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Presenter: Commander, 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, Col. David R. Gray

April 21, 2006

DoD News Briefing with Col. Gray from Iraq

(Note: Colonel Gray appears via video-teleconference from Iraq.)

JIM TURNER: Colonel Gray, this is Jim Turner in the Pentagon press room. Can you hear me?

COL. GRAY: I can hear you, Jim.

MR. TURNER: Okay. Let's get started.

Good morning. Our briefer today is Colonel Dave Gray, commander of the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division. Colonel Gray and his brigade are assigned to Multidivision North -- Multinational Division North in Iraq and have been deployed for about five months, operating primarily in the Tikrit area. He is here today to provide us with an update on his unit's activity. Please identify yourself and remember that there is a four-second delay before he can hear your questions. And with that, Colonel Gray, I'll turn it over to you.

COL. GRAY: Well, thanks.

Good morning, all. Thank you for coming today, and thank you for letting me share with the American people the great work Bastogne soldiers are doing in and around Kirkuk, one of Iraq's key strategic points.

The 1st Brigade Combat Team consists of six battalions, including an air cavalry squadron, and soldiers from combat arms and essential combat services.

Over the past six months, these dedicated warriors have spent hundreds of hours fighting insurgents, teaching and coaching Iraqi security forces in preparation to take up the fight, assisting in the development of local governance programs and working with community leaders to improve the local economy.

We operate within three provinces in an area roughly the size of the state of Maryland. We maintain overwatch in the Sulimaniyah province and the northern part of Salahuddin province. Iraqi security forces have assumed control in both of those areas. We maintain overall control in the Kirkuk province.

Our area is ethnically diverse, with a blend of Kurds, Turkomen, Arabs and Azerians populating the cities and the villages.

The region contains some of Iraq's most strategic resources and infrastructure. Roughly 40 percent of Iraq's oil and 70 percent of its natural gas come from this region.

Currently, Bastogne Brigade soldiers are conducting a wide range of operations: combined combat patrols and raids, training the Iraqi security forces and assisting with the development of government institutions in the rule of law. Although large-scale, sensational attacks are rare in Kirkuk, make no mistake, this area is still threatened by an insurgency and ethnic frictions. It's an amalgamation of a knife fight, a gunfight and three-dimensional chess, and that assumes that the enemy plays by our rules, and he doesn't.

The reason this area remains relatively stable, though, is because of the great work that the Bastogne soldiers are doing on a daily basis, along with the courage and the efforts of the Iraqi security forces and the Iraqi people in this area.

With that as a bit of context, I'd like to ask for your questions.

Q Colonel, this is Bob Burns from Associated Press.

When would you anticipate that the Iraqis would be ready to take over -- lead control of Kirkuk province?

And also, could you elaborate on your analogy to three-dimensional chess?

COL. GRAY: Yeah. I didn't catch who asked me the question.

Q Bob Burns from Associated Press.

COL. GRAY: Okay, Bob. Thanks for that question.

First, in terms of Iraqi forces in Kirkuk province, they have made great strides in their capability and their confidence in themselves. As I mentioned previously, in parts of the area that I overwatch, we've already had Iraqi forces take control. Out in Sulimaniyah, the 3rd Iraqi Army Brigade is already in control of the security in that province, along with local police and Peshmerga forces. In the northern part of Sulimaniyah three months ago, we were able to pass over tactical control to an Iraqi army battalion, and that battalion has progressed well, and together with Iraqi police in the Tuz area is operating independently, with American advisors to assist in bringing in coalition effects.

In Kirkuk province itself, the 2nd Iraqi Army Brigade is making steady progress. They've conducted two brigade-size operations with the coalition forces in support. And the good news story is that at the end of this month, one of the Iraqi battalions in that brigade will assume responsibility for the area outside of Kirkuk city and begin its own independent operations with us in tactical oversight. Such -- that's a great news story.

On the issue of three-dimensional chess, it just refers to the idea that you have to anticipate moves and really multidimension moves in advance.

