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Presenter: Major General Thomas Turner, II

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DoD News Briefing with Major General Turner from Iraq

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

GEN. TURNER: I sure can, Bryan. How are you doing?

MR. WHITMAN: Good. We just need a little volume in the briefing room, please.

Well, sir, thank you for staying with us as we work through some of these technical problems. I think we've got the power fixed on your end there. And I would like to welcome you back. I think the last time you talked to this group in the briefing room was in January sometime.

This is Major General Tom Turner. He is the commander of Multinational Division-North, as well as the commander of the 101st Airborne Division. He is at his headquarters at Forward Operating Base Speicher outside of Tikrit, where his unit's responsible for the ongoing security operations in northern Iraq.

Sir, I think that you have a few comments that you'd like to make and give us a bit of an overview of what you've been doing, and then we'll get right into the questions.

GEN. TURNER: I do. Good morning. Before I take your questions, I'd like to give you a rundown of the current status and progress made in our area of Iraq, that area known as Area of Operations North. That area comprises six of the northern provinces that run from east of Baghdad north to the border with Turkey. It's bounded in the east by Iran and in the west by Syria.

The key cities in our area are Mosul, Tall Afar, Kirkuk, Baiji, Samarra, Baqubah, Sulimaniyah and Dohuk.

Our end state in Iraq has not changed.

It's an Iraq at peace with its neighbors, an ally in the war on terror with a representative government that respects the human rights of all Iraqis, and an Iraqi security force capable of providing domestic order and denying safe haven to terrorists.

Our role in achieving that end state focuses toward the last portion -- an Iraqi security force capable of

providing domestic order and denying safe haven to terrorists. We are partnered with four of the 10 Iraqi army divisions. They consist of 15 brigades and a total of 59 battalions. Of those 15 brigades, three are in the lead in their area of operations, and 18 of the battalions are in the lead. By the end of the summer, we anticipate two of the four divisions being in the lead.

All Iraqi army units in AO North are in the fight. Those that have not assumed an area of operations, it is generally due to the lack of equipment or specialized training, and those units are fighting alongside ours. We anticipate all units of the Iraqi army in our AOR operating in the lead by early next year. It will be some time before these units are rated at Level 1 and prepare to conduct independent operations.

The major inhibitor to independent operations is lack of equipment, manpower, their inability to sustain themselves and a lack of systems or policies in place to manage the organization.

Turning to the Iraqi police forces, we've established police transition teams in all the major cities and provincial capitals in our area. We have completed assessments of these police forces and continue to assess district headquarters and stations throughout the area of operations.

There are a total of six provincial department headquarters, 61 district headquarters and 340 stations. As you would expect, they run the gamut from poorly trained to well-prepared to provide domestic order.

For partnering with U.S. forces, they are progressing rapidly. As you would expect, they are plagued with the same administrative and logistical shortcomings as the army. There are five border police brigades in the area of operations. U.S. border transition teams that have aided in advising and training those border police have been in place on the Syrian border for several months now. We are just beginning the -- to get the transition teams to those brigades along the Iranian border, although those Iraqi units have been established for some time.

Turning to the threat in our area, we have seen very limited secular tensions. Most acts of secular violence has occurred within the Diyala province, where you have a large population of Sunni and Shi'a Arabs living together. Some of the secular violence in Diyala would appear to emanate in Baghdad and spill over into the province. Much of Diyala could best be described as a suburb of Baghdad.

The greatest threat to long-term stability in Iraq remains al Qaeda in Iraq led by Zarqawi. Foreign terrorists continue to make their way into the community, and there's a homegrown element of the organization throughout our AO. The more success we have against al Qaeda, the more willing the Iraqi citizens are to report terrorist activity.

And with that, I'll stop and be happy to take your questions.

MR. WHITMAN: Thank you, General. And we'll get right into it.

Bob?

Q General, it's Bob Burns from AP. I'd like to ask you about the situation out there along the Iranian border. I think we've heard some bits and pieces about clashes between -- involving Iranian forces and Kurds. Can you explain what's going on out there?

GEN. TURNER: That, of course, is a very long border with Iran. It goes from where it intersects with Turkey, which is up in the north part of Dohuk province. It goes all the way south. The area where the reported fight occurred was due north of Erbil in very restricted terrain, very mountainous terrain, and the reports are that Iranians attempted to come across and also shelled three cities. And the Iraqi government is dealing with that

issue now. We do not have any Americans along the border up in that area.

Q Can I follow up real quick?

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead.

Q Just a quick follow-up, do you intend to -- I think you referred to transition teams going out in that area. Is that the limit of what you intend to have in terms of an American presence out there?

GEN. TURNER: That's correct.

Q (Off mike) -- transition teams. How many people or how many teams are going out?

GEN. TURNER: Transition teams are 12, and right now we have five teams in the Diyala province. They're married up with battalions and brigades. In Erbil, there is only a transition team with the brigade.

MR. WHITMAN: Will?

Q General, this is Will Dunham with Reuters. Could you describe the situation in Kirkuk? For example, what are you seeing in the way of an increased presence by Shi'ites and Shi'ite militias? How much of an influx of previously displaced Kurds are you seeing? And what's the state of ethnic and sectarian tensions there?

GEN. TURNER: I would say that the Iraqi army and the Iraqi police in that region of Kirkuk are some of the strongest we have working in our AO. And they manage to limit ethnic violence.

