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Presenter: Maj. Gen. James Thurman, commander, Multinational Division Baghdad

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DoD News Briefing with Maj. Gen. Thurman from Iraq

(Note: General Thurman appears via teleconference from Iraq.)

BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Well, good morning. General Thurman, this is Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon. Can you hear me?

GEN. THURMAN: Bryan, good morning to you.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you, General, for joining us this evening, and good morning to the press corps here on Friday morning. Our briefer today is Major General James Thurman. He is the commanding general of the 4th Infantry Division, but he's also the commanding general of the Multinational Division in Baghdad. He assumed command on January 7th of this year, and he leads the coalition operations, which include U.S. forces and those from the Republic of Georgia, Macedonia, Estonia and about 33,000 Iraqi security forces.

General Thurman is speaking to us today from Baghdad. I think this is the first opportunity we've had to have you in this format with the Pentagon press corps, General. And so we appreciate it and hope that it goes well, so we can have you back on several occasions during your tour there.

With that, why don't I turn it over to you, General, so that you can give us a brief overview before we get into some questions.

GEN. THURMAN: Well, Bryan, thank you for that introduction. And good morning to everyone and thank you for having me here today.

As you may know, we're approaching our first 90 days in theater as Multinational Division Baghdad. And there are three points I'd like to make.

First, the Iraqi security forces in Multinational Division Baghdad are succeeding in their mission. We are setting the conditions for stability and security in Baghdad, and this is the decisive period in the campaign as Iraq transitions to self-governance.

Our soldiers have risen to the challenge and are performing like champions in one of the most complex and demanding environments that I have seen.

As the operation has progressed, our task organization has changed. We currently have a little over 29,000 U.S. and coalition soldiers; approximately 32,000 Iraqi army, Iraqi national police and Iraqi police that are integrated into our formation with our coalition partners. This makes the mission truly a joint and combined effort.

Furthermore, we have increased the size of our battlespace to approximately 17,000 square miles by adding three additional provinces in addition to Baghdad. We have the Babil province, Karbala and Najaf. That's roughly the size of the state of West Virginia. The Iraqi security forces' assumption of battlespace and ability to protect their citizens has made that possible.

This leads me to my second point. The Iraqi security forces are in the lead. Within Multinational Division Baghdad, seven Iraqi brigades and 18 out of 29 battalions now own battlespace. Only three more brigades consisting of 11 battalions remain to assume battlespace. The Iraqi army has proven that they're trained and capable of protecting the Iraqi people, and their nation recognizes that.

Likewise, the Iraqi police are also poised to assume their civil law enforcement duties and are doing so. The police academies are training new recruits every day as more citizens volunteer to serve and protect the Iraqi people.

The Iraqi people further demonstrate their growing trust and confidence by the use of the national tip hotline. Over 3,000 tips have been received, and more than 2,500 of those tips have led to successful operations.

My last point is that the terrorists are failing. Terrorists failed to stop the elections. They failed to stop the recent seating of the Council of Representatives, which occurred on the 16th of March. And they have failed to incite civil war by the attack on the Golden Shrine in Samarra. In each case, Iraqis rose to the challenge and prevented the terrorists from succeeding. Iraqi and coalition forces continue to disrupt multiple terrorist cells that indiscriminately attack civilians, Iraqi security forces and the coalition.

Since the Golden Shrine bombing on February the 22nd, many are tempted to call every act of violence as sectarian. This is not true. Much of the violence in Iraq can be attributed to desperate acts of terrorism, designed to derail the formation of the national unity government. While sectarian violence does exist, much of the violence is due to criminal activity that existed prior to the Samarra bombing.

In conclusion, Iraqi forces are succeeding. They're in the lead, and they are gaining capability every day.

U.S. and coalition soldiers remain committed to the fight and assisting our Iraqi partners.

We know what is at stake, and we will defeat the terrorists. Our nation can take pride today in the selfless service and the professionalism and the courage of the great men and women that I have the honor and privilege to serve with every day.

With that, I'll take your questions.

MR. WHITMAN: General, thank you for those comments, and let's get started. Maybe we'll do something a little different today, and we'll get Pam's three-part question out of the way to start with. How's that?

Q General Thurman, this is Pam Hess with UPI. Sorry to start out so grimly, but we've got the news this week in Baghdad of headless bodies being discovered on the road. Would you talk a little bit about that, who made the discovery, and what you know about the victims, and who might have done that?

