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News Briefing with Colonel Jeffrey S. Buchanan

STAFF: Good morning, everybody. Today our briefer is Colonel Jeff Buchanan, commander of the 2nd Brigade of the 75th Division and commander of the special police transition teams for the National Police Commando Division and 1st Mechanized Police Brigade of the Iraqi Ministry of Interior. Colonel Buchanan and the majority of his teams arrived in theater in late March of 2005. And with that, Colonel Buchanan, I'll turn it over to you.

COL. BUCHANAN: Okay. Thanks.

I'm -- good morning. I'm Colonel Jeff Buchanan, commander of the 2nd of the 75th and police commander of special transitions teams, or SPTTs. Our teams have been working with the police commandos and the mechanized police brigade for the past 10 months.

This morning I'd like to talk to you about the police commandos and our teams who have been serving with them. The police commandos first formed, with one battalion, in August of 2004. The genesis of the division is fairly unique for Iraqi security forces, in that they initially formed without coalition assistance.

The division's mission is to conduct counterinsurgency operations, to gather intelligence, and capture or kill enemy forces in order to establish a secure environment for other security forces to operate in.

The commandos typically accomplish that mission by conducting raids, cordon-and-search operations, reconnaissance, and by defending fixed sites. The commando division has four brigades, and each of those has a headquarters and three battalions.

The authorized strength is more than 2,600 men in a commando brigade and more than 11,000 in the division. The commandos operate both independently and in concert with other coalition forces.

The most common mission profile is the battalion-sized operation, but they frequently conduct brigade-sized operations and have even performed with multiple brigades.

The first unit deployment was to Mosul in November of 2004, and the division still has one battalion on duty there. The initial deployment was followed by subsequent missions to Samarra in February of 2005 and Ramadi in March, and short-term deployments to Salman Pak in April and Tall Afar in September of 2005. The division currently has eight battalions in Baghdad and four deployed to the other provinces.

The Mechanized Police Brigade is deployed in the Baghdad area and is comprised of three battalions and a headquarters.

The primary focus of the mechanized police is to secure Baghdad's airport road, Route Irish.

The coalition forces support all of these teams, all of these forces with special police transition teams. The SPTTs have a number of duties, and the first of those is to coach, teach and mentor the commandos and mechanized police brigade during training, during preparation for combat and during combat operations.

Secondly, we serve as liaisons between the coalition forces and the national police and provide coalition support during operations.

Lastly, we provide assessments of capabilities and limitations during the transition to Iraqi control.

To get the job done, we have a total of 21 teams, with one team embedded in each organization down to the battalion level. Each team consists of 11 American servicemen, mostly sailors -- or correction, mostly soldiers and Marines and two to four Iraqi interpreters.

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

STAFF: Charlie.

Q Colonel, Charlie Aldinger with Reuters.

I guess this is pretty obvious, but the police you're talking about that you work with are kind of, as opposed to the cop on the beat -- these are kind of elite national police. Is that not right? Kind of like the Carabinieri in Italy? And how are they doing in terms of culture? In other words, Sunnis hating Shi'a and Shi'a hating Sunnis and -- how they are doing treating everybody equally? Is that a slow thing?

COL. BUCHANAN: All right, thanks for the question. There's a couple of things that I'd like to address with that.

The first question is you likened them to Carabinieri or gendarmerie, and, in fact, that's where we're going to. But as I said, the police commanders were initially formed based on an Iraqi initiative driven by the previous Minister of the Interior, and the purpose was to fight the insurgents. As such, they are essentially, and have been to date essentially operating as urban light infantry rather than police forces.

Now we think that the future is to take them to a true national police force to where they're badge carrying and qualified officers enforcing the Iraqi rule of law throughout the provinces. So that's the future. That's not where we are right now. And we have a plan during 2006, which is the year of the police in Iraq, to put steps in place to actually get these guys fully trained and get there.

The second part of the question -- you asked about Sunnis hating Shi'as or Shi'ite Arabs hitting Sunnis, et cetera -- I'd like to tackle that up front because I've read a lot of things in the media that have quoted -- or have used quotes like, "Shi'ite-led Ministry of Interior Forces." And, in fact, the police commandos are representative of the population of Iraq.

We have in each brigade between 50 to 70 percent of the troops are Shi'ite Arabs, and -- or Shi'a Arabs, and between 20 and 40 percent are typically Sunni Arabs. We have a small Kurdish population in two of the four brigades.