And, of course, chess implies that your opponent is playing by the same rules. Don't think he's playing necessarily by the same rules as we are. Nevertheless, I believe that Bastogne soldiers and leaders are able to anticipate their moves in many cases and prevent them from taking action or disrupt their actions as we go about our business.

MR. TURNER: Will.

Q Colonel, this is Will Dunham with Reuters. There's been an uptick in U.S. casualties this month.

What, if anything, is the insurgency doing differently that might explain this?

COL. GRAY: Okay, if I understood your question about casualties. This month we have had some casualties caused by IEDs. That's no surprise. That's been the most common way that the insurgents use to inflict casualties on us. We have seen different variations on the types of IEDs they use; they adapt, as you know, to our countermeasures. But from my perspective as a commander, we seem to be gaining on their innovations, because this month as I track our statistics we're at about a 60-percent rate of discovering the IEDs before they're able to blow up, which is a much greater improvement than six months ago when we first came into theater. So, as they adapt, we readapt; action, reaction, counter-reaction. Right now I think we've got an edge, but we're going to stay watching the situation and adapting as we go.

Q Follow-up. Is the insurgency doing anything differently lately to explain the uptick in casualties?

COL. GRAY: Well, in my particular AOR, which is what I'll speak to, our casualties for the past month have been light. Again, as I explained, their major weapon is the IED. In terms of trying to do some things different, not really. Variation on some of their same tactics, and we adjust, just as they try to adjust to ours. I think we've been very successful integrating our combined arms assets within the brigade combat team to counter some of their adjustments. But I'd still characterize them as -- their tactics -- as pretty much hit and run, and using remote-control type devices so they can escape during the -- after the attack.

MR. TURNER: Jim.

Q General, Jim Mannion from Agence France Presse. I was wondering, the political stalemate in Iraq, what effect is this having on security, or otherwise, in your AOR?

COL. GRAY: Yeah, a great question, because political stability is a great concern of the Iraqi political leaders throughout my area of responsibility, as well as all the security forces.

I would say right now they're a little bit apprehensive. Most of them believe that the government needs to be unified and it needs to be put in place as quickly as possible.

One of the effects is that for the governments, in terms of getting monies and carrying on the daily business of governance, at times there appears to be kind of a wait-and-see till the new government gets seated before they take action.

The Kirkuk provincial council, though, seems to be moving in the right direction and trying to make decisions about day-to-day business. But until the national government is seated, there are a whole host of issues that really will require the constitution to be in effect and then laws passed to implement some measures down at the provincial level.

So they're anxious, and they want to get the government seated, just like everyone else does.

Q Colonel, I'm Anna Mulrine. I'm the new Pentagon person at U.S. News. And I'm just wondering how much of a concern are the Shi'ite militias for y'all.

COL. GRAY: Yeah. Of course, in this area is primarily a Sunni area, Sunni Arabs, Kurds. The Turkomen are probably the biggest group that are of the Shi'a sect.

We -- there are Shi'a groups that are up here, the Badr Corps, and indications of Jaysh al-Mahdi up in this area. We have had reports of an increase in Shi'a moving into the Kirkuk area.

At this point, though, it's been quiet. The leaders of the Shi'a, as well as all the ethnic groups, have responded in a very calm manner to the violence that is occurring down south. They're encouraging their constituencies to remain calm, not to start any widespread violence.

A good-news story on this issue is that after the mosque bombing in Samarra in February, there were two demonstrations in Kirkuk. Both demonstrations -- one of a thousand people, one the following day of over 4,000 people, both by Shi'a groups protesting the destruction of the mosque, both carried out very peacefully. Police were there, on site, carefully watching the situation, but there was no violence. And the leaders got their point across, and everything remained peaceful.

So I think it's some good common sense on their part. They're exercising restraint, and we're very happy about that.

Q Sir, this is Pam Hess with UPI. I was up in your AO last summer, just before you guys got there. I have two questions. Could you tell us who the enemy is that you're facing? Is it Ansar al- Islam? Is it Sunni rejectionists?

And then on the ethnic issues, how many Kurds have moved back in? And how big are the squatting villages now? And what is that doing to relations there in the town, particularly between the Kurds and the Turkoman?

