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

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

GEN. HAM: Good afternoon.

In Iraq during an eight-hour period over the past two days, there were nine seemingly coordinated attacks in the city of Kirkuk, resulting in three Iraqi policemen killed, seven Iraqi policemen wounded, plus at least 11 Iraqi civilians killed and another 14 wounded. These kinds of attacks indicate that there are still cells of hardened, lethal and merciless individuals who do not hesitate to kill innocent civilians in an effort to undermine the legitimate government of Iraq.

We see today that the government of Iraq and its increasingly capable security forces are continuing to take the lead in countering the efforts of those who oppose freedom. As an example of that, over the past month 12 more Iraqi battalions, an additional four Iraqi brigades, have assumed the lead in exercising security responsibilities over Iraqi territory. Also during the past month, seven more bases have been transferred from the coalition to the Iraqi government.

In Afghanistan, U.S., NATO and Afghan security forces continue efforts to counter Taliban and other elements opposed to the elected Afghan central, provisional and district governments. Operations are intended to extend the reach of the Afghan government into areas where there's been little presence before, as well as extending humanitarian and reconstruction efforts. The performance of the 59,000 Afghan security force members continue to improve, and they are taking the lead in many of these operations.

And three final notes, if you'll indulge me, one about yesterday, one for today, and a comment about tomorrow.

Yesterday, all of us in the Joint Staff Directorate for Operations were very pleased to see our boss, Lieutenant General Conway, nominated for promotion and assignment as the 34th commandant of the Marine Corps. We're not anxious to see him leave, but if you got to leave, that's a helluva way to go. So we're very, very proud of him.

Today, importantly, is the 231st birthday of the United States Army. And though as I stand before you today as a joint officer by definition, you'll forgive me if I'm a little bit biased toward my Army today. I haven't been around for all 231 years, but I've been around for a while.

And I see today not only the best army in the world, but I see soldiers and units today who have answered the call to duty who are far more experienced, more adaptive and more capable than at any time since I started out as a young paratrooper in the 82nd Airborne Division in the early '70s.

And tomorrow there's an important ceremony here at the Pentagon, and a reminder of why we all do what we do. The ceremony tomorrow at 1:30 will be to dedicate the grounds for the memorial to those who were killed in the September 11th 2001 attack on the Pentagon. It's for those who were killed and their families that all of us privileged to wear the uniforms of our nation have pledged our support. We'll never forget them, nor those who were killed in New York and Pennsylvania on that day. And all of us in uniform are ever grateful for our brothers and sisters from all services who have paid the ultimate price in this global war against terrorism.

And with that, I'd be glad to take your questions. Please, sir.

Q General, President Bush said today that Iraqi and U.S. forces are working to restore security in Ramadi. Could you tell us specifically what's being done in Ramadi? Also, the U.S. military death toll is nearing 2,500, and could you give us your thoughts on the mounting toll?

GEN. HAM: Well, first, to the second part of your question. Each and every loss is felt hard by our nation, by the unit from which those individuals come, and certainly mostly by their families. I don't know that there's ever a way that you can adequately thank a family for the sacrifice that they make in the loss of a loved one. It's the hardest -- it's the hardest thing I think any of us ever have to go through when we experience those kinds of losses. Yet it's important to remember that there is -- there is a mission and there is a greater good which sometimes necessitates tremendous sacrifice. And the fact that we have had in our nation -- and in many other nations -- young men and women who have stepped forward, fully knowing the consequences of their action, to serve their nations in this time of war, to help the people of Iraq, to help the people of Afghanistan restore order, to establish legitimate governments, representative governments I think speaks volumes about this generation of young people.

So I guess I would say rather than focus on an aggregate number, I think it's more important for us to remember that there are individuals in that aggregate number. And those individuals are those to whom we should be very, very grateful, and to their families.

To Ramadi. I've said up here the past couple times that Ramadi is probably the most contentious city in Iraq, and I think it continues to be that way. It is ultimately the responsibility of the Iraqis to decide how they want to deal with reestablishing order and security in Ramadi. And we believe that they are, in fact, doing that.

We have a significant role in helping them do that with our own military forces and our forces that operate as embedded trainers and in other ways to support the Iraqi security forces.

