

Interview

Office of the Spokesman

Baghdad, Iraq

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Ambassador John Negroponte on CBS's Face the Nation with Bob Schieffer

(10:30 a.m. EST)

QUESTION: Mr. Ambassador, thank you for coming. We're told that the outlook now is for a big turnout in the northern part of the country, where the Kurds are; that you're expecting a good turnout for the elections Sunday in the south, the Shiite areas; but the real problem is going to be in the middle of the country. What do you think is going to happen there?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, first, I'd agree with you that there will be a good turnout in the north and in the south; and as far as the central part of the country, there are a couple of provinces which are problematic, but even there every effort is being made to ensure that there is sufficient security so that as many people can vote as possible. A lot of priority is being devoted to security, securing the ballots, locations, not only in the Sunni Triangle but throughout the country.

So I'm hopeful that quite a few people will vote, but we're just going to have to wait and see.

MR. SCHIEFFER: What do you think would be a good percentage, what would be a good vote, looking at Iraq, overall?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONE: Well, I think there's a danger here of trying to judge the legitimacy or credibility of the election in terms of turnout alone. As we said earlier, there will be a good turnout in the north and in the south, and the center we're going to have to wait and see.

But I think we've also got to judge this election in terms of what it represents to the political life of this country. This is the first free election that they've held. They're going to be moving from an appointed to an elected government. They're going to draft a constitution which will then be passed upon by a referendum next October, and then elections for a definitive government in December. So this is a very important and exciting political process and we detect a lot of interest and enthusiasm on the part of the people of Iraq for what lies ahead.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Mr. Ambassador, obviously, security is the issue, it's the problem that has to be resolved here. We continue to hear that the training of Iraqi forces is going very, very slowly. But if I understand what you're telling reporters, you will not put a number on how many Iraqi forces have actually been trained. Are you willing to do that, to tell us just how many have been trained?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, first of all, Senator Biden said at the confirmation hearing of Secretary-designate Rice that he thought only 4,000, or he had been told that only 4,000 Iraqi forces were well trained, and I think that figure significantly underestimates the work that's been accomplished. And as Secretary-designate Rice said, more than 100,000 Iraqi armed forces and police have been trained.

Another way of looking at this is the fact that Iraqi armed forces have taken responsibility for a number of very difficult areas and situations that they were not able to do before, such as Najaf, such as Sadr City, and now even in Fallujah it is Iraqi armed forces that are providing security in that area. So I see progress. A lot of effort is being -- and resources are being devoted to improving the quality of the Iraqi armed forces and that process will continue.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Well, let me put it another way. How close are the Iraqi forces to being able to defend the country on their own?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, if you're asking me to put a time limit on it, I'd be most reluctant to do that. But the goal is to enable the Iraqi army and police to take over full responsibility for the security of their country. Progress -- significant progress -- has been made and I'm sure that as this year unfolds a lot more progress will be accomplished as well. But if you ask me to put a time limit on it, I think I'd be reluctant to do that.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Well, let me -- all right, I take you then, you can't say at this point how close they are to doing it. Let me ask you one more question. There have been reports all week that the Iraqis may, in fact, ask us to leave after this election. Do you think that is within the realm of possibility, and what would we do should they ask us to go?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: I don't think that will happen. I think we share a common goal with most Iraqi political leaders that Iraqi forces be trained so that they can take over the responsibility, the full responsibility, for the security of their country as soon as possible. And I think they see our role in that context. I'm not aware of many political leaders who would want us to leave before the Iraqi armed forces and police were able to take on that responsibility.

MR. SCHIEFFER: And so is what you're telling us here this morning, Mr. Ambassador, that no one can make a projection as to how long American forces are going to be in Iraq?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: I think that you're going to see a steady progress in the improvement of the Iraqi armed forces and police. I think that as that process goes forward it's going to mean that they're able to take on more and more of the responsibilities that we are carrying out now. And that, in turn, will enable, over time, some of our forces to come home. But I would be most reluctant to put a time frame on it at this particular point.

MR. SC HIEFER: All right, Mr. Ambassador, thank you so much.

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