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Presenter: Col. Jeffrey Snow

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DoD News Briefing with Col. Snow

MR. WHITMAN: Thanks for joining this evening, and good morning to the press corps here. Today our briefer is Colonel Jeffrey Snow. He's the commander of the 1st Brigade, 10th Mountain Division. Colonel Snow, his unit is assigned to Multinational Division Baghdad in Iraq, and they've been deployed for about six months now, operating primarily in Northwest Baghdad.

And as is our format here, he's got a few remarks that he would like to make in terms of the overall situational update with respect to his unit, and then, he'll take some questions. As you know, we have the secretary speaking down from the stand up of the MARSOC at 9:30, and so we will close this down right at 9:30.

With that, Colonel, thank you again for joining us this morning, and let me turn it over to you.

COL. SNOW: Well, thanks Bryan, and I appreciate the introduction. But before I field your questions, I would like to tell you a little bit about my brigade combat team known as the Warrior Brigade, the 1st Brigade, 10th Mountain Division, currently assigned to Multinational Division Baghdad.

As an American and a professional soldier, I've got the privilege of commanding the Warrior Brigade, a team of approximately 3,500 outstanding men and women. The brigade has been at war with the enemies of freedom in the three of the last five years, serving twice in Afghanistan and once here in Operation Iraqi Freedom. The brigade is currently conducting full-spectrum operations in conjunction with our Iraqi army counterparts to enhance the safety and security of our area of responsibility during this most profound period of change in the history of Iraq.

Within our area of responsibility, we have the great fortune to work with and train two outstanding Iraqi Army brigades, the 1st Cobra Brigade and the 3rd Muthanna Brigade of the Iraqi Army's 6th Infantry Division. We have followed alongside our Iraqi brothers from our initial entrance into Western Baghdad through the constitutional referendum in October, the national election in December, and most recently in a series of brigade-size operations, which continue to expand the capabilities of the Iraqi army.

It's been an exciting and a fulfilling six months. One brigade, the Cobra Brigade, operates an independent battlespace, and very soon, the 3rd Muthanna Brigade will expand and transition to fully cover the urban areas of western Baghdad and Abu Ghraib.

These two brigades have captured the hearts of the Iraqi people. They are supported by the vast majority of Iraqis and are the great hope of the people in their area of responsibility as they work diligently to bring peace to the Iraqi street. They have planted a seed of hope, a seed of hope that one day will bear the fruit of a new democracy. This is important, and that without the trust and confidence of the people, the country will never go forward. It's a slow and it's a deliberate process, but each day the army grows in capability, the closer they are to meeting the needs of the people. They understand the great expectations heaped upon them, as do we. They know the streets; they are Iraqis, and they have the trust of the people they protect. Their determination to succeed is matched by the daily sacrifice they endure to ensure the future of their country. It will be a struggle, and it will take longer than people want, but in this most complex military task -- a counterinsurgency -- the standards expected of the army are different, and the Iraqis have the required tools to succeed.

To them, time and the people are on their side. With that as an introduction, I'd be happy to take your questions.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you. And let's open it up -- Will, go ahead.

Q Sir, this is Will Dunham with Reuters.

What changes in posture have U.S. troops assumed amid this current escalation in violence? And will your troops step in to prevent sectarian violence?

COL. SNOW: Yeah. Hey, Will, thanks for that question.

The answer is -- I can answer a couple of different ways.

In light of the concern about the possibility of sectarian violence, the Iraqi security forces stepped up and immediately took steps to enhance a security posture within our area of responsibility. With that, much like we did for the constitutional referendum and the elections, our forces are postured as a quick reaction force. In the event they need assistance, we have postured our forces throughout our area of responsibilities to respond in the event they need assistance.

The other measure that's been put in place by the Iraqi government has been a curfew. A curfew was put in place last night. Originally, it was planned to go through this morning; the government has made the decision to extend that curfew through tomorrow morning at 6 o'clock in the morning our time.

Now with that, they did lift that curfew so that the people could go to prayer call between the hours of 4:00 and 8:00 this evening, but then it will go back into effect.

Q Just a follow-up -- have your troops been asked by the Iraqi government to take any additional actions regarding sectarian violence? Have you been called in as backup yet?

