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On-The-Record Briefing: Kristin Hagerstrom, Team Leader, and Major Lee Suttee, USMC, Civil Affairs Chief, both of the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) located in Ramadi, Anbar Province, On Reconstruction Progress in Ramadi, Iraq

Washington, DC
August 23, 2007

Via Satellite from Ramadi, Anbar Province, Iraq

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(11:05 a.m. EDT)

MR. GALLEGOS: Good evening in Iraq. Good morning here in Washington, D.C. My name is Gonzalo Gallegos. I'm the Director of the Office of Press Relations here at the State Department. I'd like to welcome you. This morning we have Kristin Hagerstrom, who is the Leader of our 30-person joint civilian-military team, Provincial Reconstruction Team, in Anbar Province, in the capital city of Ramadi, in Iraq. Joining her is Marine Major Lee Suttee, who is the Civil Affairs Team Chief there in Anbar Province. And we're going to be discussing what they've been doing, how they've been doing it and their plans for the future.

Good evening, you all.

MS. HAGERSTROM: Yeah. Hey. My name is Kristin Hagerstrom and I'm a Foreign Service Officer and I'm here as Team Leader with an embedded PRT in Ramadi. It's echoing in my ear, by the way. We're good?

An embedded PRT, for those who don't know what they are, are civilian-military units. And my unit, by the way, has ten members made up of both civilians and military who work with -- assist with counterinsurgency efforts, but we do it embedded within a brigade. And we're embedded in a brigade that's made up of both Army and Marines. So we have Marine battalions and we have Army battalions here.

This is -- I believe the embedded EPRTs are the first time the State Department has actually been embedded at a brigade level, so it's very unique. I'm State Department, Foreign Service officer. My deputy is a USAID Foreign Service officer, and then I have Navy officers and Army officers and a couple of Department of Defense civilians who work on my team.

We receive joint guidance from both the Ambassador and MNF-I, and we look especially to the military for movement. We don't have our own movement teams. We're embedded within the brigade and so we go out with the brigade with what we do, and we coordinate our activities together. That's how we work it. We are -- and we are engaged, by the way, at the district or what we call the city level, the Ramadi municipal level. That's where we're engaged. We're working at a very grassroots level on fundamentally helping the local government in its capacity to govern and deliver services, essential services -- water, sewer, power, those sorts of things to the population.

Ramadi, by the way, is a city of a population of about 400,000, and it was incredibly damaged in the war, in the battle that was here. And IEDs especially destroyed roads and sewer and water systems and electric. And in fact, when I arrived -- I arrived here -- my team arrived here in April, there was very little running water and very little electric system up at all, and just miles and miles of derelict and destroyed-looking buildings.

Ramadi was written off as lost, in fact, by a lot of people, and this was -- Ramadi was declared by al-Qaeda to be their capital of the caliphate in Iraq. And most people know the story of how after the abuse by al-Qaeda -- because they were very abusive, executing teenagers and just very abusive towards the population -- the population, led by the sheiks, the local tribal leaders, took them on and helped, along with, you know, joined with coalition forces to push and -- push al-Qaeda out of the city.

When we arrived in April, in fact, just the local government was just starting. It was very fledgling. We had a mayor -- he'd been in office since January -- and a city council that had just had its first meeting. And so I was there for the second meeting and they were just organizing. But again, most of the city, 80 percent of the city, probably was out -- without power, without water.

It's changed and it's -- this is a place where, if you were here even two months ago, you wouldn't recognize it just because -- and it has a lot to do with -- Major Suttee will talk about a lot of the clearing and these -- a lot of what we've been doing here. But I was just out today, in fact, driving around the city. And even though it's a Friday and normally you don't see people out, you still saw the shops everywhere. There were even people out still painting -- painting their shops. And that was great to see, especially on a Friday, because, again, a couple of months ago you wouldn't have seen people out on the street.

So I'm going to turn it over to Major Suttee to talk a little bit about the security situation and a little bit more about what it is we do and what we do together here.

MAJ SUTTEE: Absolutely. Good morning, I guess, to you. To divorce a little bit from what Kristin was talking about, the civil affairs and the mission that my 63 Marines and sailors had just prior to the arrival of the EPRT was fairly simple. We were the bridge between the brigade here -- 6,000 Army and Marine infantry and armor and artillerymen -- we were that bridge between this combat force and the city. Civil affairs bridges that gap. It tries to -- you know, when we're not fighting, of course -- facilitate the reemergence of the city.

What we found when we first got here in March was a city that was still being fought for. The enemy was still here. My civil affairs teams would have to fight their way into civil-military operations centers just to do claims for a handful of civilians that might brave the streets of Ramadi at the time. The electricity had been knocked out in early February outside the city. There was essentially no running water. The sewer system was dysfunctional and the street was littered with debris of war. Buildings were completely collapsed. And there, quite frankly, didn't seem to be quite a light at the end of the tunnel.

