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DoD News Briefing with Brig. Gen. Cichowski from Baghdad, Iraq

(Note: General Cichowski appears via video teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq.)

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

GEN. CICHOWSKI: Good morning, Bryan. I sure can. Thank you much, and good morning from Iraq.

MR. WHITMAN: Good morning to the press corps and good evening to you. Our briefer today is Brigadier General Kurt Cichowski. He is the deputy chief of staff for Strategy, Plans and Assessment for Multinational Forces in Iraq. He's responsible for the development of the command's strategy and plans, and is the senior coalition representative on the joint committee that is developing assessments needed to transfer responsibility to Iraq -- Iraqi provincial leaders.

He's been in Iraq since May, and he is in Baghdad today. And I think he'll be talking to you about -- largely about the upcoming transfer next week in Muthanna.

But with that, General, let me turn it over to you. I know that you want -- you've got some opening remarks before we get into some questions, and we'll go from there.

GEN. CICHOWSKI: Thank you very much, and I do have a prepared statement here.

Well, good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. This afternoon I have the unprecedented opportunity to directly address the upcoming event of the transferring security responsibility in Muthanna province from the coalition forces to the Iraqi security forces.

The transfer of security responsibility clearly demonstrates an Iraqi success and signifies a tangible beginning of a brand-new phase in the history of this nation. Muthanna is the first of Iraq's 18 provinces to be fully transferred from the coalition forces' stewardship to the Iraqi security forces' administration in terms of security responsibilities.

To give you some background information about this province, Muthanna is equivalent in size to about the

state of West Virginia. It covers an area of 20,000 square miles and has about 550,000 people.

Samawa, its capital, is also the largest city in Muthanna. And this province boasts a history that tracks back to 4,000 B.C. and the Sumerians, the first civilization, that brought us wheeled vehicles, the 60-minute clock and a writing system. In fact, many scholars tell us that one of the Sumerian city-states, Uruk, may be the genesis for the actual name of the country of Iraq.

It is somehow fitting that this province is the first one to meet the criteria for provincial Iraqi control.

Well, the decision to turn over security responsibility in Muthanna was determined by a process, where evaluations in four different areas by the provincial governor and the coalition ground commander were conducted. They jointly determined Muthanna had met the agreed-upon conditions, and to assume the full security responsibilities would be soon in their future. As part of the process, the provincial governor and the ground commander jointly drafted an agreement detailing the post-transfer relationships between the province and the multinational division forces. Together, their recommendation, as well as this agreement, was forwarded to the Joint Committee to Transfer Security Responsibility, known as the JCTSR. This latter committee was originally created in July of last year and establishes the conditions for which must be met for the Iraqi civil authorities to assume the full security responsibilities in the province.

The second committee consists of representatives from the government of Iraq, the coalition military forces, as well as the embassy personnel, and I'm the co-chair of this committee, along with the Iraqi deputy national security adviser.

Well, the JCTSR forwarded their endorsement to the Iraqi government's ministerial committee for national security. This committee is chaired by the prime minister, who understandably made the final decision.

It is noteworthy that the provincial police forces have already been in control of Muthanna for more than four months, with only minimum support from the coalition forces. In fact, they have manned their own 115 system, which is equivalent to the U.S. 911 emergency notification process, in addition to conducting all administrative police headquarters business for this same time period.

Moreover, we hold high regard for the United Kingdom and the Australian forces who ensured security and trained the Iraqi security forces, as well as the Japanese self-defense forces who provided humanitarian aid and reconstruction efforts in Muthanna for these past many months.

The coalition forces remain committed to continue the humanitarian efforts in the province, as well as provide emergency assistance, if needed, in the future. So the coalition will continue to work as partners with the sovereign nation of Iraq as we transition the remaining 17 provinces, eventually achieving our mutual objective of a free and totally self-reliant Iraq.

Now may I take your questions?

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you for that overview, and we'll get right into it.

Mr. Burns?

Q General, this is Bob Burns from AP. Bryan Whitman mentioned in his introduction that you're on the joint committee that is working on the transfer of security. I'm wondering where you stand in addressing the question about reductions of U.S. troops in the context of a joint committee.

