



**U.S. Department of Defense**

Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs)

# News Transcript

On the Web:

<http://www.defenselink.mil/cgi-bin/dlprint.cgi?http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/2006/tr20060523-13103.html>

Media contact: +1 (703) 697-5131

Public contact:

<http://www.dod.mil/faq/comment.html>

or +1 (703) 428-0711

---

**Presenter: Deputy Director for Regional Operations, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Brig. Gen. Carter F. Ham**

**May 23, 2006**

---

## DoD News Briefing with Brig. Gen. Ham from the Pentagon

Click [here](#) for slide shown at briefing.

GEN. HAM: Good afternoon. It's nice to be back. About two weeks ago, General Eikenberry was here to address the situation in Afghanistan. Since then, since his visit here, Operation Mountain Lion, a combined operation with Afghan, U.S. and other coalition members participating, has transitioned into what we call the stability and reconstruction phase, which will go on for some weeks. And I'd like to give you a quick summary of what's been accomplished so far during Operation Mountain Lion.

Over 650 patrols, many of which were combined U.S. and Afghan security force operations, were conducted. Twelve significant weapon and ammunition caches were discovered. Some of these were the result of information provided by local Afghans, which was very good news. Medical teams from the coalition treated over 8,000 Afghan men, women and children as they were making their rounds throughout the districts. And there were numerous meetings with local and district leaders to explain to them what the purpose of Operation Mountain Lion was, and why they were seeing coalition and Afghan forces in their areas, and to solicit their support for the Afghan security forces.

Importantly, there were over 13,000 radios distributed, a means for people who didn't have that means before to receive news and stay connected with their central government. And at mid-month, the first 1st Battalion of the 3rd Marines concluded their service in Afghanistan, transitioned their responsibilities to a unit of the 10th Mountain Division, and they headed home.

In Iraq, you've all been monitoring the seating of the elected government and have heard many senior officials talk about that. From my perspective, from someone who's been there, as have many of you, I'd say that the seating of the Iraqi government is yet another sign of hope. Are there challenges ahead? Yes, there are. To be sure, there are challenges ahead, and some of them are tough ones. But this seating of the government is an important step forward for the people of Iraq.

The Iraqi government now has over 263,000 security forces. As one sign of how things have changed, I'd like you to take a look at this chart, if that will come up. On the left, you see that territories that -- shown in green, where Iraqi security forces were in the lead in October of 2005, just seven months ago, and on the right,

you see shade in green and one segment in blue, which is the national police, where the Iraqis are in the lead today. Two Iraqi divisions, 14 brigades, and more than 50 Iraqi army battalions are operating in the lead in various areas throughout the country.

Now, we want it all to be green. The Iraqis want it all to be green. And only those who are opposed to freedom and elected representative government want it otherwise.

There's still a lot to be done in Iraq, and we shouldn't kid ourselves about that. But I think every now and then it's important to realize that much has already been accomplished, and I think this chart shows some of that great work that has been done by the Iraqis.

Finally, this weekend, our nation will celebrate Memorial Day. There are several great events here in the nation's capital, some of them here at the Pentagon. And I'd ask that each of us in our own way, maybe public and maybe private, to take a few moments to remember those who have made the ultimate sacrifice for America and for oppressed around the world.

From Concord and Yorktown to the streets of Baghdad, in the Philippines, in the mountains of Afghanistan, our nation's armed forces have always been there when they were needed. And today we're honored by the service and sacrifice of so many of our soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines and their families. Let's show them this Memorial Day how proud we are of them and how thankful we are, and let's never forget those who gave their all for our country.

And with that, I'd be glad to take your questions. Bob, please.

Q General, first of all, good to see you back in the briefing room. We do appreciate having these operational updates.

GEN. HAM: You realize this is not my favorite place to be.

Q It's been a long time. I wanted to ask you about Iraq. You referred to the seating of the government. The new prime minister has referred in recent days to what he called a "conditions-based plan" or a road map that would lead to reductions of U.S. forces to a level of 100,000 or less by the end of this year. Is that in fact the target you're looking at, depending on the conditions?

GEN. HAM: Well, a couple of things are important. First, it's been some 72 hours since the elected government has been seated, so still a lot of things yet to be worked out. I'm not aware of anything on our side that has a specific number in mind as an end state. But yet, what is important is that we clearly want to follow the lead that says when and where the Iraqis are capable of exercising the lead for security, we want to make those transitions, when appropriate. Those decisions are made in collaboration with the Iraqi government, Iraqi security force leaders, and the U.S. and other coalition members that are present in those areas.