We have seen some movement of militias into the area. Badr Corps has been there for quite a while. And they're basically unarmed, and the IP and IA are managing to control them.

I think that Colonel Gray talked to you about this a couple weeks ago. He of course is our brigade commander up in Kirkuk.

Q General, Peter Spiegel with the Los Angeles Times. Can you talk a bit about the Turkish border? You know, the Turks have been rather worried about the PKK and the Kurds in the north and, you know, allege that there's terrorist activity going on from the Iraqi side. There's been rumors and gossip about Turks actually moving in across the border to try to deal with some of that. Can you talk about that a bit?

And on a completely separate topic, just give us an update on your basing up there. We've heard some talk about consolidation of U.S. basing in the north. Can you just give us a picture of where we are now?

GEN. TURNER: Sure. The second question first. We have been consolidating bases, and we've been turning bases over to the Iraqi army. We anticipate that by this summer, we'll be operating from approximately eight bases that are U.S.-only. And the remainder of the ones that we want to operate from will actually have been turned over to the Iraqi army, and we'll keep forces there as required.

On the Turkish border, of course we have great interaction with the Turks and the Kurds there, and the Turks have LNOs in our headquarters in Mosul, and there's a Turkish LNO in our headquarters in Kirkuk. And the constant communication helps to prevent incidents along that border.

Q All right, just to follow up real quick.

GEN. TURNER: All right.

Q You said you're hoping to get to eight bases. Where is that down from? What was the -- how many bases did you have operating previously?

GEN. TURNER: I think the original number we started with was about 24 or 25. I can get you that number. I don't remember it exactly.

Q Thank you, sir.

Oh, and sir, and how many now?

GEN. TURNER: (Pause.) I have to count them here. Twelve. We're operating from 12 right now, I think.

Q General, Gordon Lubold from Army Times.

You mentioned earlier the lack of equipment and manpower, systems and policies, some of the things, challenges you see with getting ISF up and running to be in the lead. Can you just elaborate a little bit more on that and what you're doing to kind of address those problems?

GEN. TURNER: Sure. This army was grown from the bottom up. And we've trained great Iraqi companies and battalions, and they're still lacking some equipment. As you start developing the institution from the top up, there are policies and systems that need to be put in place to administratively and logistically support the force. I would suspect that once the government is seated and a minister of Defense is named and they can get on with establishing that bureaucracy that will cause soldiers to get paid religiously in a timely manner, that will allow promotions, that will allow resupply of fuel, that will allow contracts for food and life support to be standardized, that that will move out very quickly.

MR. WHITMAN: General, I've realized that we've reached the end of our original time. Do you -- we started about 19 minutes late, though. Do you have some time on your schedule that we continue for a few more minutes?

GEN. TURNER: Sure. I can give you about five more minutes.

MR. WHITMAN: Very good. Thanks.

Pam?

Q General, this is Pam Hess with UPI. Could you explain to us how it is that -- I understand the shortcomings on the Iraqi government side, but the U.S. has been training and equipping Iraqi forces for quite a long time, spent billions of dollars. So the question occurs to me, why, even if the Iraqi government isn't providing the equipment they need, why hasn't the U.S.? What's been the problem there?

And then, on a separate question, could you tell us a little bit about Baqubah? There were two recently announced big captures of al Qaeda in Iraq there, and I'm wondering if that has made it -- if you've seen a significant improvement in the security situation there, because I know for the last six months Baqubah's been sort of crazy.

GEN. TURNER: On the first, on equipment, it's just a normal schedule that we were on in providing equipment. Next month, they should begin fielding armored vehicles to the Iraqi forces, and their supply parts

for equipment will begin to flow. So I think it's just a natural timeline that is occurring here.

And your second question was about AQIZ in Baqubah. I think we are making great strides in the war against al Qaeda. I think the -- last week there was an attack. It seemed to be a rather coordinated attack in Baqubah. The AQIZ claimed responsibility for it; it was six separate attacks, all preceded by indirect fire, and the Iraqi army and Iraqi police held their own and won that battle.

As we take al Qaeda leaders off the street, yes, we see occasionally some -- or not occasionally -- but we do see an improvement in the security environment. Al Qaeda works very hard to quickly replace those leaders that are killed, but, for instance, we have done the same in areas east and west of Samarra, and we have seen improvements within the city itself once we know these al Qaeda leaders are dead or captured.

MR. WHITMAN: General, I think that we have got a -- completed what our questions were here.

And actually we have -- let's make this one last follow-up here, and then, we'll let you go.

Q How -- this is Pam Hess again. How many armored vehicles for the Iraqis, and what kind are they?

GEN. TURNER: The ones the divisions that we partner with are supposed to get are the up-armored humvees, and they're getting a certain number per unit.

Q We're not saying that for operational reasons, or you just don't have the numbers at your fingertips?

GEN. TURNER: I believe the divisions get 259, if I remember correctly.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, General, again thank you for joining us this morning. Let me, just before I close it, ask you if there's anything else that you want to say before we do that.

GEN. TURNER: Yeah, I would like to tell you about the fantastic sons and daughters of America that are over here -- your soldiers. I think you should be extremely proud of this young generation of Americans. They're probably the smartest, most physically and mentally tough soldiers our nation's ever produced. They believe in each other and they believe in what they're doing, and just doing a marvelous job here. And they certainly appreciate -- understand and appreciate the support of the American people and the Congress.

Thank you very much.

MR. WHITMAN: Thank you, General, and for everything that the 101st is doing there.

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