And would you also talk about if you all are getting any actionable intelligence about Jill Carroll's kidnappers? Is there some information that you have that you're going to be able to break up some of these kidnapping rings?

GEN. THURMAN: Well, I'll take the last part of your question, and I'm going to have to ask you to say the first part because I did not hear it plainly.

The last part of your question that I understood was the reference of kidnapping sales in regard to the kidnapping of Jill Carroll is what I understood, and I currently -- I'm not at liberty to discuss any of the intelligence that we gain on a daily basis as we continue to target terrorist cells. But I will just tell you one thing -- we are doing that 24 hours a day.

And if you could repeat your -- first part of your question.

Q About -- on the news that we heard this week of a number of headless bodies being found along a road in Baghdad. I was wondering what more you could tell us about that, what you know about the victims, and who the perpetrators were?

GEN. THURMAN: Okay. I did understand that question, and what I would tell you -- we have not confirmed that report. We went to multiple sites to look for the 32 headless bodies that was reported to our headquarters, and we did not find anything; nor did any of the local citizens that were in these areas could verify that anybody had ever been in there. So I look at that report as completely false right now.

MR. WHITMAN: Tom.

Q General, it's Tom Shanker from The New York Times. We are rarely told by senior leaders that 14 of Iraq's 18 provinces are relatively stable based on the number of attacks and all of that. I'm sure that's true. But as the commander in Baghdad, the general officer familiar with the concept of center of gravity, is it possible for Iraq to hold together if Baghdad does not? And are you seeing any evidence that terrorists and insurgents have changed their strategy and are focusing their attacks in Baghdad and not elsewhere across the country?

GEN. THURMAN: Tom, I will answer what goes in Multinational Division Baghdad, given the fact that I do have four provinces that we are in fact in charge of. And what I would say in Baghdad, as I look at the 10 beladeyas (ph), the districts inside of Baghdad, the majority of the violence that we have seen in the past few weeks, after the Samarra bombing, has been in five key -- what I would call -- beladeyas (ph), districts. And that's where we're focused on in Baghdad and with our operations, and we have been conducting Operation Scales of Justice as an operation to prevent the attacks from occurring and protect the people in those areas.

Q General, Will Dunham with Reuters. There has been a significant decline in U.S. military fatalities in Iraq this month and really in recent months. Could you offer an explanation for what accounts for this? For example, is it because Iraqi security forces are out in front more and U.S. troops are not as exposed, or has there been a general decline in the number of attacks staged by insurgents across the board?

GEN. THURMAN: Well, since we've been in here from transfer of authority, we've conducted over 46 division, brigade and battalion- level operations with the intent of working with the Iraqi security forces with them in the lead to disrupt the networks that operate in and around the Baghdad area of operation.

The second thing I would tell you is is the training levels and the confidence that our soldiers have as they work side by side with the Iraqi security forces.

Now, I just returned today from being out in one of the toughest spots in Baghdad, where we've had numerous drive-by shootings, IEDs, kidnappings, and intimidation from terrorists. And what I saw today was a true Iraqi force in the lead, with Iraqi army, Iraqi national police and Iraqi police,, with coalition assistance, performing a great job out there. And I think part of what we're seeing every day is our ability to continue to work close with the Iraqi security forces as we continue to grow their capability and support them.

Q Could I follow up, please? Is that the explanation that you're offering for the decline in U.S. fatalities, that it's the increasing capability of the Iraqi security forces? You didn't make that explicit.

GEN. THURMAN: Okay. What I would tell you is the Iraqi security forces' capability is getting better. And I attribute to a lot of the decline in our fatalities is the alertness and the training levels of our soldiers. And I'm very much impressed with that. And we worked very hard before we came back into Iraq because we knew what the nature of the fight would be.

MR. WHITMAN: Lolita.

Q General, Lolita Baldor with the Associated Press. I'm just sort of following up a little bit on Will's question. Have you seen any change, though, in the level of violence in Baghdad, particularly since the Samarra bombing? Has it remained relatively stable, or has there been any decline such that they -- a number of additional troops, about 700 additional troops were brought in to help in the Baghdad area. Do you still need those troops or are you seeing any kind of fall-off since the end of the religious holiday?