I think those who are looking for perhaps a large-scale offensive may be somewhat off the mark. And I think what we will see increasingly is the Iraqis finding ways to increasingly establish the presence of Iraqi security forces, and we'll help them do that in any way that we can.

Q Can I just follow up on that quickly?

GEN. HAM: Sure.

Q Back in October, the Marines put out a statement -- they were handling what was called Operation Doctor back then, handing out medical supplies. And the statement at that time said of Ramadi, "Signs are pointing to a city that is ready for change." It also said Iraqi army and police units were preparing to take to the

streets.

And I'm wondering, over the past eight months, what has happened in Ramadi? Has was it allowed to deteriorate? Is it a question of these Iraqi units weren't ready to take responsibility? Or is it a question of not enough U.S. forces where you pushed the insurgents out of Fallujah, they went to Ramadi, and you just couldn't cover all those areas? Essentially, what happened to Ramadi?

GEN. HAM: Well, I think there's a number of issues. And as much as we'd like to say it was "this," it's a combination of a number of effects. One of them -- and I think perhaps the most significant -- is -- I believe it's important to remember that al Qaeda in Iraq, other insurgent organizations, and those other entities that are opposed to the progress that is occurring in Iraq, I think they see that there is a limited window in which they can operate. And Ramadi may be an example of that, where there was progress that was being noted. And it may be the reason that we are where we are today is that al Qaeda in Iraq, and others, made a very, very concerted effort through campaigns of intimidation, murder, and other threats, to try to prevent the progress that you talked about in terms of security and other governmental functions. And so there is a contest there, and it's ongoing, and it's going to be a tough one. It's more than just military; there's obviously a reconstruction, and a humanitarian and governmental aspects to all of this. And certainly the U.S. military has a role in helping the Iraqis be successful, and we'll certainly do that.

Q But there was progress being noted there at the time. Why couldn't you capitalize on that? And why were the insurgents allowed to basically, you know, pull that back and --

GEN. HAM: I don't know. I mean, certainly we'd like to see -- you know, we'd like to see uninterrupted progress in all areas. But I think the nature of this conflict, the nature of insurgency is sometimes there are ups and downs, there are fluctuations in areas where you're able to have success, and sometimes it's two steps forward, one step back. And we've got to keep wrestling with it.

Q General, could I ask you to talk about the Baghdad security plan, "Together Forward," or "Forward Together." A couple of specific questions about it. One, I'm a little confused about the numbers. Yesterday the Iraqis suggested it was 70,000 to 75,000 personnel that would be involved in this. The president put out some lower numbers today. And also, where are these troops coming from, these additional troops -- the Iraqis? Are they coming from other parts of the country into Baghdad?

And finally, Tony Cordesman has put out an analysis of this morning saying that there's been some situations in Baghdad where areas that had been bad but secured are now becoming what he described as red again, that you have an expansion of the truly dangerous -- (word inaudible) -- areas of Baghdad in the last year or so.

GEN. HAM: Well, I think part of that is what we talked about. There is some ebb and flow as you prioritize and move forces about inside Baghdad as well as across the country.

Together Forward is an Iraqi operation, and I think that's what -- we've got to always maintain a focus on this. So in terms of, you know, numbers of Iraqis that are going to participate and exactly what they're going to do, that's something for the Iraqi government to talk about, and I think that's exactly the way that it should be. That's what we have been building toward over the past years is to build the capacity within the Iraqi security forces so that when their government decides that they want their security forces to do something, they have the wherewithal to do that. And I think that's what we're starting to see in Together Forward.

Again, there is clearly a U.S. role. There are U.S. forces and other coalition forces embedded with the Iraqi security force units, and they'll continue to do that in providing assistance, mentoring, training and bringing to bear the effects that the Iraqi security forces do not have -- fires, intelligence, collections -- some of those

capabilities that are resident only within the U.S. and other coalition forces.

I think it's going to be very interesting to see how this develops over the coming days. But importantly, the fact that the Iraqi government has recognized the necessity of doing this, the necessity of bringing under control those who are armed who are outside the security force construct, all of those, I think, are very, very good and positive signs.

Yes, sir?

Q General, on the \$94 billion --

GEN. HAM: I'm sorry. Go ahead.