GEN. CICHOWSKI: Well, Bob, it's important to understand that troop reductions and the transfer of Iraqi

security control are mutually exclusive. While they are related in the end, the security force transfer is the taking over of the policing functions within the province, and so therefore the joint committee does not address that issue.

Q So the joint committee has nothing to do with level of military forces in Iraq; it's only police? Is that right?

GEN. CICHOWSKI: That is correct. It is a joint committee where we together work through a very detailed process that looks at four different areas. These include the threat in the province, the status and the buildup of the Iraqi security forces, primarily focused on the police, the status and the relationships between the multinational forces and the Iraqi security forces, and then finally, the ability of the governance in that province itself.

Q This is Kristin Roberts with Reuters. Now that you've transferred authority over to the Iraqis in that one province, will you be able to move coalition forces into other provinces and reduce the numbers there in Muthanna?

GEN. CICHOWSKI: Well, Kristin, let me correct something here just quickly. We have not yet done that. We are in the very last stages. The prime minister has stated that it will happen. We know that it will happen in the very, very near future. The last final details are being worked out.

As far as the moving of forces and the coalitions following it, yes, there is that opportunity, and there are about -- many plans that we have to go through on both the Iraqi side and on the coalition side.

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead.

Q General, Peter Spiegel with the Los Angeles Times. Can we talk about some of the police in other provinces, particularly around Muthanna, because the British have reported quite a bit of problems in Basra and in Maysan Province with infiltration, particularly the Badr and Jaish al-Mahdi, in those police forces. Can you bring us up to date of how the British and how the coalition is dealing with that issue and where those police forces stand right now?

GEN. CICHOWSKI: What I can tell you is that in each one of these provinces, in a joint process we go through a very established process. One of those areas is to look at the threat, so the threat in any one province, whether it be Basra or whether it be in Wasat or whether it be in An Anbar, are things that are considered into the evaluation.

As far as any one province in particular, the JCTSR takes those recommendations and then provides them forward to where the prime minister is the one that makes the final adjudication.

Q Can you just give us an overview? I mean, if you can't talk specifically about provinces, give a general overview of where the police stand?

I mean, we've heard a lot this year obviously about the year of the police and certain mixed reports about how well that training in that particular competency level has reached. Can you give us sort of an overview of where they stand in some of these more problematic provinces?

GEN. CICHOWSKI: I certainly can tell you that it is the year of the police. We're making great strides. I know that General Dempsey was there last week and talked to that process as well as some of the lawmakers on the Hill. As in any type of police force, there are some that are better than others here, and those are the ones that we are working on. So we have been making great strides as a whole on both the police and on the

Iraqi army.

MR. WHITMAN: Jeff, go ahead.

Q Good morning, General. Jeff Schogol with Stars and Stripes. I understand the Defense Department is trying to accelerate reconstruction projects in Iraq. Is this going to require a change in how security forces are deployed in the country?

GEN. CICHOWSKI: Well, Jeff, good morning there. Thank you. I appreciate that.

The effort on the reconstruction projects is always one that has great interest. And while there may be increased focus, the effort still remains the same and is being adjusted all the time.

It's important to note in regards to Muthanna, these reconstruction projects will continue, even though the security responsibility has transferred.

MR. WHITMAN: Jim.

Q This is Jim Mannion from Agence France-Presse. Is the threat level going up in any of the provinces?

GEN. CICHOWSKI: I understand the question is, is the threat level going up? Well -- is that correct?

Q Right. Is the threat increasing in any province?

GEN. CICHOWSKI: This assessment that goes on is happening every month, and threat assessments change every month. And in some cases, they may be adjusted up or may be adjusted down. And so to say at any one given time as a snapshot would be disingenuous and be difficult to say.

I will only say that we always look at those threat assessment at that given time that we are doing that assessment.

Q Well, just generally speaking, can you say whether the threat in Iraq is increasing, staying the same, or going down?

