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Presenter: Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld and Commanding General, Multi-National Forces - Iraq, Gen. George W. Casey Jr.

**April 25,
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Press Availability with Secretary Rumsfeld and Gen. Casey in Baghdad, Iraq

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: General Casey and I have just had a good visit. It's a pleasure for me to be able to do it in person. We do it via secure videos and the telephone regularly. I come here in the theater every three or four months as you know. What's different this time is that we've now gone through two elections, the drafting of a constitution, the referendum on a constitution, all of which the extremists have tried to stop and failed. We now are moving through another important milestone, the formation of a new government, a sovereign government of Iraq, the first government that doesn't have a qualifier in front of it. It's not a transitional government, it's not an interim government, it's not a governing council, it's a government. It's the government of Iraq. That's the thing. This is a sovereign country, and they're making impressive progress.

I plan to meet later today with individuals, the top seven, who have been selected and to visit with them. From everything I've heard about the meetings with General Casey and Ambassador Zal Khalizad have had with them, they're moving forward aggressively. They intend to put together a government, a set of ministers which will be the next benchmark. People who are competent, who understand the importance of running ministries not as sectarian ministries, but as ministries for the whole country, and having competent people who recognize the importance of fighting corruption and seeing that those ministries connect throughout the country.

So I'm very pleased to be here and I'm pleased to see the progress that's being made. I have nothing but the greatest respect for the work that General Casey and some 133,000 men and women in uniform out here are doing for our country and for the Iraqi people.

QUESTION: This latest political progress and the naming of the Prime Minister and other leaders, does this take you one step closer to moving forward with the very substantial reductions of U.S. troops[some time] this year?

GENERAL CASEY: It is certainly a major step in the process and the Secretary just laid out the other milestones that we've met. It's interesting to think that in this country last year there were three national polls. In each of them the levels of participation got greater, the levels of violence got less. And this government formation now is another step. When they get the cabinet identified, get the ministers identified, the government then takes up its position and begins governing, that will be the next major step.

So we are seeing the situation a little clearer, I'd say, and the clearer I see it the better I can make my recommendations.

QUESTION: So you're still on track to what you have been anticipating all along?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: I've said let's wait until we get a government formed. We've got the leadership here, we need to get the ministers formed and get them in the job and we'll see how they go. But I'm still on my general timeline.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, how soon do you think that you'll be opening talks with the Iraqis on the future status of U.S. forces? And recently you've talked about Iran and I was wondering if you would foresee leaving forces here to contain Iran.

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: General Casey and I discussed that and there's no question but that as the new government is formed and ministers are in place that it's appropriate for us to begin the discussions with the new government about the conditions on the ground and the pace at which we'll be able to turn over responsibility in the provinces and with respect to military bases and with respect to security responsibilities to the Iraqi security forces.

There is a UN resolution that expires at the end of this year, as I recall. What we would want to do would be to engage in discussions with the new government about that resolution and arrangements between our two countries with respect to our military to military relationship. It also will require us to begin the process [at] the Department of State and Department of Defense to look forward in terms of the budget cycle to see what our arrangements would be with Iraq.

QUESTION: A question about Iran, [inaudible] indicating that [inaudible] in Iraq is something that would help contain Iran. I'm wondering if you're also thinking in terms of maybe the need to leave forces here to contain Iran.

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: I don't believe I said anything like that. The question of our force levels here will depend on conditions on the ground and discussions with the Iraqi government which will evolve over time.

I think what I said was the truth. The truth is that a successful Iraq that is at peace with its neighbors and has a government that's representative of the various elements within the country would represent an enormous success for this region. It would add to prosperity for the region, it would be something that all of the neighbors would benefit from except Iran.

Iran's view of the world is quite different. It would represent a failure from the standpoint of Iran. Those people that are concerned about Iran and the statements being made by the leadership in Iran and the efforts they're making towards nuclear capabilities I think would recognize that a successful Iraq is fundamentally inconsistent with the interests of Iran.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, considering all the discussions at home and some of the difficulties coming to this point would it be possible that this might be your last trip to Iraq as Secretary of Defense?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: No.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, is one of the messages you're delivering to the Iraqi leaders at a meeting the point that they need to understand that U.S. forces will not be in Iraq permanently and that --

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: I think I'll reserve the things I'll be talking about with Iraqi leaders for the new Iraqi leaders.

GENERAL CASEY: There is a transition process that is in place here. The transition government of Iraq is already working and it's one that the new government of Iraq will be intimately involved with. You've heard us talk about the numbers of divisions, brigade and battalions -- Iraqi divisions, brigades and battalions that are assuming the lead across Iraq now.

We went from last year where there was one brigade and two battalions in the lead to right now where there's two Iraqi divisions, 14 brigades and over 50 battalions that are in the lead. By the end of the summer we think that will be up to about 75 percent under Iraqi brigades; and by the end of the year about 80 percent under Iraqi divisions. So that process is continuing.

The other process that's in place in the development of the police and the transition of the provinces to Iraqi control. We have worked with the Iraqis to develop some criteria for that. The governors have been briefed on that. That process is moving forward. So you'll see some provinces starting to move in that direction at the direction of Iraqi control over the coming months.

So the Iraqi government will be intimately involved in that process, and that's one of the things that I talked to the new Prime Minister about, about getting this new administration involved in that process.

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: I will just observe this. For a couple of years, three years, we have heard people trashing the Iraqi security forces in Washington, D.C. and saying that they're not capable of this, they're not capable of that, they can't do this, they can't do that, and the fact of the matter is that what we have said and what General Casey has just said is the truth.

The truth is they have proceeded with their training and equipping, they've gained more experience, they've provided the overwhelming portion of security for the last two elections and for the referendum on the constitution, and they are increasing their capabilities every day just as we predicted they would. And those naysayers and critics who constantly tried to undermine and denigrate the quality of those forces were just plain, flat wrong.

Thanks.

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