We want to do it as soon as we can. But you can't do it too fast. We've talked some about rushing to failure, and we got to be very careful to not do that. But the transition responsibility for the lead of security as soon as the conditions are right to do that. So not a specific number, but certainly that's the direction we want to head in. Yes, sir?

Q General, is the U.S. military looking at moving additional troops from the "call forward force" in Kuwait into Iraq right now?

GEN. HAM: There is, as you know, one battalion from that brigade is already inside Iraq. And General Casey, General Chiarelli will make an assessment as to how long that force may be needed. There's an ongoing process of assessment at the tactical level of what the right force mix should be inside Iraq. There are always units that are transitioning out as they hit the end of their normal scheduled deployment, and others that are coming in. And should the commanders on the ground make an assessment that they need additional forces, that's why that force is in Kuwait, is to do just that. If there were to be such a decision to make -- you know, to deploy or not, we, for operational security reasons, wouldn't talk about that until that decision had been executed. So nothing -- that's just -- that's why it's there. Whether or not it's needed will be determined on the ground.

Q Shall we stay tuned for an announcement on that?

GEN. HAM: Well, I suppose you could. But I -- I don't think there'll be one forthcoming soon. Jim?

Q Well, if I could ask specifically about Ramadi, there were reports late last week that the decision had been made to move a battalion from that forward operating force in Kuwait to Ramadi. Are you saying that's not the case, that decision has not been made?

GEN. HAM: I -- I'm not aware that that decision has been made.

Q Well, then, let me ask you about the situation in Ramadi, because there's been an uptick in violence. Ambassador Khalilzad said today that the coalition forces do not have control of Ramadi. Can you give us an update on the conditions there? And exactly who is the enemy there in Ramadi?

GEN. HAM: Well, Ramadi's a tough area, probably -- probably the most contentious city right now inside Iraq. And I think that's not a -- I think that's not an overstatement. It's a tough place right now. The U.S. forces, both Army and Marine Corps, that are operating there are frequently in contact. Who the enemy is I'm not sure, and I'm not sure that there's always a real clean definition. It's -- it's certainly possible, likely, that there are elements of al Qaeda in Iraq resident inside Ramadi seeking to establish some form of safe haven, if you will, a base from which they can operate. It's a convenient location in that regard, because of the Euphrates River valley access to border areas, access into Baghdad. So, you could see from that area why it would be an area they'd be interested in. It's long a Sunni Arab stronghold as well. And there are some, certainly, in that element of the insurgency that would likely be strong in Ramadi as well. So, I -- I don't think we can clearly say it's one group or another, but rather the combination of those.

Q Well, has there -- has there been a change in the battle there lately? Is -- are the coalition forces simply holding on, or are they engaged in an offensive, or are the enemy forces engaged in an offensive? Could you describe what's going on there today?

GEN. HAM: I wouldn't -- I wouldn't say it's -- there isn't a large-scale offensive either way. But it is this -- it is this wrestling for control of space inside the city as well as protection for the people who live there. The key, in my mind, will be not so much how many or how few U.S. forces are there, but how can we best help the Iraqis to establish control in their city.

And I know the commanders there are working very hard with the Iraqi ministries of Defense and Interior to get the right Iraqi forces on the ground in Ramadi to help a very, very difficult situation.

It -- it isn't a situation that we can resolve. The Iraqis have got to. We can help, and we had a significant role in helping them. But we -- the Iraqis have got to be -- got to take the lead in solving this one.

Q Sir, can you translate this map a little bit?

GEN. HAM: Sure.

Q In October, Iraqi troops were in the lead in, it looks like, one part of one province of the 18. And in --

GEN. HAM: And a little bit of Baghdad.

Q Okay. A little bit of Baghdad. What's it today? It's hard to read this blotch of green here.

GEN. HAM: Okay. On -- what -- what the green area shows, those areas in which the Iraqi army has the lead for security operations. It doesn't necessarily mean that they are fully capable of independent operations. But it means that they are in the lead, in most cases with U.S. and other coalition support for them.

What does "being in the lead" mean? It means that they -- they are planning and conducting operations. They are responsible for it; we are in a -- very clearly a support role. We provide intelligence, logistics, communications, medical support; if needed, quick reaction forces and those kinds of things. And always, as you know, there are the embedded training teams -- transition teams that are with each of the Iraqi security force units. Over 6,000 U.S. personnel are committed to that transition team mission.

