.

Q Did they escape? I mean, did a large amount, like, move to another area, do you think?

GEN. VINES: No, many of them are dead.

Q I'd like to follow up on that, actually. (Laughter.) You said earlier that al Qaeda in Iraq is in disarray. Can you give us any more details about that -- why do you think that, what evidence there is of that? And what is the latest on Abu Musaab al-Zarqawi?

GEN. VINES: Well, there are a variety of indicators that we use to determine what the origin of the violence was, who may have planned it, and who may have executed it. There are obviously some intelligence

factors that we use in terms of what we see, what people tell us, what we may hear. We use a variety of methods to do that. The indicators are that many of the events that we see are not related to al Qaeda in Iraq; they are in some cases related to other terrorist groups. In some cases they're related to former regime elements and Saddamists. In some cases they're related to people who do -- who conduct violent acts for pay. So there are a fair number of indicators that tell us currently al Qaeda in Iraq is in disarray. Does it have the capability to regenerate? Unfortunately, it could. But we must keep the pressure on. We must maintain the offensive to deny them the ability to establish this caliphate that they would like to establish so that they can attack you and other people.

Q And the latest on Zarqawi, sir?

GEN. VINES: If you happen to know where he is, I'll be happy to send you my phone number.

MR. WHITMAN: Go back to Will for a second.

Q Will Dunham with Reuters. Do you have any information on a U.S. helicopter that went down near Mosul after coming under insurgent fire?

GEN. VINES: I probably have the same reports you do. The indicators are that there was -- we did lose a U.S. helicopter earlier today in the vicinity of Mosul. And the indicators are it was due to hostile fire. But in all honesty, I don't have any more than that right now.

Q Jonathan Karl, ABC News again. Could you bring us up to date on the Sunni general that was to take over the Iraqi Baghdad Brigade and was rejected? How far back did that set that brigade in terms of the handover? And where is that Sunni general now?

GEN. VINES: He is still in command. And our concern, of course, is that we have leaders who are competent and able to conduct operations, and when we give them responsibilities they have to be able to fulfill them, or when the Iraqi Ministry of Defense gives them responsibilities. So we watch carefully to ensure that the people put in position have the ability to execute that. We advise the Ministry of Defense and the joint force command and the Iraqi ground force command about what we believe is a way to proceed. He is still in command at this time, and as far as I know, he's doing a very good job.

Q Is he not to be replaced? The Iraqis have not said they'll replace him?

GEN. VINES: It's my understanding that they decided to leave him in place, and I believe that's probably, as far as I know, was a good decision. That was one that was recommended by not only the Iraqi ground force commander, Lieutenant General Abdul Qatr, but the various coalition commanders that served with him.

MR. WHITMAN: We just have time for a couple more. Pam?

Q Sir, it's Pam Hess again. You mentioned other terrorist groups in Iraq. Are you talking about preexisting ones like Ansar al- Islam, or have new groups, perhaps outsiders, shown up?

GEN. VINES: Well, it's primarily, I believe, Iraqi-in-origin organizations such as Ansar al-Sunna and 1920 Revolutionary Brigade. There's a variety of organizations that people declared themselves to be, but those are two for example. And you're well familiar with those, I'm sure.

Q General, it's John Hendren again from NPR. I was just wondering if you could give us an update on training for the ministry of the interior. There have been some changes announced, including embedding U.

S. forces with commandos. I was just wondering if that had begun yet and if you could tell us anything about the progress of that program.

GEN. VINES: We're making progress, and we're going to put a great deal of focus on the police issue. The Iraqi Army has made enormous -- enormous -- progress in 2005. And the police have made progress, but we think they will make more progress if we give them some more assistance in training through the academies as they go to their provinces, the districts, as well as the stations. And so we're going to put some units and missions with the responsibility of training those. That is in process as we speak. Now I can't, in all honesty, tell you that there's been enormous progress made yet, because much of it is happening as we speak.

MR. WHITMAN: Let's finish up here with Bret.

Q General, just to wrap up: As you finish up here and you leave, can you just sum up what you've seen on the ground -- I'm trying this again -- and as you leave your feeling? You said you were optimistic, but can you explain, you know, really why and the changes you've seen in your term there at that post.

GEN. VINES: Well, again, a 70 percent turnout for a national election is something we would be very, very happy about in the United States, and that's what we experienced less than a month ago, Bret. I mean, that's pretty extraordinary -- three elections in the space of a single year. Iraqi soldiers, border enforcement police are performing bravely throughout Iraq. They're operating on the Iraqi border. We've reestablished their presence on the Iraqi border to deny terrorists the opportunity to come into Iraq from places like Syria and attempt to impose their will on Iraq. So the capabilities of the security forces are enormously increased. The participation by all factions of Iraq are exponentially greater than they were, for example, even in the January election. Many Sunni advocated boycotting the elections in January, and they participated in many provinces by more than half. That's a huge turnaround. So their commitment to have their voice heard peacefully, democratically is extraordinarily heartening. There's just no question about it.

MR. WHITMAN: Sir, we've come to the end of our time, and I'd just once again like to thank you for making these meetings with us possible each and every week and to wish you and your unit the best as you get ready to re-deploy back to the States. Thank you very much.

GEN. VINES: Could I make a final comment, please?

MR. WHITMAN: Certainly.

GEN. VINES: This weekend, of course, millions of Americans, including many of us here in Iraq, will watch the national football playoffs and we'll cheer for the Redskins or the Steelers or the Panthers, and we will pull for their team and talented young men will perform brilliant athletic feats. But the real heroes are the young men and women, America's sons and daughters, around the world who are confronting terrorism today, even as we speak. They've been brilliant in carrying out our national policies. They face hardship, danger, deprivation and loneliness every day. And if Americans could see them as I do on a daily basis, they would be in awe of them, as I am, and they'd say a prayer of thanks for their service and also a prayer for their safety. And with all due respect to our World War II veterans, which includes my late father, these young men and women are America's new "greatest generation." It's good to be here with you.

Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: Thank you, General.

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