GEN. CICHOWSKI: Well, I would tell you with the PIC process -- just the overall example of Muthanna coming out and some other provinces in the very near future -- I would say the threat is being considered appropriately and that we are moving forward.

MR. WHITMAN: AI.

Q This is AI Pessin from Voice of America. Understanding that each province is different and that you have a committee process and the prime minister makes the final decision, can you give us any sort of overall -- maybe I shouldn't use the "timeline" word -- but any -- overall time frame, because we always hear that the -- most of the violence in Iraq is limited to only a few provinces. Can you give us an overall time frame for when most of the provinces, all but the difficult four, might actually go over to Iraqi control?

GEN. CICHOWSKI: An excellent question. What I can tell you is the PIC process is a pure conditions-based one, and while we have a road map for those kinds of things, and we actually have projections, to associate it to a direct timeline would be disingenuous. I will tell you it is our hope that approximately half of the provinces by the end of the year will have done this security transfer.

Q This is Natalie Yon, with (inaudible). General, you talked about the evaluation process. Can you tell us some of the most of the important criteria that are involved and particularly which criteria were different about Muthanna than the other provinces that really made the difference here?

GEN. CICHOWSKI: Well, I certainly can. Thank you. In those four areas, again, I will tell you the threat is a primary driving one. Is there anything that is within the province or anything that is impinging on the size of the province is things that we look at.

The second area as far as governance, do we actually have a governor in place, and is this governor in fact leading? Is there a provincial security council that the governor's giving direction to and the provincial security council doing their oversight job to the director of police for that province? I will tell you in talking with the governor of Muthanna just the day before yesterday he is excited. He talks about how stable it is and that how -- how much they are looking forward to this. As far as the other two areas, the multinational force area, what we look at are the relationships built there between the MNF forces as well as the Iraqi security forces so that the training that is still going to go on, the exercises that can be asked before, the transition teams that will be left in place, to make sure we have the establishments and procedures there. And as far as the Iraqi security forces there -- are we building them; are they going through the training; are they meeting their standards to which we call a transition readiness assessment so that they can take care of themselves and have improved to the ability where they can run a 115 system, for example.

MR. WHITMAN: Let's go to Carl. I'm sorry. Jonathan.

Q Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: (Off mike.) Okay. Go ahead.

Q Kernan Chaisson with Forecast International and the Journal of Electronic Defense. IEDs and suicide bombers continue to be a problem. There's been a lot of effort in developing jammers, countering devices. With this transition, will the Iraqis be taking on board some of this equipment and that's being developed? Are there any particular techniques that they're going to be using to address this problem? Could you give us a quick update on that?

GEN. CICHOWSKI: Well, I wish I could. I can't -- that's a little bit outside my area of expertise about which particular kind of equipment, especially in that specialized electronics area. What I can tell you is the police of Muthanna are excited that they have their vehicles, their uniforms, they're getting paid on time, and they're excited with what they have and feel exceedingly ready to take on their jobs.

MR. WHITMAN: AI?

Q General, it's Al Pessin again. I want to try to get a sense of whether these transitions are more of a paperwork or bureaucratic change, or is it actually a change of forces on the ground? And if it is forces on the ground, how many or what percentage of the coalition force will remain, for example, in Muthanna? And what capabilities will you continue to provide through that force?

GEN. CICHOWSKI: Okay, thanks. I think that's a two-part question here. In the first part, let me tell you how important this is. This, as a symbol for what is happening in Iraq, is unprecedented. This is like Delaware back in 1787 coming back and telling the world that they are the first colony to actually -- now a state -- to actually ratify the constitution. That Muthanna is the first province to do the transfer is much more than a paperwork drill.

Secondly, of approximately 1,400 forces that are in Muthanna, they'll be moving out from the cities, they'll

be relocating in accordance to what was in that memorandum of understanding between the governor and the multforce division commander. They'll be taking on new jobs. They'll be relocating or they'll be moving into what we call an over-watch or at least a reinforcing position to be there in case conditions require and the prime minister asks. The ability to then move forces is inherent in that type of a relocation.

