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Statement by Zalmay Khalilzad, U.S. Permanent Representative, on the MNF-I report, in the Security Council, April 28, 2008

Thank you very much Mr. President,

It is my pleasure to report today on behalf of the Multinational Force in Iraq (MNF-I), as requested by Security Council resolutions 1546, 1637, 1723, and 1790. I would also like to thank the Secretary-General for the submission of his report on the progress made by UNAMI, as well as Under Secretary-General Pascoe for his briefing to the Council. The United States expresses its appreciation to Special Representative Staffan de Mistura and all the staff of UNAMI for their courageous efforts, dedication, and hard work.

Mr. President, the United States shares with the people of Iraq the goal of achieving a secure, unified, and democratic Iraq that can govern, defend, and sustain itself. In early 2007, President Bush and the Government of Iraq approved increases in the numbers of Coalition and Iraqi forces to ensure the security of Iraqi communities and promote reconciliation at the local and national levels. The overall security environment in Iraq continues to improve, and there have been some gains on the political, economic, and diplomatic fronts as well. Nevertheless, progress has been uneven in certain areas, and many challenges still remain.

The average weekly number of security incidents has decreased since my last report, and the level of violence nationwide continues to be significantly lower than levels seen in late summer 2007. Although there was a brief rise in security incidents in recent weeks as a result of the violence in Baghdad and Basrah, the level of incidents is going down once again. The number of civilian deaths due to violence has fallen by more than 72 percent since July 2007, and continues to be below the level seen in February 2006, prior to the Samarra Mosque bombing. Coalition deaths have dropped by more than 70 percent since last summer, as well.

Another important trend is the decrease in deaths attributed to ethno-sectarian violence by 94 percent nation-wide and 97 percent in the Baghdad security districts from January 2007 to January 2008. This steady decline in ethno-sectarian violence is due to both the increased presence of Iraqi and Coalition forces along sectarian fault lines and the decreased capacity of the enemy to re-ignite the cycle of ethno-sectarian violence. Weekly IED attacks are down by more than 50 percent since last summer, and Coalition deaths from IED incidents have fallen to their lowest level since July 2006. This drop in casualties is attributed to the significant disruption of insurgent networks, the effectiveness of physical security barriers, and the increasing proportion of IEDs that are now found and cleared before they can be used. The rate at which IEDs have been found and cleared has recently exceeded 55 percent -- the highest in nearly four years. The level of high-profile attacks, such as car bombs and suicide attacks,

remains far below its height a year ago, although there has been a small increase in such attacks in the past few months. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these attacks is declining due to improvements in security.

During the reporting period, Iranian-backed groups have launched numerous attacks on Iraqi civilians and Iraqi and multinational forces. The recent clashes between criminal militia elements and Iraqi government forces in Basrah and Baghdad have highlighted Iran's destabilizing influence and actions. The Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps - Qods Force continues to arm, train, and fund illegal armed groups in Iraq. The bulk of weapons used by these groups are made in Iran and supplied by Iran, including mortars, rockets and explosively-formed penetrators (or EFPs). This lethal aid poses a significant threat to Iraqi and multinational forces and to the stability and sovereignty of Iraq. It also undermines the efforts of the Government of Iraq to rebuild the nation. These transfers of arms and related materials are fundamentally inconsistent with the restrictions on such transfers to Iraq adopted by this Council under its Chapter VII authority.

Iraq's border with Syria is another source of concern, as estimates suggest that Syria is the entry point for 90 percent of all known foreign terrorists in Iraq. Syria continues to allow foreign fighters to transit Syria en route to conducting attacks in Iraq, and we know that Al Qaeda terrorist facilitators continue to operate inside Syria. Iran and Syria must stop the flow of weapons and foreign fighters into Iraq, and their malign interference in Iraq.

Mr. President, 33 countries currently play an indispensable role in supporting security in Iraq, by either participating in the Coalition or contributing to UNAMI operations. Coalition members other than the United States and Iraq contribute some 10,000 personnel to the Coalition, and another 450 personnel to support UNAMI. Specific contributions range from El Salvador, which has deployed nine contingents since 2003 and completed more than 300 reconstruction projects, to Estonia, which has combat forces conducting counterinsurgency operations. These forces play an essential role in helping the Iraqi people achieve success.