So that's what green is. The green checked area, here just south of Samarra and just south of Mosul, are areas which are presently in transition. They have not yet transitioned to Iraqi lead, but we think those will be the areas to next transition to Iraqi lead. And the one area of blue here in the southeast of Baghdad is where the Iraqi national police exercise those lead responsibilities.

Q How many provinces are we talking about now in May? Does it -- it looks like about six -- five or six. And I'm just reading from here, so --

GEN. HAM: Yeah, I'd have to -- I'd have to look at it.

Probably three or four provinces in their entirety and then the rest kind of by district in several other provinces as well.

Q One final -- what is a reasonable expectation by the end of the year for how many more areas will be under Iraqi control?

GEN. HAM: I can give you a precise answer: As many as are ready.

Q In percentages. What's the assumption among the Joint Staff?

GEN. HAM: There isn't a target that I'm aware out there that says, "By date X, we want to transition this." It clearly is conditions-based, that the key role of the transition teams that are embedded with the Iraqi security forces will help make those assessments, as will the U.S. and other units with which they are partnered.

Please?

Q Can you give -- who's in control of Ramadi? Is it the Iraqi forces on that map or?

Q They're the Green Zone.

GEN. HAM: The city of Ramadi is kind of by itself right now. There's -- there are U.S. forces executing security force lead in the -- inside the city.

Pam?

Q It's -- well now I have a lot of questions. (Laughs.) Because Ramadi on there is green, and that would suggest that Ramadi's under Iraqi government control. It's obviously not.

GEN. HAM: In the city itself, no.

Q But the surrounding area. A question on Afghanistan. We -- there's -- we're getting a lot of releases from CENTCOM talking about big engagements with Taliban. Could you put that in context? Is that part of Operation Mountain Lion or is it separate, and what's going there?

And as far as Ramadi is concerned, why do you say that that's an Iraqi problem to solve when it was the U.S. that was in the lead in solving Fallujah and insofar as Tall Afar has been solved -- solving Tall Afar? Why wouldn't that be a U.S. operation?

GEN. HAM: Let me take this -- the second question first. Iraq is a sovereign nation, so Iraq clearly has the primary responsibility for the establishment of security and other conditions inside their nation. Our role is to help them. I think what's changed since -- certainly since Fallujah one, which predated the transfer of sovereignty, is there is capability now of Iraqi security forces where there was not great capability before. There is increasing capability within the Iraqi government, which didn't necessarily exist before; certainly now, with an elected government, that's much more the case. So I think those conditions have changed significantly.

To Afghanistan, three fairly significant engagements over the past several days, the most recent of which, in a small town called Azizi about 40 kilometers south and west of Kandahar, a coalition of forces identified a grouping of Taliban who were operating in there.

There was a small engagement. Close air support was called in, principally A-10s. I think most of you

have seen Combined Forces Command Afghanistan has reported 20 confirmed Taliban killed. Some reports from Afghans and sort of some other media reports that maybe as many as 60 additional to that.

CFC Alpha has forces on the ground there today doing a follow-up to that strike to render a more complete assessment. And it's important to note -- I think you're also aware that there are reports that non-combatants were killed in that strike as well. And I guess I would say two things about that. You all I think are very well aware of the measures that we go through to try to avoid any non-combatant casualty, to the extent that is possible. And when such allegations surface, we take those very, very seriously and investigate those to the fullest.

Having said that, it's also important to note that the Taliban knows that, and it's not unusual at all to see them operate in and amongst non-combatants knowing the great measures that we take to try to protect non-combatants.

So the facts aren't known. President Karzai I think stated to reporters today that he was very interested in getting the facts. We are as well. And there are forces on the ground now trying to gain that assessment.

Yes, sir?

Q General, you mentioned the significance of seating the Iraqi government. But Secretary Rumsfeld and many others have talked particularly about the importance of getting the ministers of defense and interior in place, and their teams, making sure they govern from the center and not from a sectarian point of view.

How significant is it that that hasn't happened yet? Does that set back your plans or further delay any plans of talking about significant withdrawals of U.S. troops?

GEN. HAM: Well, it will have some effect, I believe, and the prime minister has addressed that for us from a security standpoint. Those are the two key ministries, and having stability, having responsible, capable leaders in those ministries is clearly beneficial to everyone.