Q So, just to clarify, you won't actually be reducing the number of coalition forces in Muthanna, but just moving them to sort of standby locations. Is that correct?

GEN. CICHOWSKI: There will actually be forces that will leave the province itself as a part of this transfer.

Q Part of my question was, what capabilities will you still be providing to the province? I'm thinking of training and rapid reaction, but perhaps there are others.

GEN. CICHOWSKI: There will still be the transition teams from the coalition to lead, coach and mentor, the Iraqi police, especially.

They'll be doing exercises. We'll be also helping and providing some more equipment to the border's forts that are along the border between Muthanna and Saudi Arabia. There will be other training and exercises we do with the Iraqis themselves as well.

Q And rapid reaction?

GEN. CICHOWSKI: There will be a force that will move into, again, this reinforcement positioning -- and we call it an overwatch -- to be available, should the prime minister feel that there's some type of humanitarian emergency or any other type of condition where the prime minister asks the Multinational Force of Iraq commander to help him resolve a crisis.

Q Thank you.

Q General, I'm Carl Osgood with Executive Intelligence Review. Just quickly, what provinces are you looking at next, working on this kind of a transition?

GEN. CICHOWSKI: Well, Carl, that's a great question. We look at all the provinces every month when we do this review. And again, we look at all four areas. And there are some that are obviously more ready than others. But in order to make sure that we don't have the door stamped down and we -- at this time, I couldn't be able to say which one's next or whatever. But I will tell you that there are a -- we're looking for about half of the provinces by the end of the year.

Q General, Jeff with Stars and Stripes again. If I understood you correctly, you said you tried -- you were looking to transfer half of the provinces, half of the 18, to Iraqi security forces by the end of the year. Do you have a ballpark estimate of how long it will take to transfer all 18 provinces to Iraqi security forces?

GEN. CICHOWSKI: Well, I tell you, that is a -- that's a difficult question here. If I put a timeline on there or anything associated with a time, I wouldn't want to create an -- unexpected feelings here.

I will tell you there are some problems that remain here that we and the government of Iraq have to address. And so I would not want to put on the back end of this year that this is when the transfer of security responsibilities will be complete.

Q Given that half will be hopefully completed by the end of this year, would it be accurate to say that if you

can do half in one year, can you do the other half in the next year?

GEN. CICHOWSKI: I would again come back to – remember it is a conditions-based process. We go against all four of those areas and again establish criteria within those four areas, and then we evaluate it and then make the recommendation to the prime minister to accept or not.

MR. WHITMAN: Robert?

Q General, Bob Burns from AP. Just thinking about that half, half the provinces by the end of the year, wouldn't that imply less requirement for U.S. troops if half the provinces are in Iraqi control?

GEN. CICHOWSKI: Okay, again, now remember -- I remind you that troop levels and PIC are mutually exclusive, even though there's a seeming relationship between the two. You also have to understand, while we are transferring Iraqi control that the Iraqi -- other part of the Iraqi security forces are being built up, there are more divisions coming on line, more brigades. For example, there's 63 battalions, 18 brigades and three divisions right now. We expect about 75 percent of the brigades to be complete in September. So I would be hesitant to give you an exact number of saying if PIC, then force reductions.

Q I wasn't asking for an exact number. I'm just asking if there isn't a relationship between, you know, less need for -- less -- more Iraqi control and less need for U.S. troops. Is there no relationship there at all?

GEN. CICHOWSKI: Well, I will tell you, the conditions-based calculation for the amount of coalition forces required goes through the same type of a process as we go through the joint decision-making on the PIC. And so there are some conditions that are similar in both, but again, PIC -- we are talking about police-civil authority-type versus coalition forces in the military sense.

Q Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: Peter.

Q Peter Spiegel of the L.A. Times. Can I ask you to talk a bit specifically about Baghdad? The prime minister made a rather big show of force right after he took office a few weeks ago. We've sort of seen continued violence in Baghdad, and I guess also today, there were reports of some problem at the army and whatnot. Has any of your gauges on, you know, security threat, on Iraqi capabilities, any of your gauges for Baghdad changed for the better since Maliki's taken control?