COL. SNOW: No, we haven't. I mean, we have a partnership with two Iraqi Army brigades, as I mentioned in my introductory statement. And so what we have done is we've prepositioned our forces out in that area of responsibility. But we've not been asked -- at least within my area of responsibility -- to do anything above and beyond what we ordinarily do to assist Iraqi security forces.

They've done a great job responding to what is a concern about increased sectarian violence.

MR. WHITMAN: Let's go over to Pam.

Q Colonel Snow, it's Pam Hess with UPI.

Could you tell us what you're seeing around Baghdad? What the conditions are there? And I'll have another unrelated question for you about the unit out in Abu Ghraib.

COL. SNOW: Sure. Well, it's good to hear from you, Pam. I remember you from your visit over here.

I'll tell you, in terms of what we're seeing -- it's actually been a very quiet day in sector.

We have had four improvised explosive devices, two of which exploded, fortunately did not cause any injuries or damage to equipment, and we had two improvised explosive devices that were found.

In terms of what we're seeing, people are, for the most part, complying with the curfew. Particularly in the urban areas, what we've been doing is using loudspeaker teams. Iraqi forces had also been disseminating that word. And for the most part, they're compliant.

What we're also seeing is Iraqi security forces have established a number of static traffic control points throughout the city, so that they could enforce the rule of law.

In the rural areas, it takes a little bit longer for that word to get out. But it really has been one of calm throughout the day, fortunately.

Q And on the -- particularly out in Abu Ghraib, what I was told when I was there is that the Iraqi forces that were there before you guys came in had a really bad reputation locally. They had been, I think, trained up by some other government organizations. And so you guys fell in on a situation where there just wasn't any existing ISF infrastructure. Is my understanding correct? And what challenges have you had in establishing a good reputation for the guys that you have now? How have you done that?

COL. SNOW: Well, Pam, thanks for that question. I'll tell you, I can't speak for what transpired before we got here. But I have been very impressed with the professionalism of the 3rd Brigade of the 6th Iraqi Division. I mean, their commander, a man by the name of Brigadier General Aziz, is a fine officer, and he has done a great job leading that organization.

They were a little bit further behind than our First Brigade that is on the western side of Baghdad. He has established a tremendous rapport with the people of both eastern and western Baghdad, and I'll give you one example. You know, in a couple of weeks, they are going to assume independent battle space, which means that we will fall back into a -- continue to provide military assistance, but it's really their battle space. They will take their instructions from the 6th Iraqi Army Division commander. Up until that point, they have been really under our tactical control.

But as part of that effort to move towards independent battle space, he recently had a meeting with the local officials in eastern and western Abu Ghraib. And they had 80 folks that turned out for that meeting. And he did a tremendous job talking to them about what was going to transpire, and the rapport from Sunni and Shi'a alike was very, very positive. So they're doing a great job.

They need a little bit more people, and we're working on that. But they have done a great job enforcing a safe and secure environment in eastern and western Abu Ghraib. They've got a lot to be proud of.

MR. WHITMAN: Let's over to Mik.

Q Colonel Snow, Jim Miklaszewski with NBC. You said earlier that the Iraqis have the advantage in providing security in that they know the streets, they know the people. Since they do know the streets, they do

know the people, what are they telling you about this current wave of violence and the possibility that it could tip over into an all-out civil war?

COL. SNOW: Yeah. Jim, that's a very good question. What they're telling us in both Iraqi Army commanders -- and I've had the opportunity to spend time with both -- number one, as you may or may not know, there was a fatwa issued by Sistani and some key imams, both Sunni and Shi'a alike, asking for calm. That was obviously followed up by the government also.

I think they have developed a rapport with the people, so that the people understand the possibility exists. But they're very pleased by the responsiveness of Iraqi security forces, following on the heels of this tragic bombing down in Samarra.

It is their beliefs, based on their discussions with people, that although they are concerned, they are not going to resort to sectarian violence within our area of responsibility. So certainly the possibility exists, but at this point the word on the street from the people within our area of responsibility is that they understand this was the act of terrorists and they are not going to allow themselves to take action as a result of it.

Q And what is the level of concern among U.S. military commanders in Iraq? This has been the worst wave of violence, Iraqi on Iraqi, that we've seen in some time. Is there an increasing level of concern among U.S. military commanders that our troops on the ground there will indeed get caught in the middle of a civil war?