GEN. THURMAN: Well, first off, in Baghdad I have seen some spikes and then I've seen declines. It's been sporadic in spots. And I would tell you it's five areas of where we've seen the majority of the violence. And those beladiyas (ph) that we've seen that in has been in the Mansour area, the Baya-Dura area, the Kadhimiya-Shula area, and over in Sadr City and New Baghdad area. And what we've done to counter that is with Operation Scales of Justice. But I believe it's making a difference. This past week we have cut the amount of attacks in the Baya area by 58 percent.

MR. WHITMAN: Go over to Al.

Q General, it's Al Pessin with Voice of America.

Can I ask you to clarify something from your opening statement? Then I have a different question.

You talked about the number of tips and the number of tips that were useful. Can you tell us a little more about what? First of all, over what period were those figures, and what sorts of things are you finding based on those tips?

And then, the question I wanted to ask was that you've had a lot of praise for the Iraqi forces for their operations, like the one you saw today. Do you foresee a time -- well, let me put it this way. Do you foresee that your successor would likely need fewer coalition troops to secure the same area that you're securing today?

GEN. THURMAN: Well, first of all, in response to your first question, reference tips, the numbers that I gave you is over the 90 days that we have been in the battlespace as we replaced the Third Infantry Division. And what that's led us to has been successful operations to disrupt IED cells, disrupt kidnapping cells and some of the criminal activity that has been occurring inside of Baghdad. And what I've seen every day is a rise in the number of local nationals that are calling in on that tip hotline, which tells me they got trust and confidence that the government of Iraq is serious about providing the rule of law in Baghdad. And I'm encouraged by that. And I've seen that increase, particularly since we've started Operation Scales of Justice.

In regard to your second question about the level of training and the capabilities of Iraqi security forces, I think we will stay at the current level that I spoke of inside of Baghdad until we get the national unity government formed because I see that as being a critical piece to getting the overall rule of law established in all Iraq, but more importantly, as we continue to work inside of Baghdad.

Q Excuse me. I was asking more, sir, about the trend line, not looking at the next couple of months, but looking out to the end of your tour and the trend lines that you see, do you foresee that your successor would need fewer U.S. and other foreign troops at his disposal?

GEN. THURMAN: Well, what I would tell you on that, I think you're going to have to look at the conditions and where we are in the formation of the national unity government. So I'm not going to speculate on what the troop levels will be at the end of our tour here, because what I believe that's most important is the establishment of the national unity government.

Q Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: Jim.

Q General, this is Jim Mannion from Agence France Press. You mentioned -- or you said in your opening statement that much of the violence is terrorism and criminality. But I wonder if you could specifically talk to the role in the violence that the Mahdi Army has played.

GEN. THURMAN: What I would tell you, the government of Iraq, I believe is going to establish a policy in order to look at how they deal with extra armed groups that are operating in Baghdad. And you can't have militias operating on their own outside the rule of law. And I think you got a policy decision here that I believe the Iraqi government is going to work to establish.

And secondly, as far as the encounters with the Mahdi militia, we have seen some evidence of some of militias -- I'm not going to say Mahdi militia -- where there's been encounters out on the streets. But as soon as we show up, that is diffused.

Q Well, could I follow up, General?

I'm just wondering that without that policy in place, are you constrained from going after these extralegal, armed militias?

GEN. THURMAN: As far as going after terrorist cells, I am not constrained inside of Multinational Division Baghdad.

Q What about militias?

GEN. THURMAN: As far as militias, we don't openly target militias. We are targeting terrorist cells that are responsible for the disruption of the -- or the potential disruption of the national unity government and folks that are responsible for criminal activity, the emplacement of IEDs and the small-arms attacks that's occurring on the Iraqi people, and we're doing that in support of the Iraqi security forces.

MR. WHITMAN: Go to Lisa here.

Q General, this is Lisa Burgess with Stars and Stripes.

Recently, Baghdad television has been running warnings from the ministry of Defense that have said do not cooperate with members of the Iraqi army or police unless members of the American coalition forces are with them. What is that all about, and what is that supposed to tell the Iraqi people?

GEN. THURMAN: Well, first off, I have not seen that, and that has not been brought to my attention. This is the first I've heard of it.

What I see when I'm on the ground -- and I've been throughout every baladiya inside of Baghdad -- I do not see that when I get out on the ground, and I talk to people.

There's three things people are concerned about in Baghdad, at least that's what they've told me, as I've been throughout every key area.

One, they are concerned about security.