Additionally to that, looking at the leadership of the division, half of the battalion commanders are Sunni and half are Shi'a. One of the battalion commanders is a Kurd and one of the brigade commanders is actually a Sunni-Turkmen. So half of the brigade commanders are Sunni and Shi'a as well.

This representative population, when we have a representative population like this, they tend to treat people fairly regardless of where they are in Iraq.

Q When you say "tend to," is that the hope that they do, or are they actually doing it? And can you cite any kind of figures for improvement?

COL. BUCHANAN: I don't know what sort of measure of -- I don't have my hands on any specific figures that would demonstrate a measure of improvement in one area or the next. But what I can tell you is that the security situation is improving, say, in the town of Samarra, where we have the 1st Commando Brigade operating in. Anecdotally over the past eight months or so, we've seen a lot more participation of the community in policing themselves. We see shop owners out on the streets selling goods, where they weren't there before.

And I got the tone of your question, I think, as to if they tend to. We have not seen any problems with sectarian-shaped violence or sectarian-driven motives within the police commando division.

Q Colonel, this is Bob Burns from AP. Do you have any specific target date by which you would complete the training mission either this year or next year, or is it entirely open ended?

COL. BUCHANAN: Thanks, Bob. It's an open-ended mission. And we are here with our Iraqi partners to help them get better and better, and it's not for me to decide, or we don't have an established target date over when we're going to be complete with the mission.

STAFF: Pam.

Q Sir, this is Pam Hess with UPI. I was out there last summer and spent a little bit of time in Tall Afar with Wolf Brigade and some of the other units that you deal with. And the shorthand that I got from the Americans on the special police commandos is they're the most effective forces in Iraq but they're also a bit heavy-handed, to put it gently. What's your take on that? And are you doing anything to address it, or is that appropriate for the threat environment you're in?

COL. BUCHANAN: The -- there's a -- let me address, are we addressing it? Well, obviously, these guys -- one of their strengths is that they're aggressive, and so what we try to do is ensure that their aggressiveness does not go over the top and is -- and that they operate in accordance with Iraqi law. We do address it. We address it intentionally through training. We address it through leadership, through our leadership, so that they can follow our example, and we address it during operations by being there with them on every operation.

There have been times where we have had to intervene to keep them from going in a wrong direction, and that might have been in a situation where we're operating in a crowded battlespace, for example, with a number of coalition or Iraqi army units. There's the potential for unintended consequences of contact if these guys don't stay within the confines of their operation. Well, they tend -- like I said, they tend to be aggressive, and they will hunt down the enemy. If -- sometimes that aggressiveness has the potential to get them into trouble -- in other words, take them across unit boundaries or things like this -- and so we have had to get involved at times like that to stop it.

But the fact is that we are addressing it, and we think that we're being effective in helping to shape their behavior.

STAFF: Jeff.

Q Hi. Jeff Schogol with Stars and Stripes. Any of the transition teams, are any of those U.S. soldiers and Marines -- do they have experience as police officers in civilian life? And if so, what departments do they work for?

COL. BUCHANAN: Thanks for the question. We do have a number of soldiers that have experience as police officers. The initial group that deployed with me are dominantly active-component soldiers, and most of those guys have -- honestly have experience just operating in the armed forces. However, we also have MPs -- military policemen -- included in that population.

Now since we first deployed over here, we've had a number of replacements and fillers. As our team strength changed from eight to 11, the armed forces sent us additional men to beef up our team strength. Most of the fillers that came in -- or a number of the fillers that came in were actually from the Reserve components, National Guard and U.S. Army Reserve. A lot of them are MPs, as military policemen, but in civilian life serve in various police departments.

In addition to that, I have one international police liaison officer who serves with me on my team, and he serves as my primary adviser for law enforcement.

Q Colonel, it's Al Pessin with Voice of America. I wanted to follow up on Pam's question. Some of this over aggressiveness that you mentioned, is that manifested when they're working in populated areas doing cordon and search and other types of activities? Have you had to intervene or ratchet them back in those situations?

COL. BUCHANAN: I personally -- to answer your question, I personally have had to intervene on one occasion, and this was in Tall Afar, by the way, which was the specific case that she mentioned. We were in a -- we got in a firefight, and the commanders apprehended a -- one of the suspected insurgents. And they continued to fight with the guy after he should have been under control, so we intervened to stop that.