COL. SNOW: I think all of us as commanders, regardless of rank, are always concerned for the welfare of our soldiers. But I think we have provided the right guidance to our soldiers and taken the prudent measures. As you know, our soldiers are very well equipped. They understand that this is a challenging time.

I want to make it clear to everybody that there is no question that Iraqi security forces are clearly in the lead here. And so what we've done is we'll continue to monitor the situation, monitor the atmospheric, but we've provided guidance, and that's not only from my leadership but also what I've provided my soldiers, that if they identify an issue, best to observe, find out what is the cause, what is the particular agenda, and then get somebody from Iraqi security forces to go out and talk to the people, find out what their concerns are and resolve the situation.

We've had similar types of incidents of this nature, perhaps not on this scale before, but our approach has been the same and it has worked very well for us.

Q Just one quick follow-up. Are U.S. soldiers under orders not to take action, not to use kinetic force?

COL. SNOW: No, there has been no change to our rules of engagement. So if we -- are you still there?

Q Yes.

COL. SNOW: Okay. I'm sorry, I thought I lost you there for a second.

There has been no change to our rules of engagement. So if soldiers see someone that is breaking the law, they could take the appropriate actions, escalation, graduation of force, and whatever measures are necessary to enforce the rule of law.

MR. WHITMAN: Jeff.

Q Colonel, Jeff with Stars and Stripes. From what I understand, U.S. troops are letting Iraqi security forces take care of the situation or most of the situation. What trigger or what would make U.S. troops respond or take over for Iraqi security forces?

COL. SNOW: That's a good question, Jeff. I can't think of any particular situation that would warrant us taking over for Iraqi security forces. I mean, they are our partners. And so we have a very good relationship, and that relationship exists amongst the commanders. It is one of providing assistance. As you know, in terms of equipment and capabilities, we possess some capabilities above and beyond what the current Iraqis possess; for example, the ability to coordinate attack aviation or for some aerial platforms. So I can't think of an example in which we would take over.

We will continue to work very closely with them. If they need assistance responding to a particular situation, then we would coordinate for the integration of those combat multipliers, which is what we've done throughout the time we have been here. But they are clearly in the lead.

MR. WHITMAN: Jim?

Q Colonel, this is Jim Mannion from AFP. Since the violence is sectarian and the Iraqi security forces are of mixed Sunni -- Sunni/Shi'a mix, are you seeing any strains within those forces, any signs of unit indiscipline? And how are their commanders dealing with the possibility of that?

COL. SNOW: Well, thanks, that's a very good a question. Fortunately, the answer is we're not seeing any signs of that at all. What is remarkable to me, and I think it's important to share not only with you but for the American people, is that both of the commanders, the Iraqi army brigade commanders that I work with, clearly understand that their obligation is to Iraq, the government of Iraq. Now, they may -- in this particular case they are Shi'a, but their organizations are mixed, and you obviously know that, but we're not seeing any indications within the ranks of an allegiance one way or another. The allegiance is to the government of Iraq. They have conveyed that to their soldiers. Their soldiers are complying.

Their soldiers took very good actions. I mean, we know our area of responsibility, so we know those areas that fall along what we call fault lines. And both commanders, based on their understanding of their area of responsibility, deployed soldiers out to areas that they thought may be at an increased risk or an increased threat, and they provided security to Sunni enclaves, in particular, Sunni mosques, and in other areas that they had concern. So I think it speaks volumes about their capability and just how far they've come as a fighting force.

Q Colonel, I'm Carl Osgood. I write for Executive Intelligence Review. The two brigades that you work with, how capable are they of operating on a sustained basis without U.S. support? If they're not fully capable of that, what steps are required to bring them up to a level where they can operate fully independently?

COL. SNOW: They're capable of operating independently to a degree. In other words, there are certain manning shortfalls which we're working with them. Same with equipment. What we're really working with them on now, what prevents them from operating in a sustained fashion, is the logistical infrastructure. That's what we're working to assist them with. And it's going to take time. Everybody at the various levels of leadership understands that. We are doing schooling for individuals, but that's something that we take for granted in the American Army, and it's going to take a little time for that to stand up in the Iraqi army.

