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Presenter: Maj. Gen. Thomas R. Turner, II, commander, Multinational Division North and 101st Airborne Division

**January 20,
2006**

News Briefing with Maj. Gen. Thomas Turner II

(via Teleconference from Iraq)

JIM TURNER (Press operations deputy director): Good morning, General Turner. This is Jim Turner at the Pentagon. Can you hear me?

GEN. TURNER: I can.

MR. TURNER: Good morning. Our briefer today is Major General Thomas R. Turner, II, commander of Multinational Division North and the 101st Airborne Division. He and his command are responsible for ongoing security operations in northern Iraq. This is his first visit with us from Iraq, and he is here to provide us an operational update.

General Turner has an opening statement and then will take your questions. Remember he cannot see us, so please identify yourself when asking your questions.

So General Turner, welcome, and thanks for joining us today.

GEN. TURNER: Good morning. I'd like to thank you all for being here today and for this opportunity to address the great work that our soldiers are doing in Iraq.

I'd like to begin by giving you a little background on our task force, our battlespace, our mission, and finally, some areas where we're seeing progress.

The 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) first assumed responsibility for the area known as Multinational Division North Central from the 42nd Infantry Division on November 1st. On December 30th, we assumed responsibility for Task Force Freedom's Multinational Force Northwest, which combined constitutes our current area of responsibility, known as MND North.

MND North is about the size of Pennsylvania, 47,000 square miles, and it covers the provinces of Diyala, Salahuddin, Kirkuk, Sulimaniyah, Nineveh and Dohuk. It covers from just north of Baghdad to the border with Turkey, and in the west from the Syrian border to the Iranian border in the east.

The population's approximately 10.2 million, and all of the Iraqi ethnic and religious groups are represented in the AO.

The task force consists of approximately 23,000 U.S. soldiers, which includes three brigades from the 101st, the 172nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team from Alaska, the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment and the 3rd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division from Fort Carson, Colorado, and it includes the 555 Combat Support Brigade (Maneuver Enhancement) out of Fort Lewis, Washington. We also have tactical control of about 105,000 members of the Iraqi security forces. That includes four Iraqi army divisions, one strategic infrastructure brigade, 14 strategic infrastructure battalions and four border police brigades.

Our mission in northern Iraq is to develop Iraqi security forces capable of conducting independent counterinsurgency operations within MND North while simultaneously conducting combined operations to neutralize AIF. This is in support of the Iraqi government's ongoing efforts to improve internal security, foster economic growth and the maintenance of basic infrastructure.

We are partnered with the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th Iraqi army divisions. These units have made tremendous progress in their training and the ability to provide the citizens of Iraq the security they deserve. Iraqi soldiers and policemen are in the fight every day. They're risking not only their lives, but often the lives of their families for the security of their fellow citizens.

Iraqi citizens are also stepping forward in the fight to secure their country. Tips from concerned Iraqis to both Iraqi security forces and coalition forces have led to the discovery of numerous weapons caches and IED-making materials.

As you know, in the December parliamentary election, the voter turnout was a tremendous success. The Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq determined that 70 percent of those Iraqis eligible to vote voted -- over 11 million -- did so despite the threats of violence. In the six provinces within MND North, 75 percent of those registered voted. The high voter turnout is a clear indicator that the citizens of Iraq not only have a strong desire for democracy, but they also have an increased sense of security, security that during the latest election was provided entirely by Iraqi security forces.

Iraqis continue to advance in other areas as well. One government capability that has progressed tremendously is the Joint Coordination Centers, which are located throughout every province and municipalities.

The JCCs have become extremely effective in coordinating emergency service responses. Their planning and the Iraqi security forces execution of that plan was primarily responsible for a safe and secure vote during the December elections.

Our most important mission, however, remains the training and equipping of Iraqi security forces. Working together, we will support the continued progress toward a democratic Iraq. Our end state remains unchanged: an Iraq at peace with her neighbors, with a representative government that respects human rights of all Iraqis, with a security force capable of maintaining domestic order, and denying safe haven to terrorists.

And with that, I'd be happy to take your questions.

MR. TURNER: Okay. Let's get into it.

Charlie?

Q General, Charlie Aldinger with Reuters. The 101st is essentially an air assault division where you

guys are designed to use a lot of helicopters to get around. Do you use a lot of big helicopters to get around in northern Iraq? And are you concerned about the recent crashes of U.S. helicopters, including the possible use of these new so-called jumping IEDs?

GEN. TURNER: There are several questions there. We have had two helicopter crashes, both of which are still under investigation. In the first, it appears to be an accident in western Nineveh, and the second crash of an OH-58 in downtown Mosul was the small arms fire. We have not witnessed any jumping IEDs that you mentioned in our AO.

I'm extremely proud of the safety record of the aviation units in the 101st Airborne Division. It is constantly part of our daily operations, and the training that our pilots receive is outstanding. Additionally, prior to deploying into Iraq, each crew qualified in some specific tasks in Kuwait to ensure that they were prepared to fly in this environment.