The Iraqi Security Forces continue to make progress and develop increased capability and proficiency. More than 540,000 individuals now serve in the Iraqi Security Forces, an increase of 24,000 since I last reported to you in January. As of February 1, 2008, 123 Iraqi army combat battalions are conducting operations, an increase of six battalions since last quarter. Of these combat battalions, 112 are capable of taking the lead in operations. During recent operations, some Iraqi units were found wanting, but overall the Iraqi Security Forces are quite capable and their performance is solid. Looking forward, we expect an additional 50,000 Iraqi soldiers and 16 Army and Special Operations battalions to be trained before the end of the year, as well as more than 23,000 police and eight National Police battalions.

Local citizens, both Arab Sunni and Arab Shi'a, are also continuing to aid in the fight against extremists. These 91,000 volunteers, known as the Sons of Iraq, are fostering bottom-up reconciliation by providing Iraqi and Coalition forces with information on insurgents, securing critical local infrastructure, and aiding in the discovery of improvised explosive devices and weapons caches. We are working closely with the Iraqi government to integrate many of them into the Iraqi Security Forces, vocational training programs, and other government jobs.

The Coalition continues to transfer responsibility for security to the Government of Iraq, which currently has primary security responsibility for nine of the country's 18 provinces. Many of these provinces have transitioned smoothly, and although challenges have arisen in others, we expect the process to move forward, with Anbar and Qadisiyah provinces transitioning later this year.

Turning now to economic issues, the ability of the Government of Iraq to spend its resources, to provide essential services, and to promote economic development is progressing. The Iraqi Ministries of Defense and Interior are steadily improving their ability to execute their budgets. In 2007 and 2006, both Ministries spent more on their forces than the United States provided through the Iraqi Security Forces Fund. We anticipate that Iraq will spend more than \$9 billion on security this year and \$11 billion next year. The IMF projects that Iraq's GDP will grow by seven percent in real terms this year. Core inflation for 2007 was approximately 12 percent, compared to more than 32 percent in 2006. The Iraqi dinar remains strong and the Iraqi Central Bank has begun to bring down interest rates.

At the same time, as mentioned by Mr. Pascoe, there has been some political progress, as well. The passage of the Accountability and Justice Law, which provides for de-Ba'athification reform, the Amnesty Law, and the Provincial Powers Law, which calls for provincial elections by October 1, 2008, were major steps forward. Much will depend, however, upon their successful implementation. Politically, Iraq's leaders must continue to cooperate with each other and place national interests above parochial ones.

Steps also have been taken to reintegrate Iraq into the international community, and specifically, into regional affairs. On April 21, the Foreign Ministers of the Gulf Cooperation Council (or, GCC), Egypt, Jordan, and the United States met in Bahrain and were joined by the Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari. We welcome the group's decision to make Iraq a regular participant in such meetings.

In closing, Mr. President, I would like to thank UNAMI for its work in helping to resolve disputed internal boundaries, dealing with the humanitarian issues facing the Iraqi people, co-chairing the International Compact for Iraq, and preparing for provincial elections. The UN continues to play an important role in regional dialogue, and UNAMI's contributions to the Expanded Neighbors support mechanism will help ensure that the process will remain a valuable regional forum. In the weeks and months ahead, we look forward to UNAMI's continued involvement in promoting national reconciliation, the Constitutional Review, economic reform, and capacity-building. We also encourage UNAMI to consider expanding its presence to other areas of Iraq.

Mr. President, MNF-I and UNAMI must work to sustain the momentum achieved by the recent improvements in Iraq's security. Iraq's leaders and its people must capitalize upon these hard-won gains against insurgents, extremists, and criminals by assuming responsibility for achieving the objectives Iraq has set for itself as an independent and sovereign state. I look forward to an enhanced commitment by all parties to take concrete steps toward assisting the Government of Iraq in achieving these goals.

Thank you Mr. President.