I would like to say something about shaping behavior versus changing values. Right now, we've done -- we've had a tremendous impact shaping behavior, and I think that we're making strides towards changing values. But the fact is most of the people in this country have learned and operate the way they do based on 35 years of experience.

I liken it to the experience of my mother. My mother's an anthropology professor, and she recently retired as an anthropology professor. She's moved all over the world. She's experienced all different cultures, and she was married to an Army colonel. She's been around.

She's also not poor. But she still washes Ziplock bags out and hangs them on the line to dry because she was raised during the depression. So this is her own -- this is her own way of dealing with her experience.

And that's somewhat what we face with all of the Iraqi security forces, but in particular the commandos. They have learned a certain way of operating in the past. Right now we're shaping behavior, we're starting to affect values, but changing values is going to take a long time.

Q Can I follow up? Colonel, just to follow up, you said you personally intervened one time. Do you have any figures on how many times your troops have had to intervene, and any indication as to what the trend line is there?

COL. BUCHANAN: I don't have specific figures. I can tell you it's very infrequent. And the last case that I know of that we had a situation that was a commander getting over-aggressive on the ground, occurred about two months ago in Samarra. And actually, our troops did not intervene. The commando brigade commander in Samarra intervened, apprehended one of his battalion commanders who was destroying civilian property in response to some of his men being attacked; actually had the guy removed from the force and fined him to pay back the shop owners whose property he destroyed.

Q Thank you.

Q General (sic), this is Jim Mannion from Agence France Presse. As I understand it, the training is going to have to change -- right? -- as the military takes on the task of training regular police. And I'm wondering how it will change. I'm also wondering how your trainers feel about being put in that, you know, situation, which it would seem to me would be of a higher personal risk. And basically if you could just lay out what the differences are going to be and how that's going to work.

COL. BUCHANAN: All right, I'll give it a good shot here. First of all, one thing that is different during the year of police is that we are embedding police transition teams with normal Iraqi police services throughout the country. And these are coalition advisers that perform a similar mission as myself and my men do with the national police or police commandos.

And we hope that through this partnership and embedding coalition advisers in each police department, we will increase their proficiency along the way.

Now specifically addressing the issue of the police commandos, we have a national academy that we send them to, and we are changing the curriculum of the police -- the national police forces academy to include more and more law enforcement and rule of law training. We're also bringing in mobile training teams formed of international police advisers that will serve with each unit for a period of six months -- correction, six weeks -- and take each unit through very specific training on law enforcement.

With respect to the last part of your question, how do my men feel about additional risk -- we're here to serve, and there's really -- we see there's nothing changing in the risk between how we operate now or how we will in the future.

Q It's Pam Hess again. I'm interested in what you've done about changing values. One of the things that I found when I was there and talking to Iraqis, particularly the commandos, is that they all said, "We can't wait for the Americans to go so we can really do what we need to do to win this war." I got the impression that they felt like they were being held back. Do you think you are going to be successful in changing those values? Or are they kind of going along with you all until you get out of their way and they can pursue this war? And would you tell us a little bit about their background? Were they special forces under Saddam or Fedayeen, or where did they come from?

COL. BUCHANAN: Okay, the first part of your question is how successful or what is the time associated with changing the values here, and I've got to be honest with you, I don't know. We -- what we can measure and what we can see is behavior. We think we're making great progress in the behavioral dimension.

Values, understanding what it's like to be a servant of society and in a democratically elected -- as part of a democratically elected government is something that is going to take time to learn. And I don't have an answer on when they will achieve the standard, if you will. But it is going to take time. And as I said in an earlier question, it's an open-ended mission until we achieve final success, if you will.

Regarding background, the commandos generally come from one of two sources. Most of them served

in security forces of the previous regime.

The two sources are the Iraqi army's -- the old Iraqi army's special forces and the Directorate of General Security, the special operations forces, for the Ministry of Interior. And in fact the commando division commander comes from the second source. The national police force's commander comes from the first, army special forces. The two of them met when they were serving a sentence in Abu Ghraib for attempting to overthrow Saddam Hussein, and they served together, if you will, when they were stuck in a cell together for five years. And that's when they first formed a bond.

STAFF: Jeff?

Q Colonel Buchanan, Jeff Schogol with Stars and Stripes again. When your troops see Iraqi special police acting out of line, what exactly can they do to restrain the Iraqi police officers? Can they arrest them? Can they physically detain them? I mean, can they return fire, if necessary? What can they do?