Q Have you reduced in any way the use of big helicopters to move a larger number of troops around because of this possible threat?

GEN. TURNER: No, not at all.

MR. TURNER: Eric.

Q General, Eric Schmidt with The New York Times. I know you and other commanders have described the insurgency as a diverse group, both of AQI, former regime elements and such. But I wonder, at least from your perspective you can say, what is -- which element of the insurgency, which component poses the most immediate threat to both your forces and the new Iraqi government or that's basically driving the insurgency, if there is such a component now?

GEN. TURNER: I think that's difficult to discern. I think we have made great strides in neutralizing the terrorists and foreign fighters in the country. But in terms of threat, all the insurgent groups seem to have the same weapon of choice against coalition forces, which is the IED.

Some -- I'm not sure which one would be a greater threat.

Q What about longer term? Is there a sense there of which presents a longer-term threat to security in Iraq?

GEN. TURNER: Well, with successful elections, if the Sunnis are enfranchised and begin participating in the political processes as we think they are beginning to do as witnessed through the election and voter turnout, I would suspect it would be the foreign fighters that you may find still resident here, other jihadists, religious extremist groups, and I think that would probably be the greatest threat that needs to be dealt with right now.

Q General, Jamie McIntyre from CNN. Can you say categorically that all the troops under your command have all the body armor that they need to complete their mission? And are you sensing any reluctance among some troops to wear large amounts of body armor because it hampers their mobility?

GEN. TURNER: No, not at all. We do have the best body armor available, and our troops are wearing it. And we have confirmed that we have gotten the latest update for body armor.

Q All the troops under your command have all the body armor they need?

GEN. TURNER: That's correct.

Q General, Lisa Meyer from AP Radio. There was an interesting article in The Washington Post yesterday which talked about some of the stuff that your guys are doing out in the field, and the fact that they're finding more encounters with IEDs and they're taking countermeasures in trying to improvise some solutions to the problem. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about that. And also, secondarily, are you finding that there are any surprises that you've encountered since being on the ground in Iraq, things that you didn't expect before you got there?

GEN. TURNER: The last one first -- no, I don't think we've found any surprises. We do have soldiers and commanders that continue to be innovative in addressing the latest tactics and technique that this enemy may be employing. This enemy is an adaptive enemy. He will continue to adapt to our countermeasures, and so some commanders are innovating in terms of what they are doing with their vehicles. Some are adding armor in places that they think are particularly vulnerable to the type of threat they might face in their particular battlespace.

MR. TURNER: Jim.

Q Jim Mannion from Agence France-Presse. I wonder if you could talk at all about what evidence, if any, you see of the Sunni insurgent groups in your area moving away an armed struggle towards, you know, some sort of political participation.

GEN. TURNER: I don't know if I would see that in our area.

Q General, it's John Hendren at National Public Radio. After the battle for Fallujah, there were reports that Zarqawi and a number of foreign fighters had fled up toward the Mosul area, and I was wondering if you still believe that he might be in that vast territory that you oversee?

And what evidence are you seeing of groups of foreign fighters up there?

GEN. TURNER: I didn't hear the second part. But we do suspect that Zarqawi is still present in our area of operations somewhere.

Q The second question was, what evidence are you seeing of other foreign fighters in there? Is there an organized network in that territory?

GEN. TURNER: We continue to see organized networks of al Qaeda. We are very successful I think at killing leadership. They do have ways to regenerate. Of course, those that take their place are not as skilled, don't have the experience as the ones they're replacing and make far more mistakes, and it's much easier to -- it's getting easier and easier to find and capture or kill them.

Q General, Julian Barnes from U.S. News and World Report. How many months or how many weeks will it be in Mosul and Kirkuk when you will be able to pull back routine American patrols and let the Iraqi army or the Iraqi police patrol those two cities by themselves?

GEN. TURNER: Well, the Iraqis are increasingly moving into the lead. We have four Iraqi battalions that have assumed battlespace in our area and one brigade. The division that has responsibility for Mosul is doing very well, and in the next couple of months, we'll begin -- they will have battalions that will begin to assume battlespace in that area, in Mosul in particular.

What was the other city you asked about, Sir?

Q Kirkuk.

GEN. TURNER: And the same is true in Kirkuk -- very close to turning over battlespace to the Iraqi army in that area.

A word about the police. That -- the Iraqi police will be an area of focus for us in the coming year. We are currently in the process of establishing police transition teams that are U.S. MPs and others that are partnering with Iraqi police in each of the major urban centers, and we anticipate the performance and capability of the Iraqi police in those areas to improve pretty dramatically. Some are doing very well right now.

Q Are teams in place embedded with those Iraqi police units right now, at this moment?

GEN. TURNER: In Mosul, yes, Sir. They just -- they are.