They are concerned about the basic needs of life, about their ability to raise their families and have electricity, have clean water and the things that we take for granted in our country.

And then the third thing is is the unemployment. I talked to a gentleman the other day that was a history professor, and he's running a muffler shop in Sadr City. And, you know, he's -- as I looked at his seven children and his family, he told me, "I'm very encouraged to see you down here and your interest in a better way of life for us."

Now, that's what happens when you talk to the people, and I see that every day. I see evidence of that.

Q Do you also --

MR. WHITMAN: Oh, do you want to follow up? Go ahead.

Q Oh, if you would, please, sir, is that -- to go back to my original question, is that something you might follow up on? Isn't that the kind of directive from the MOD that you would like to know about and perhaps drill down into a little further, especially if it's something that is being shown on at least three major television stations that I know of?

GEN. THURMAN: Any bit of information like that, I'm interested in. I'm interested in anything that's going to affect the overall security of Baghdad. And I will take that and go look at it and investigate it, but I was not aware of that when you told me that.

MR. WHITMAN: Donna, you're up.

Q Sir, it's Donna Miles, American Forces Press Service.

I'd like to shift gears for a second, if you will, and ask, as a commander of troops in Iraq, many who were at the tip of the spear on previous deployments; now they're in a supporting role in many cases.

What fundamental changes does that present in the way you're preparing your troops for the mission, how they're carrying out their day-to-day activities?

GEN. THURMAN: I think, number one, that you have to look at is the level of training that all our armed forces have that have participated in Iraq and other campaigns. What has assisted me is establishing clear priorities and clear commander's intent, and being on the ground with the soldiers and looking at the confidence that they display every day. And quite frankly, they know what's at stake in this, and we worked very hard before we come over to -- came back to Iraq with our training. And so the other thing I would tell you is the importance of cultural awareness and a respect for the Iraqi people. And that's what I've seen throughout the formations that are currently operating inside of Multinational Division Baghdad.

Q Can I do a follow-on, sir? What I'm curious is, when you've had troops who have been at the front who have been leading these different operations and now they're in a supporting function, largely, what is the shift in the missions that they have and the responsibilities that they have, and is that a challenge to make that shift?

GEN. THURMAN: Well, I think first off, what is demonstrated with us every day is the agility and the ability for our soldiers to adjust. And that can only be done through a very good training program, of which the United States Army, Marines and folks that are operating in here with us have been doing, and the lessons learned that we're getting learned every day over here and fed back into our training regime. I think I attribute that to that, and I attribute it to some very good leaders over here.

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

Q General, Tom Bowman with the Baltimore Sun. I want to follow up on the militia issue.

You said the Iraqi government has to deal with this -- come up with some sort of a policy, but we've been hearing that for many weeks from both the Pentagon officials and officials in Baghdad. Do you get any sense that policy is imminent, or there are just discussions of this thorny issue over in Iraq, and they're frankly kicking

this can down the road?

GEN. THURMAN: Well, I believe as they continue to form the government, which they're doing, and seat the final government as they did on 16 March with the Council of Representatives, I think it's more than talk. I think they're looking at their dialogue with that to do that.

Now, as far as what they're going to do, I can't answer that, and I'll leave that up to the political arm of the Iraqi government and what is occurring as their establishing their overall governments.

Q (Off mike) -- will happen until after a government has formed a policy with the militias?

GEN. THURMAN: Well, I don't know when they will make that decision on what -- on how they're going to handle militias. I do know I think they're serious about it, and they know that there cannot be private armies operating in the penalty of the rule of law, as a government is trying to form and provide that overall rule of law for the Iraqi people.

Q General, Peter -- (last name inaudible) -- with the Los Angeles Times. One more time on Jaysh al-Mahdi. Can you -- separate from the policy discussion, can you give us your assessment of the relative strength of Jaysh al-Mahdi, particularly in Sadr City? We've been hearing a lot of reports of they're gaining in strength, you know, attracting sort of disaffected young men, particularly post-Samarra. I mean, separate from the political issue, that's got to be a concern of yours if we're seeing Sadr gaining strength in Baghdad. Can you give us your assessment of how strong they are in that area?

GEN. THURMAN: I will tell you I do not believe they are gaining strength. I think, as I said before, when the Iraqi security forces and the coalition has a(n) encounter, the situation is diffused. I think it is a concern to deal with militias, and I've stated that I believe, but I don't see that as a situation that's completely out of control in Baghdad. I just don't see it when I'm on the ground, and I'm talking to the people, and I'm in police stations, and I'm doing patrolling with our commanders that are on the ground.