Q General, when you talk about Ramadi and how it will be primarily the Iraqi government's responsibility to bring -- rebring order and security, are you saying that any operation there would be primarily Iraqi security forces?

And on another subject, can you talk about what prompted the upcoming -- or the offensive in Afghanistan?

GEN. HAM: In Ramadi -- Iraq is a sovereign nation, so the requirement -- the responsibility for establishing security in a sovereign nation is that government's responsibility.

There will be discussions between local and national level security force and government leaders as to what the role of the U.S. will be in supporting the Iraqi security forces in reestablishing security in Ramadi. So I think what you'll see likely is in some parts of the city, in some parts of the area, there may be U.S. forces in the lead. And in other parts, there'll be Iraqi forces in the lead supported by the U.S. But overall, the responsibility resides with the Iraqis.

In Afghanistan, particularly in the South in the four southern provinces of what will ultimately be Regional Command South of ISAF, there has been a -- somewhat of an increase in the number of incidents by Taliban and other forces which are opposed to the central Afghan government. Part of that is certainly an aggressive campaign by the Taliban and others to recruit, to try to reestablish their influence in a number of areas. Part of that also is attributable to Afghan security forces supported again by the coalition and other nations' forces operating in areas where there has not been substantial security force presence, Afghan or other, for some period of time.

So there are pockets, if you will, in some of the districts in those four provinces where there has not been much security force presence, and so when there is now security force presence, there is some conflict there. And I think that's largely what we're seeing.

Q General Ham?

GEN. HAM: Yes, ma'am?

Q As far as al Qaeda in Iraq is concerned, do you have any new information about a successor to al Zarqawi?

GEN. HAM: Well, we've seen the public announcement, I think as you all have, and we'll have to see how that develops. What is important for us from a military standpoint is the death of Zarqawi, we clearly recognize, does not equate to the death of that organization. And so al Qaeda in Iraq remains a very, very

deadly and dangerous organization, and it's very likely that someone is going to step forward and try to exercise control over that organization. And we'll watch that very, very carefully. It's not unlikely that there may be some reluctance of individuals to step forward because of some of the successes that Iraqi and U.S. and other coalition forces have had against that organization.

Q General, can I just follow up --

Q General, can we follow up on that, please?

Q Can I follow up on that, please?

Q Okay.

Q Thank you. Of course, General Caldwell has already identified this Egyptian man, Abu Ayyub al-Masri, in his press conferences in Baghdad as the person you believe is Zarqawi's designated successor. I'm wondering if you can tell us any more about this Egyptian, how he came to this -- how it is that the U.S. military is so convinced, in fact, he is already in place as Zarqawi's successor, and a couple of details about him -- his rise to such a prominent role, how he got to this place. And do U.S. troops at this point even have the information in hand about him so that if they came across him and captured him, they would know who they have?

GEN. HAM: Well, he said that he has assumed the leadership. We have -- we have enough information to do what you talked about.

Q Do you have a photograph of him? Do you know what he looks like, General Ham?

GEN. HAM: That would be inappropriate, Barbara, for me to talk about that. We have enough information to do the things that you talked about.

Q General, please, could you help us identify this person? Because we've heard his name is al-Masri, then al-Muhajer, now al-Bardiri (ph). Are those all in the same person? And how is the U.S. identifying this person by name, specifically?

GEN. HAM: Well, again, this individual said that he is the successor for the leadership of al Qaeda in Iraq. Whether he is or not, I think, we'll have the intelligence effort in theater try to make that assessment if he is, in fact, exercising the leadership in al Qaeda in Iraq.

Q But who is he? I mean, when it comes up on your morning brief, your PowerPoints or whatever, what is the name that appears at the top of that when identifying him? What name is the U.S. military using to identify him?

GEN. HAM: Well, that's obviously pretty sensitive information, and so I wouldn't want to talk about that here. But it is important for us to track to see if in fact there is someone who steps forward and is able to exercise control, and we'll watch that very, very carefully. And that individual, obviously, if there is such an individual, would be subject to a fair amount of intelligence effort to locate that individual and for us to take action in conjunction with the Iraqis to prevent him from exercising control.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry --

Q And one -- it sounds as if --

Q Come on, Nick -- (off mike).