MR. TURNER: Joe.

Q General, this is Joe Tabet with Al Hurra TV. Would you give us a clear idea about the insurgency that you are facing, their tactics? How many foreign fighters are involved in the operations? And do you still believe -- my second question -- do you still believe that the Sunnis are supporting the insurgency in your area?

GEN. TURNER: If I understood the questions right, the first one was, do we still have foreign fighters fighting in Iraq? And the second is, are the Sunnis still supporting them?

Yes, I think we still find very limited evidence of foreign fighters in our area of operation, and there are some Sunni groups that make alliances of convenience based on capabilities or as they proceed. But I think we will probably see fewer and fewer Sunni organizations aligned with terrorists and foreign fighters.

I think the Iraqi people fully realize that the goals of al Qaeda are not compatible with the Iraq of the future that they envision.

Q General, this is Pam Hess with UPI. You mentioned at the beginning that one of the goals for Iraq is a country that respects human rights. And I'm wondering what your experience is up there so far. How many Ministry of Interior inspections have gone on, the surprise raids we were hearing about, that maybe you all supported, and what are the results of them?

GEN. TURNER: Human rights abuses in our AO, if they're discovered, are reported rapidly. I will tell you that we have Ministry of Interior forces, commando battalions in Samarra, and we have a special police transition team that is embedded with them. And there was a reported allegation of abuse there, but the brigade commander, the Iraqi brigade commander conducted the investigation of that abuse and he was relieved immediately. If we see abuse, we attempt to stop it, and it does not take much to stop it.

Q If I can follow up? It's Pam again. My experience -- no?

GEN. TURNER: I can only talk of one instance, but we did see it after an attack by Iraqi army units, one soldier that was very upset at losing his buddies, and as soon as he was told by an American that was present, he stopped. I think they're working very hard at trying to do the right thing.

Q Could you tell me where that last incident was? I was talking over you.

GEN. TURNER: I'm sorry, what -- ?

MR. TURNER: Can you tell us where that last incident was, please.

GEN. TURNER: (Off mike.)

MR. TURNER: I'm sorry, could you say that location again please?

GEN. TURNER: Yes. The incident with the MOI occurred in Samarra.

Q General, the Army has sent 170,000 sets of deltoid plates to Iraq. Do your troops have these deltoid plates and are they wearing them?

GEN. TURNER: Yes.

Q All of your troops are wearing the deltoid plates?

GEN. TURNER: Commanders can have them wear the plates depending on the situation. They're not wearing them on FOBs, but they have the deltoid plates available when they go out on patrol. And as far as I know, they're all wearing them.

Q General, Lolita Baldor with the Associated Press. Can you tell me whether there has been any reaction to the recent release of the tape by Osama bin Laden in your area? And has there been any increase in violence, or do you expect that that may or may not trigger any increase in violence in your area?

GEN. TURNER: We have not seen any reaction to that tape. And I don't think that will, in and of itself, trigger any increase in violence in this area.

Q General, it's Al Pessin from Voice of America. Can you give us some idea of the level of activity of the insurgency in your area over the last several months? I mean how many attacks you're seeing and how effective they are, what the trends are?

And also, you mentioned that you've hunted down and killed some of the insurgent leaders, then they get replaced, then you hunt down the replacements.

Can you give us some detail, maybe one or two of those stories in some detail or some chronology? And finally, we've heard from other commanders that there have been some clashes or at least some very obvious disagreements between various elements of the insurgency. Have you seen any of that in your area?

GEN. TURNER: We have not seen open fighting between insurgents in our area of operation. We're encouraged by reports of it in other areas. And like I said earlier, we think it's a clear signal that the Iraqi people do not see the goals of al Qaeda as being a part of the future of Iraq.

And could you ask me your first question again, please?

Q Yes, sir. I wanted to get an idea of the trend line of the insurgency in your area -- how many attacks, what type and how effective, and also some details on the killing of the insurgent leaders that you mentioned earlier.

GEN. TURNER: The trends have been pretty constant since we have arrived, and the attacks are primarily IEDs, and it's really been a steady state across our area. There have been increased attacks against Iraqi security forces in some areas, in particular against the Iraqi police. We've seen what would appear to be assassinations in Kirkuk.

MR. TURNER: Okay, we've got time for about one more, please.

Q General, it's Mike Mount with CNN. If I understood you earlier, you said that you expected that Zarqawi is still somewhere in your AOR. To the extent that you can, can you give us some evidence of what you've seen that supports that, and if there's anything along the lines of the support network you might be seeing there?

GEN. TURNER: Yeah, we're just making the assumption that he's still here leading the AQIZ. I don't have any hard evidence that he's still in this area.

MR. TURNER: Okay. General, we appreciate you coming to visit us today in the Pentagon Briefing Room, and we hope to see you again in the future soon.

Thank you very much.

GEN. TURNER: Thank you.

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