There's been a fairly significant effort in increasing ministerial capacity. You know, the transition teams are embedded with the security forces, trying to improve performance at the tactical level. You need that same kind of effort and improvement at the ministerial level; a little difficult to do while there is still some uncertainty as to who the leader of each of those ministries will be.

We're all hopeful that those decisions will be made soon by the Iraqi government, and we'll be able to move forward.

Q If this situation continues, where the prime minister is essentially running those ministries on his own, would that preclude any significant withdrawal until that's resolved?

GEN. HAM: No, I don't think -- I mean, I don't think that has -- it is the conditions on the ground that will be most important.

I think we probably have one or two more.

John?

Q General, can we come back to Afghanistan? Has this fighting we've seen over the last several days -- constituted the most significant fighting we've seen in Afghanistan since, what, like, March, 2002 is the way it's been described. Is that accurate?

And you can comment -- walk us through -- you said there were three significant events over the past several days. Could you walk us through those three?

GEN. HAM: There were -- sure.

I don't know if it's the most significant fighting since the spring of 2002. It is significant. There has been an increase in Taliban activity, particularly in the southern parts of Afghanistan. Why is that? You don't ever really know, but my suspicion is that the Taliban see a couple of things happening and recognize that if they don't try to do something about that now, then they may not have a chance to do something about it later -- those two things being the expansion and the furthering of the reach of the Afghan national government.

One of the reasons I believe that there are more incidents in the South is that the Afghan security forces are going more places. They are going places where they didn't go before and certainly meeting some resistance.

So this extension of the reach of central government, I think, is important.

Also, as you're aware, in Regional Command South, more NATO nations are contributing forces in that command. At the end, there will be a significantly higher number of forces than were there when the U.S. was solely responsible for that area. And I think again the Taliban see that to say if they don't do something to try to disrupt that transition to NATO control, then they may lose the opportunity to do that for a while.

We are short on time, but I can get you the couple of particulars on the other two -- other two strikes.

I think probably one more. Yes?

Q General, back to Ramadi. Iraqi security forces, there seems to be a problem. If it's a Sunni area, most of the Iraqi security forces are still Shi'a, and there's been some problem of doing -- can get in there to actually do the job. Could you comment on that situation? There seems to be trouble getting Iraqi forces to actually function inside Ramadi.

GEN. HAM: Well, the commanders on the ground, I think, are keenly aware of the necessity of having Iraqi security forces operate inside the city. There are certainly some ethnic considerations which have to occur. But one of the key points of focus for us and for all the coalition members and the senior leaders of both the Iraqi army and the Iraqi National Police has been the focus on commitment to Iraq; not to a Sunni Iraq or a

Shi'a Iraq, but to Iraq. That's culture change. That's trying to overcome a generation of feeling that was just the opposite. But that's what it's going to take, and that's why we're working very hard with the Iraqi leaders to do just that. But what it will take in Ramadi is capable, dedicated and loyal -- loyal to Iraq -- security forces to help do that.

Okay, I think that's -- I think we got to end up, because I think Admiral Keating is going to be on in just a moment. Thanks.

(C) COPYRIGHT 2005, FEDERAL NEWS SERVICE, INC., 1000 VERMONT AVE. NW; 5TH FLOOR; WASHINGTON, DC - 20005, USA. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. ANY REPRODUCTION, REDISTRIBUTION OR RETRANSMISSION IS EXPRESSLY PROHIBITED. UNAUTHORIZED REPRODUCTION, REDISTRIBUTION OR RETRANSMISSION CONSTITUTES A MISAPPROPRIATION UNDER APPLICABLE UNFAIR COMPETITION LAW, AND FEDERAL NEWS SERVICE, INC. RESERVES THE RIGHT TO PURSUE ALL REMEDIES AVAILABLE TO IT IN RESPECT TO SUCH MISAPPROPRIATION. FEDERAL NEWS SERVICE, INC. IS A PRIVATE FIRM AND IS NOT AFFILIATED WITH THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT. NO COPYRIGHT IS CLAIMED AS TO ANY PART OF THE ORIGINAL WORK PREPARED BY A UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT OFFICER OR EMPLOYEE AS PART OF THAT PERSON'S OFFICIAL DUTIES. FOR INFORMATION ON SUBSCRIBING TO FNS, PLEASE CALL JACK GRAEME AT 202-347-1400.

<http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/2006/tr20060523-13103.html>