COL. GRAY: Okay, Pam. Thanks for that question -- actually, a couple questions.

I see the fight in Kirkuk province as two interrelated fights. And out west from Kirkuk is a small town, about 40,000, called Hawija, just east of the Tigris River. It's kind of on the very tip of the Sunni Triangle. It's about 95 percent Sunni Arab.

And in that region, I see that as primarily a fight involving the Sunni insurgency. That means mainly members of the former regime who reject the constitution, want to get back in power.

They do have some influence from Ansar al-Sunna and some other elements that sometimes come into the area, but that's pretty much the fight out there.

In Kirkuk, it's a much larger fight, and I'd characterize it as more of a strategic fight that revolves around the ethnic tensions regarding overall control of the city of Kirkuk.

Since you've been here -- and I mentioned in my opening remarks -- you know that the oil infrastructure up here is very, very important, not only to this region but to Iraq itself. And so the tensions over that, control of that and control of Kirkuk itself -- it has great symbolism and meaning to every one of the ethnic groups here. It does cause a great deal of friction.

Now, of course, that friction is further exacerbated by the movement of Kurdish, internally displaced persons and other immigrants into the city, mainly out of the result of the returns after being cleansed by Saddam Hussein during his Arabization Program.

About -- some estimates say about 120,000 people in this northern region -- Kurds, Turkomen and Assyrians -- were driven out, and many, many of them want to return to Kirkuk in their homes. But in returning to their homes, there are now Arabs who were displaced by Saddam that occupy some of those homes or have built homes in this area. So there is this friction among the groups. The provincial government spends a lot of time discussing these issues, discussing the internally displaced persons. Right now we haven't seen any widespread violence regarding this issue, but I believe it's clearly one that needs to be dealt with quickly for this

part of Iraq to move on and be peaceful overall.

Q Colonel, this is Al Pessin from Voice of America.

I want to follow up on the earlier question about the impact of national politics in your area. You talked about the impact on the provincial governments, but not about the impact on the insurgency. And it's been suggested here that the difficulty forming a government has contributed to continuation of the violence. Do you see that sort of connection? And if so, after today's breakthrough, do you have reason to hope for some change?

COL. GRAY: That's a great question, which I think you're spot on.

The longer the government is not seated, the more the insurgents try to drive wedges between the politicians trying to seat that government and the people, undermining the legitimacy, undermining the legitimacy of the institutions that are up and working.

So, yes, I'd agree. They are at work, and they are using both their terrorist tactics as well as propaganda and information campaigns to try and keep things stirred up here, trying to cleave the ethnic -- or to reinforce ethnic tensions rather than to bring it together.

So I think it's a good sign. Today's breakthrough -- hopefully we'll get the government seated and up and running, and then all of Iraq can move on with the process.

Q Colonel, it's Peter Spiegel of Los Angeles Times.

Can you just give us a snapshot of what you think the ethnic breakdown is now in Kirkuk? It seems every group we talk to claims to be 60 percent. (Laughter.)

And I'm curious if you have an estimate that you use in terms of, you know, representation in local councils, and that kind of thing, for Kirkuk City?

COL. GRAY: Yeah, you're going to put me on the spot because there are a lot of speculation about what the ethnic breakdown is, and it is very hard to get at that very question because residency requirements have not been clearly defined by the national government, much less the provincial government. And of course numbers mean everything in terms of political clout in this area and for all of the competing agendas by each of these Iraqi groups. So any numbers are really speculative.

I would say that it appears from the voter rolls that -- in the last election -- that the Kurds are the majority in the area, followed by, in pretty close numbers, the Turkomen and Arabs and, of course, the Azerians are a very small part of the population. So I can't answer accurately, but I think that's the demographic trends.

Of course this issue of how many people are in Kirkuk is one that is addressed in the constitution. There's to be a census performed before this issue is resolved about the status of Kirkuk, whether it becomes part of Kurdistan region or some other status, remains more oriented as part of the province. And in 2007, the status of Kirkuk is supposed to occur. So I think there'll be -- once the government's seated, I anticipate there'll be a lot of pressure to conduct that census, and there will be multiple plans for who's a resident and at what point were they a resident, to manipulate the numbers one way or another.