Q General, Gordon Lubold from Army Times.

Just a quick question about the kinds of attacks you're seeing. Please talk a little bit about -- characterize any new kinds of attacks other than the traditional ones we're used to on either Iraqi citizens or on American forces, and do you see an increase in sniper attacks?

GEN. THURMAN: I have not seen any increased capability of sniper attacks. What we typically see in regard to snipers is firing in areas where they're populated, at moving cars with drive-by shootings, and we see that quite often. But it is not that these are great marksmen and their marksmanship has really increased.

A second point is with indirect fire. We see a lot of sporadic, really point-and-shoot, what I call intimidating indirect fire, that typically does not do anything and it's not well-aimed or precision indirect fire.

The thing that we see a lot of are IEDs, and that continues to be an issue for us. And that is one that we continually work every day. And currently we -- over the past month of March we've encountered over 602 IEDs, and roughly 50 percent of them have been found before they detonated. And we're doing that by defeating networks and defeating device in the soldier training.

Q Thank you.

Q A clarification?

MR. WHITMAN: I think we have time for maybe just one more if it's not a three-part question.

Q A clarification.

MR. WHITMAN: Pam.

Q (Off-mike.)

Q All right.

Q Sir, you mentioned the terrorist violence and sectarian violence and militia violence in Baghdad. Does it matter what flavor of violence it is for the overall security of Baghdad or Iraq? You talked about how some of it is criminal, but, I mean, doesn't it all add up to insecurity?

GEN. THURMAN: Any type of activity that is violent in nature, that is outside the rule of law, causes me great concern. And what I'm saying is it's something that I look at every single day, 24 hours a day, as we continue to work closely with Iraqi security forces to, one, protect the people and prevent these attacks. Whether it be a terrorist event or whether it be criminal activity, it doesn't matter; it's still violence and it's got to be corrected.

MR. WHITMAN: General, we really have reached the --

Q Clarification? One point of clarification?

MR. WHITMAN: A point of clarification, then we'll bring this to a close. (Laughter.)

Q General, (name inaudible) -- again. In your opening statement you said that because of the ability of the Iraqi forces, you've been able to expand your area of responsibility from Baghdad to include three other provinces. Does that mean with the same number of U.S. and other foreign troops you're now controlling that bigger area with the help of the Iraqis?

GEN. THURMAN: Okay, let me see if I can explain that a little clearer for you. When we started Scales of Justice, which is an increased presence with Iraqi security forces and coalition inside of Baghdad, I asked for additional capability. And I thought we needed at least five more Iraqi security force battalions -- that's army and police -- and three additional coalition battalions as we increased the overall presence of patrols. And what we're currently doing with that is we run on the average of about 115 to 120 patrols, and we're operating at roughly 138 checkpoints, thereabouts, inside of Baghdad. And when we took over, we were 5,000 less than what the 3rd Infantry Division had as we come in. So we have increased our overall coalition level to approximately 3,700, with the introduction of eight additional battalions -- police, Iraqi army and coalition. So that's what's occurred throughout all four of the provinces that we're responsible for.

MR. WHITMAN: General, we've exceeded our time, and we thank you for being gracious with your time, and hope that we haven't made your first two-way back to us painful. (Laughter.) We hope that it's been good for as it's been informative for us back here.

Before we close, though, why don't I throw it to you and see if you have any closing remarks that you'd like to make before we bring it to an end.

GEN. THURMAN: Well, I do. In closing, I'd just like to tell you how proud I am of our soldiers. Our nation's sons and daughters are making a difference very day. Staff Sergeant Jerry Durbin from the 2nd Battalion 502nd Infantry Regiment was one of our great soldiers. He and his dismounted squad came under a daisy-chained IED. When he identified the threat, he alerted his squad and attempted to deactivate the device and stop the detonation. On 25 January he died leading from the front while saving his men. His selfless service demonstrates the soldiers we have serving today, and I ask we never forget that.

Finally, I just want to thank the people from across America for supporting our soldiers and their families. And I want to thank especially the people of Central Texas. God bless you.

Thanks.

MR. WHITMAN: Thank you, General. And thank you for everything you're doing and for your leadership.

GEN. THURMAN: Thank you.

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