COL. BUCHANAN: If they had to, the answer is yes. We are to -- and we're under orders -- and we won't hesitate to enforce the orders, if we need to -- to stop illegal acts or abuse. And so we have rules of engagement. Rules of engagement are honestly shaped to -- shaped towards enemy forces and to protect the civilians. And we could use escalation of force, if we had to, to protect all innocent life.

Q You could theoretically shoot Iraqi police officers if they're acting out of line?

COL. BUCHANAN: If that's what it took -- if that's what it took to protect innocent human life, we could.

Q Jim --

Q (Inaudible) -- sir? Has that ever happened? Do you know?

COL. BUCHANAN: Not at all.

Q It's Pam Hess again. Would you give us an update on, if you know, that Iraqi Interior Ministry jail in Baghdad that General Horst went into?

And at the time, General Dempsey told us that the U.S. military was searching intel to see if it they could come up with any other leads on other possible jails like that. Has any -- have any been found? And what's been the situation in the command that you're in?

COL. BUCHANAN: I can tell you that this one is a little bit out of my lane. I know that there is an investigation ongoing. I don't know the results of the investigation. I don't know if there's other secret prisons that have been found or what the situation of that might -- of those cases may be.

Q But nothing in your command, not with the guys that you're dealing with? No jails have been found under your --

COL. BUCHANAN: Well, we do maintain two detention facilities. They're not secret. We've been involved with them and providing oversight, advice and medical treatment. We invite Iraqi Ministry of Human Rights and Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Interior joint inspection teams in to check the conditions. And so it's not that we have a jail or something that we suddenly found. We have two facilities and they're in the open, and we've been providing support all along the way.

STAFF: Okay. We've got time for about one more question, and then Colonel Buchanan has some

thoughts he wants to share with us after that question.

Q Colonel, it's Al Pessin again. With so many former members of the -- Saddam's security forces, do you have a problem with insurgent infiltration? And what, if any, sort of steps do you take to find those folks and get them out and prevent them from getting in?

COL. BUCHANAN: Okay. Well, that I know of, we've had two incidents in the past 10 months of AIF infiltration. The first one occurred was a new recruit who was a -- who detonated a suicide vest when he came into the second commando brigade compound and joined in a formation of his fellow commandos. That was the first case.

The second case we actually had three members of the mechanized police that were arrested by MOI (Ministry of Interior) forces about two days after a vehicle-borne IED crashed into a mechanized brigade police checkpoint adjacent to Route Irish, and they were implicated in that they helped set up the attack, if you will.

What -- please, let me finish the answer to the question, which is the commandos actually do a very good job vetting all recruits, which is one of the reasons why we are not full strength.

We have about 8,900 out of 11,000 authorized. But they're really searching for quality rather than quantity. They recruit only through word of mouth. We don't have recruiting centers set up in a mall or something like that. And basically, every guy that comes in is known to some of his fellow comrades, which is a way that they have of cutting down potential infiltration.

Q Can you just tell us the results of that suicide attack you mentioned?

COL. BUCHANAN: It was -- I don't remember exactly -- somewhere in the neighborhood of five commandos killed and 15 wounded. But that's an estimation. It's been about six months, and honestly, I've forgotten.

Q Thank you.

STAFF: Okay, Colonel, I believe you had something you wanted to share with us.

COL. BUCHANAN: Yeah, I would like to say something. In closing, I'd like to say a few words about one of the Army values, and that's selfless service.

The commandos and the SPTTs who serve with them make tremendous sacrifices for the good of their country. And honestly, it's humbling to know these men. They serve the people and they do it voluntarily. For the Iraqis, a volunteer force is a new concept, but they're starting to learn that democracy is far more complex than simply choosing those who govern you. Democracy requires individual sacrifice for the good of society, and these men are doing just that.

In the past year alone, the 1st Commando Brigade has suffered 99 men killed in action and 140 wounded. Those who remain honor their fallen comrades by continuing to serve. They, like their coalition teammates, put the needs of their fellow men, their units and their nations above their own.

Regarding the SPTTs, many of us are on our second or third combat tour in the past four years. These men and their families have sacrificed a lot for the good of others. They've missed the births of children, birthdays, graduations, anniversaries, and they've also lost friends. Why do they serve? They do it for you and they do it for me. We all owe them a great deal. It's truly an honor to serve with all of these men, both Iraqi and American.

Thank you for your time.

STAFF: Well, thank you, Colonel Buchanan. We hope to see you again in our briefing room.

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