Q Colonel, Tom Bowman with National Public Radio. You mentioned reports of Shi'a moving into Kirkuk area. Can you give us a sense of the numbers moving in? You know, are these militias, are these residents? What's your sense of it?

And also, clearly this is a move to sort of counter, I would guess -- this is maybe part of that 3-D chess game you were talking about -- sort of maybe tilt the population up there. And expand a little bit on the tensions, the ethnic tensions you talked about. How worried are you that this is going to explode into a big fight up there?

COL. GRAY: Okay, in terms of numbers of Shi'as, I would tell you we only have a general sense. That general sense comes from reports from the population itself, it comes from observations of the Iraqi army and Iraqi police patrols in the area, and our own patrols. We have seen some movement, as I mentioned, of the Badr Corps setting up additional offices in Kirkuk, and some indication of the Jaysh al-Mahdi coming to Kirkuk. How many the numbers are, I can't really say. They're coming in bits and pieces. I don't think it's in huge numbers right now. It's probably in maybe a hundred or so, couple hundreds. It's something we're going to monitor. It adds to, of course, a already ethnically diverse population.

In terms of tensions and what might be at stake, I believe that, again, this is all a part of the game to figure out who is going to control Kirkuk ultimately in the future. What keeps the tensions down? Quite frankly, it is aggressive leaders, both on the part of the coalition force, but also within the Iraqi units that operate within Kirkuk itself, and getting a feel about what's going on in the city; doing some pattern analysis and some intuitive analysis, and then adjusting our pattern of operations to deter or disrupt any kinds of planned actions by the terrorists. So right now, I think the presence of coalition forces along with an increasingly competent and confident Iraqi army brigade and Iraqi police force inside Kirkuk are keeping a lid on potential violence.

MR. TURNER: Okay, I think we have time for one more question.

Courtney.

Q Colonel, my name is Courtney Kube from NBC News. Can you just give us an example of the ethnic tension? I mean, how are you seeing it manifest?

COL. GRAY: I'm sorry, could you repeat your question again?

Q The ethnic tension, the ethnic friction you've been talking about, how have you seen it manifest? Can you give us any examples of that?

COL. GRAY: Yeah. The ethnic tension manifests itself in many ways. First, in terms of acts of intimidation, whether that's a direct threat to the families of those serving with Iraqi security forces, or even those who are operating with the coalition forces. It goes into coercion of government leaders -- you know, don't support a given policy or not. Some of that is under the table; we don't see it, but we see it manifested in the way that they'll vote on certain issues. Certainly there are assassinations and kidnappings. Now, in January following the December election, we reached a high point in assassinations, and we were quick to recognize that pattern. We believed at that time those were efforts by the insurgents to disrupt the seating process which, you know, was scheduled to happen late January -- or late December, early January. We adjusted the way we operated and targeted those areas where we were seeing an increase in kidnappings and assassinations, and were able to drive down that. So we're on a positive trend there.

But those are just a few examples.

MR. TURNER: Okay, before we close, Colonel Gray, do you have any final remarks you'd like to make?

COL. GRAY: Yeah. If I could close -- and you've probably gathered that this is a very diverse region. It has many multi-faceted challenges. Friction points abound. I would, again, credit the relative calm that most believe is in our area to aggressive commanders and soldiers on the ground, both Iraqi and American, who keep

their finger on the pulse in the region and have developed a keen sense for the potential flash points. By keeping our finger on those flash points, I think we're able to anticipate and place forces there to disrupt enemy actions in a fairly positive manner before they become newsworthy.

A final statement is that I'd like to express my very much heartfelt thanks to all of our families back at home and for their tremendous support of the Bastogne Brigade and its soldiers. Your support's critical to our success, and it's directly related to the morale of everyone here. So I want to thank you again for that, and I'd like to thank all of you for an opportunity to speak to the American public.

MR. TURNER: Thank you, Colonel Gray. And we hope to see you again soon here in the Pentagon briefing room.

COL. GRAY: All right. Thank you.

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