Q No, no, it sounds as if you don't believe that he is actually in control. You've said a couple of times HE claims he's in control, and it sounds as if you're still trying to figure out if he is indeed in control. Is that the case?

GEN. HAM: I think -- I think I'd stand by that. He has said he's in control. We have a number of intelligence means that are focused on that organization. And we'll try to -- we'll try the best we can to determine who the key leaders are, who the operatives are, and those individuals operate at some individual peril.

I'm sorry. Three times. I'm -- (laughter).

Q (Laughs.) I have two questions, actually. With the Zarqawi thing no one is talking about any more -- any more about the Haditha issue. So where is the investigation? I mean, where is it now, and why hasn't it been -- why hasn't it been released yet?

And another question. The Council on American-Islamic Relations has called for the punishment of the Marines who sang the song against the Iraqi people, or made fun of them. So, are you going to -- because you -- I mean, the president has said that it was insensitive. Are you going to take steps against these people?

GEN. HAM: Not here. I -- I've heard about the -- I guess it's a video or something that you're talking about -- not seen it. I'm fully confident that the commanders of those organizations will take the appropriate action.

With regard to the Haditha investigation, the investigation is not yet complete. So when the investigation is complete and as it is appropriate to do so, information will be made available as to the results of that investigation and any results thereof. But until that time, premature.

Phil?

Q Thanks, General. Back around the time of the January election in Iraq General Casey predicted he'd probably have recommendations on troop numbers by spring. With the delay in forming the government, that's obviously been pushed back. Has he indicated to the Joint Staff when his next troop recommendation will come, and do you have any marks on the wall that are sort of hard stops, like contracts for troop ships, or that sort of thing, for the sort of, you know, deadlines for those decisions?

GEN. HAM: General Casey, General Eikenberry in Afghanistan, clearly in consultation with General Abizaid, are continually making assessments as to what the right force presence is in the theater. There's not a -- there's not a set time line upon which those assessments are due in which -- and when recommendations from those commanders would come through the chairman to the secretary of Defense for a decision. But I think you said it exactly right. We are expecting an assessment and a recommendation in the spring. The government didn't form, so the conditions weren't quite right. So clearly, the assessment and recommendations will be pushed a little bit to the right. But I don't think it will be too terribly long.

With the -- and in the -- with regard to the movement of units, there are a number of units that are identified to deploy in the coming months. And each of those units has its own individual time line, you know, when they have to ship their equipment, when they have to, you know, load on airplanes and get to Kuwait and do their training and those kinds of things, and we watch that pretty carefully. And the commanders, certainly in consultation with the secretary of Defense and -- make recommendations to the secretary of Defense, say, yes, I need this unit, or, I don't. A great example of that is the 2nd Brigade of the 1st Infantry Division, where the

commander said, I don't need this unit right now. And so, that unit is temporarily suspended.

(Cross talk.)

Q We haven't talked about IED trends lately. And you talked about the toll of your troops going up. We heard a couple weeks ago the Pentagon's six month report that the U.S. is defusing and detecting about half the IEDs it's encountered, but we don't get a sense of whether those trend lines are going up in terms of actual attacks and sophistication. It's a touchy subject, but can you at least broadly address it? Are attacks going up also as our detection rate goes up?

GEN. HAM: The vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices, the VBIEDs, still compose a very small percentage of the overall attacks, yet the casualties that they produce, both from -- both the U.S. and other coalition, and to Iraqi security forces and civilian, are disproportionate to that number of attacks.

So the number of attacks is quite low, but the casualties are fairly high for VBIEDs.

For IEDs, roadside bombs, the efforts of the Joint IED Defeat Office are starting to prove beneficial. And you'll remember -- many of you have received a briefing from General Meigs and his folks, that says this is a holistic approach; there is a technical piece of this, there is a tactical piece of this in how you operate, there's clearly an intelligence piece to this as well.

So we are seeing good progress in the detection of IEDs. We are seeing good progress in the identification of IED cells. But the overall numbers have increased over the past several months.

Q General?

GEN. HAM: Maybe -- maybe two more.

Q When the supplemental was passed this week in Congress, it was passed without a ban on using the money for permanent bases in Iraq. That clause in different forms is included in both the House and Senate version, and I'm told it was taken out in conference by a vote, with the support of the Pentagon. And I'm just wondering if you can tell us what the objection is to writing such a ban into the legislation?