GEN. CICHOWSKI: I will tell you that there's an evaluation that is going on right now about the entire operation that has started, and those are the kinds of lessons learned that we hope to tease out of what has happened in order to improve it for the future.

So the prime minister is just coming back in country, and I know that there is an evaluation that he will receive.

Q In terms of internally, within the committee or even within your gauges, is it -- has there been enough time to say whether Baghdad has improved at all in the last month or so?

GEN. CICHOWSKI: Well, again, it is -- Baghdad and the evaluation of Baghdad is totally outside of the

committee that I am on, so I am hesitant to tell you whether it's better or we're worse.

What I will tell is there is definite criteria that is being measured against, and that evaluation will be presented.

Q General, Natalie Yon again. Who will be taking over the humanitarian and reconstruction projects the Japanese forces have been working on?

GEN. CICHOWSKI: Well, the Japanese have done about \$400 million worth of reconstruction efforts in Muthanna already. The other type of reconstruction that the coalition -- other coalition partners will still be ongoing. So whether it be a contract that comes in or whether it be other coalition, which still will have the ability within the agreements signed between the governor and the multinational force division commander, we'll still continue with those projects. So there could very well be -- a totally other nation other than the British or the Australians or the Japanese will be completing the reconstruction projects that are ongoing or plan for in the future.

MR. WHITMAN: Jim.

Q This is Jim Mannion from Agence-France Presse again. If in one of these provinces where control has been turned over to the Iraqis, if security conditions deteriorate, could that control revert back to the coalition or is this an irreversible process?

GEN. CICHOWSKI: What I will tell you is there are three governing documents that cover the security transfer. In each one of the documents, to include the document between the governor and the multinational division commander, there is a very detailed explanation for whatever reason. If there is a humanitarian crisis or any other type of incidents, the governor will first request from the prime minister, and then the prime minister and the governor discuss the situation and determine what is appropriate. Within those criteria there is the potential for the prime minister to ask the Multinational Forces Iraq commander to help him with a situation that is ongoing in any given province.

MR. WHITMAN: Mike.

Q General, it's Mike Mount with CNN. Can you tell us which provinces are still most problematic? And of the four criteria you're using to evaluate, can you tell us of those provinces what criteria they're not meeting or having most trouble with?

GEN. CICHOWSKI: Very good. That would be something that would probably take for the -- another hour to be able to go through because, as you point out, the four criteria, the individual parts within those four areas, are fairly extensive, and some provinces are more advanced than other provinces.

And so therefore, in our joint process that we do here with the government of Iraq, that is something that we hold within to the governor and to the multinational defense division commanders. And so the -- perhaps I will let them keep those type of decisions with them and working with their own provinces.

Q Is there any estimate you can give us or anything you can tell us along those lines, in the most basic form?

GEN. CICHOWSKI: Gosh, what I can tell you is some provinces have things that they need to do in the

governance side. Some need to work things as the relationship between their security forces and the MNF- I, and some need to work on the -- their security forces and/or the threats. So it's across the board.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, general, we've reached about the end of our time. Let me just turn it back to you to see if you have anything you'd like to say in closing. Otherwise, we'll bring this to an end.

GEN. CICHOWSKI: There is kind of a closing statement that I would give to you, and then that would be I just wish that I could articulate in a manner that is clear how important this event will be in the very, very near future. It is truly a historic event. The transfer of authority is a tangible and a beginning of a new self-sustaining phase for this government. It is the first road on the eventual self-reliance of the government of Iraq itself. And it's a powerful thing to be here in a part of history. There are times I think I'm back in 1787, with all of our nation's forefathers, and watching this process happen and to be a part of it. I'm honored to be there, to a spot where the history of the civilized world began, and I look forward to making the same kind of history here in the very near future.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, general, thank you very much for your time. We appreciate it, and we wish you the best.

GEN. CICHOWSKI: Thank you very much, and I thank you all very much. And please remember all the soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines back at home, especially their families.

MR. WHITMAN: Thank you.

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