Q Wendy Wang with Talk Radio News. Should the sectarian violence turn into civil war, what does this mean for U.S. troop drawdown?

COL. SNOW: Well, I would certainly hope -- you know, the terrorists would like to see this break out in

civil war, but I don't think the people are going to allow that to happen. I mean, that's my personal opinion. If that were to occur, obviously, that place -- the soldiers between what would be the, you know, the two parties involved. So that would certainly place our soldiers at an increased risk, but again, based on what I have seen with in our area of responsibilities and the actions of Iraqi security forces, both police and army, I don't see that occurring.

Q Hypothetically speaking, if it does?

MR. WHITMAN: I'm not sure you heard that. We tend not to deal in hypotheticals, but the question was, hypothetically, if that was to occur. I don't know if you have anything else you wanted to add to that.

COL. SNOW: You know, hypothetically, I mean, what we are going to do is we're going to take the appropriate measures to safeguard the soldiers' lives. So if hypothetically that were to occur, then much like we do with any other military problem, we would conduct the analysis and determine what states -- what steps we needed to take in order to mitigate that risk.

MR. WHITMAN: We'll go back to Pam.

Q Colonel, it's Pam Hess again. From our distance, looking at what's going on in Iraq, the supposed-Shiite militias that maybe have infiltrated highway patrol or other parts of the government, the latest sectarian violence, from this distance it looks like it's inevitable. From what I hear you saying, though, is you don't think it's going to happen.

Would you talk about -- a little bit more as to why you don't think it's going to happen? Is it just you're trying to put a happy face on things, or do you see a real indication? And what have you learned over the last six months?

COL. SNOW: Yeah, I am not trying to put a happy face on it. I'm trying to share a perspective, one of a commander that works daily with, you know, Iraqi security forces and talks to people not only Iraqi Army, Iraqi police, but also sheikhs, imams in the area.

And so, you know, does the possibility exist? Sure. But based on my interaction with Iraqi army officials at various levels, coupled with talking to men like Hussein al-Sadr, who's a very respected ayatollah in Kadimiya, who has made, along with the Ayatollah Sistani, called for calm, the prevailing thought right now is they think that is going to carry the day.

Now, will there be incidents of violence? Yes.

Are we concerned about what we refer to as Mahdi militia? Yes. But what's encouraging to me is, in even in this particular case, Muqtada al-Sadr has called for calm. That -- had he directed otherwise, that would be a cause for concern. But he is not, so -- do I think there's going to be pockets of violence? Yes. The terrorists would certainly like to see more of that.

But I really think the people are tired of that. They want to get on with their lives. They realize that if the violence were to escalate, ultimately they lose out. They want to get about the business of going back to work, taking care of their children, letting them go to school. I mean, they're tired of it, and to be honest with you, I have seen evidence that they are turning against terrorists. We are seeing an increase in the number of tips, which is resulting in us able to take operations which are allowing us to kill or capture terrorists.

So I am seeing a lot of positive signs, and that is my opinion. It's not an effort to put a happy face on it.

MR. WHITMAN: Jeff, go ahead.

Q Hi, Colonel. Jeff Schogol with Stars and Stripes again.

Can you talk about what your troops are doing outside the wire? You mentioned something about loudspeaker operations? Can you talk about these things?

COL. SNOW: Sure.

What we've done again -- you're talking about a very large area, and a significant portion of our area of responsibility is urban and built-up area, so we are trying to assist -- or not trying -- we are assisting Iraqi security forces with disseminating the word, just explaining to the people that a decision has been made to extend the curfew. Please go back to your home. You know, you're able to go to prayer call between these hours, but then we're going to ask you to go back home.

The other thing we've done is again, based on providing military assistance, we have an habitual relationship with the subordinate units throughout both of these Iraqi Army brigades. And what we've done is we have postured forces throughout the battlespace. In the event there were to be an incident that they needed assistance, we would be able to respond in a quick fashion.

It's very similar to what we did for the referendum and for the elections. And I realize some of you will not know that, but it's a similar type of thing where they know we're out there, they know where we are. We have representatives within their operations center, so if they need some assistance, they can turn and talk to somebody in a U.S. uniform, and we can go there to provide assistance.