GEN. HAM: I'm sorry, I cannot. But I think we can take that and ask the OSD folks to answer that.

Q General, a question on the troop reduction and what might happen with that. We increasingly hear the argument, both inside and outside of government, that now that the government in Iraq is formed that there ought to be a firm timeline for the withdrawal or redeployment of U.S. troops -- not to cut and run or to send the wrong signal to the insurgents, but to send a strong signal to the Iraqi government that they're under some firm timeline to step up to the plate. What do you think -- from a military standpoint, what's wrong with that argument of having a firm timeline for the withdrawal or redeployment of troops?

GEN. HAM: Well, there's pros and cons, I think, to establishing a date certain vice purely conditions-based. And I think, frankly, what will happen is this will be discussed between the two governments, clearly with the input of the security force leaders -- U.S., coalition and Iraqi -- and they'll come to the best conclusion.

I'm quite confident that -- in fact, I'm absolutely certain that General Eikenberry, General Casey, General Abizaid are fully understanding that having a larger force than necessary is not a productive way of operating, but having too small a force is not a productive way of operating either. So those commanders are charged with that very difficult decision of balancing of what's too large to be an onerous presence and what's too small to be effective. That's tough business for those commanders to wrestle with, and they rely, obviously, heavily on the

input from their subordinate commanders, from their Iraqi and Afghan counterparts. So I think we'll see over the coming months those kinds of discussions on again and off again. But ultimately, it is those commanders who make the recommendation to the secretary to say we think this is the right force, and we ought to increase or we ought to decrease based on those conditions, rather than a date certain. And I think that's probably -- that approach is probably the right way for us to operate for now.

Maybe one more.

(Cross talk.)

GEN. HAM: I'm sorry?

Q Can we close the loop on al-Masri? Is he the -- there's three names being floated out there. Is it your understanding that it's all the same person being called by different names, or is there some question to whether there's different people that are claiming to be?

GEN. HAM: I would say there is an individual who has claimed to be the successor --

Q Right.

GEN. HAM: -- to Zarqawi, of al Qaeda in Iraq.

Q But there's different names associated with those people. Are they different people, or are they one person with many different aliases?

GEN. HAM: We have a variety of intelligence capabilities that we'll try to determine if there is an individual or individuals who are -- exercise -- who are trying to step forward and exercise control.

If you want me to give you an answer (sic) to which I don't have an answer right now --

Q So you guys don't know if this is one person or if there's two or three people claiming --

GEN. HAM: If I did know, I wouldn't say.

Q Okay.

GEN. HAM: Last question, please.

Q General, can I follow up on Jamie's question? The number of troops in Iraq has fluctuated, went from like -- about 132,000 to a certain point last week -- today the latest number we have was about 127,000. Are you saying it would be wrong -- can you explain that decrease? And is it -- would it be wrong for us to look at that as perhaps the beginning of a trend downward?

GEN. HAM: I think General Casey last weekend talked about, you know, the plan over the coming weeks and perhaps the year.

The recent decrease has been first this -- you'll recall again that the 2nd Brigade of the 28th Division, Pennsylvania Army National Guard, is at the end of its rotation. So many of its soldiers have already redeployed out of Iraq and are staging for movement home. So that's a pretty -- that's -- we are at about 127,000, and that accounts for a large part of the reduction over the past week or so.

I think it's not unlikely to see in again the coming weeks and months the number's going to fluctuate. There will be weeks where the number goes up because we're replacing units. And as we replace units, you all know there's two units in the same place at the same time. And then there will be weeks when the number -- like this week -- where the numbers go down.

So the overall strategy, it's important to remember, is not driven by numbers but by effect. And as the Iraqis are able to exercise greater responsibility and independence, then over time we would certainly like to see the U.S. number come down.

Okay. Thank you. (Cross talk.)

Q Just to be clear, on Lolita's question, is this -- is what we're seeing now the beginning of the drawdown, or just what you sort of referred to as the rotational ebb and flow that we normally see as the numbers --

GEN. HAM: This week, I think, is -- clearly is this brigade that's at the end of its deployment coming out, and the rest will depend on the recommendations that come up from the commanders to the secretary.

Thanks, y'all, very much.

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