Q A follow-up -- when you said it's a rapid response -- what kind of situations are you talking about, and how does that work?

COL. SNOW: You know, with the Iraqi army units, they have what are called military assistance teams. We refer to them as MiTTs. So as they conduct their operations, we have advisors at the battalion and brigade levels.

So if they need assistance -- say, for example, there is a -- some type of demonstration, and they would like an increased U.S. presence, they would provide that word to whichever advisor is with them. That advisor has got radio communication with other U.S. forces in the area. They can call back, and then we can provide additional forces, if necessary, to cordon off an area so that a situation does not expand.

Additionally, if they would like some aviation to look in a particular area, based on a threat or a tip that they receive, we could coordinate that support for them, given that they do not have that capability right now.

Q But are you worried that if you do end up sending U.S. troops to demonstrations, that that could make a potentially volatile situation explode?

COL. SNOW: Well, you know, on the one hand, yes. But this is a decentralized environment, and I've got an awful lot of trust and confidence in my soldiers and in my commanders.

So what we do is, we assess every situation, and we do our best to make the right decision, given the circumstances.

On the one hand, you know, your point is well taken, and that is if we rapidly mass on a particular area, we could incite an incident. And we're careful not to do that. We have a capability resident within the brigade

combat team to actually observe, using ISR platform -- intelligence surveillance platforms, so that we can assess the situation without putting soldiers in the immediate area. And we can assess it, and then if we think, based on a request, the prudent thing to do is to reinforce with some type of capability, we can coordinate with that -- for that capability. That could be as simple as another patrol. It could be a platoon's worth of combat power. It could be Bradley fighting vehicles. It could be attack aviation. So every situation is assessed independently.

MR. WHITMAN: Before I --

Q (Off mike.)

MR. WHITMAN: Very quickly, because we need to bring this to a close.

Q Colonel, have you had to deploy your troops in those situations over the past 48 hours?

COL. SNOW: We have not. As a matter of fact -- and I think I said that earlier -- it appears as though the people have really listened to the government of Iraq, as well as their religious leadership, in terms of not allowing this to break down in violent acts.

So at this point, the answer to your question is no, we have not had to respond to a single situation without -- within our area of responsibility.

MR. WHITMAN: Before we bring it to a close, let me turn it back to you, Colonel Snow. If you have any final comments that you'd like to make, you have the floor.

COL. SNOW: Okay. Well, listen, I want to thank you very much for your questions. I would like to leave you with a couple of thoughts.

First of all, I'd like to say that the Warrior Brigade is proud of its contributions in this fight, and we look forward to the day when all Iraqis can stand together and defeat the scourge of terrorism and sectarian violence.

We realize the unique and necessary contributions of the Iraqi security forces in this fight, and we will stand in partnership with them through the tough times and forge the necessary military cooperation and planning to meet the requirements of the government and the people of Iraq in our particular area of responsibility. I think the American people can count on us to meet all challenges with strength, honor and the will to succeed.

It's important that we not be unrealistic. The defeat of the counterinsurgency is going to take time, and the growth of a new army cannot be instantly realized. The Iraqi security forces that we work with have made remarkable growth in capabilities in an unusually short period of time, and I'm confident they will gain additional ground as conditions and training levels permit.

The Iraqi Army, I am confident, will in the end meet the requirements for security and go forward without our presence, but our hearts will always accompany them as brothers in arms, in duty, and one day in reunion when we can walk the streets of Iraq in peace.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank all of the families back at Fort Drum in the North Country for the great support they have provided to our soldiers. That is most appreciated.

With that, that's all I've got. Thank you very much.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you, Colonel Snow. And again, thank you for your time and for your insights. They're very valuable for us back here to be able to talk to somebody that's on the ground every day working with the Iraqi people and the Iraqi security forces.

Our regards. Hope to talk to you again soon. And I'll just pass on a special hello from Carter Ham, who asked me to send that off to you.

COL. SNOW: I'm sorry, I missed that. Could you say that again?

MR. WHITMAN: General Carter Ham asked me to pass his regards to you. And he's glad that you're talking to the press today as opposed to him. How's that? (Laughter.)

COL. SNOW: Well, tell General Ham I said thank you very much. He's a wonderful person.

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