Many of you will have read about a lot of the sheikh involvement here in Ramadi and in al-Anbar, and what they did was bring local Iraqi police into the struggle for Ramadi and, larger, into the struggle in al-Anbar. And when we put the local police partnered with the coalition forces here, partnered with the Iraqi army that was already here as well, that combination -- and then I think, quite frankly, the will of the people in Ramadi who after three and a half years of suffering were tired of it, in very short order, about a month and a half, the fighting stopped. And when it came to a stop, it literally stopped about April 22nd.

Coincidentally, on that day, we held our third reconstruction conference. And if you had seen the first two, you would have wondered what we were thinking, but we were certainly planning for the day when fighting would stop. At that reconstruction conference, about 200 contractors came forward. We presented a very optimistic plan about how we would start in the first phase of reconstruction by clearing the thoroughfares in the city, the major streets, of rubble, debris. We would then, you know, clear those areas of this. We would try to then reopen some of the military-only lanes on the streets for civilian businesses, and that over time we would rebuild civic infrastructure so that this burgeoning government that we had would have a place to actually work, kind of working on that Maslov's hierarchy of needs: Give them a place and turn on the electricity and water and the sewage and the place will come back to life.

And so as we did this reconstruction conference and the fighting kind of all stopped at the same time, we then found ourselves having to quickly ramp up into using commanders' emergency response funds to fund what we kind of promised to the Ramadi citizens. And the first group of four that came in with Kristin, kind of the advance party, if you will, what they did with us what they built their situational awareness. They were here as the fighting stopped. They were here as we began to work through these reconstruction zones, these rubble zones, if you will. And they saw our work with a couple of our NGO partners that are here. And so when the rest of their team arrived in late May, we were really starting to hit our stride with contractors in the city, the department heads for electricity, water, and sewer and trash were starting to come forward with their workers and we were using response funds to repair their vehicles so we could get them back on the streets and doing their job.

And what's happened since the end of May really was what Kristin described to you. The EPRT, in my mind, what they bring to us is a certain level of collective experience that civil affairs doesn't have. I mean, I'm 39 years old and I'm the second-oldest guy in my unit. So when I have people who are -- who have worked in the defense industry and factories, for example, their entire life and they come in and they look at a state-owned enterprise out at the ceramics factory, they know what it takes to get that thing going again. And so Bill Marks, our factory guy, he's going to do that in the next month or so. He'll have the ceramics factory going here in Ramadi. That'll employ hundreds of people.

All of this is stabilizing and it stabilizes the community. It makes people want to believe that there's a future for Ramadi. And then that builds upon itself a certain level of momentum that we intend to maintain. So I hope that kind of gives you an idea of the differentiation, but also what they've done in partnering with us and the local government to really, I think, do a lot in a very short time here in Ramadi.

MR. GALLEGOS: Kristin, Major Suttee, I appreciate that. What I'd like to do now is open it up for questions here. And we'll start with our senior journalist from AP.

QUESTION: Major, if I could ask you to -- you said something a moment ago I thought was very interesting. You said if you had seen the other two reconstruction conferences, you would have wondered what we were thinking. Can you describe what happened there and how this was different, who attended the others, and what -- you know, sort of the background of that?

MAJ SUTTEE: Sure. And it's not so much about the reconstruction conference itself as it was, what was going on at the city at the time. The brigade combat team that was here before this particular brigade held the first conference in January. And there was -- there were 50, 60 attacks a day going on in the city. You could not move around with anything short of a four-vehicle convoy outside of an operating base. It was truly still the most dangerous city in Iraq, in my estimation, at that time. But they held it because they said, "We are turning a corner here. We're turning a corner with sheikh engagement. We're turning a corner with the recruiting of the Iraqi police. And these things, in the end, are going to pay off. We don't know when, but they're going to pay off."

So it was the atmosphere outside the conference. And it wasn't that it was lightly attended. It was certainly with the involvement of the sheikhs. There were plenty of contractors there. There just wasn't a lot that we could tell them as far as, here's what you're going to be doing in the city. The second one was about a month and a half later. It was at the very end of February and it was right as I had got here. And in fact, I was still trying to sort out my East Coast time from Iraq time. And I go to this thing and there was a lot of professional contractors in there and they're talking about what they do. But their question to us was: When do you think the city's going to be ready for some of the stuff you're talking about? And we had a new brigade on deck, certainly a lot of fresh legs in here to capitalize on the great work that the brigade before us did and the commander said, "We're not far away. Be patient with us and work with us in those areas where we can." And at that particular time, we had one district that we felt like we could really start to do reconstruction in, so we named that conference after that district and we poured contractors in there and just said, "Here are some of the projects we want to do and help us get them going."

And the whole thing really was to establish the relationships and the -- kind of the working and business relationships. And we had contractor seminars just to get them used to how we were going to write contracts, for example. So it was more the atmosphere around it than it was the actual conference themselves. But we knew on that third one that, you know, the IED attacks had fallen off significantly in the previous days, the sniper attacks had fallen off significantly. And it was definitely something out of the ordinary and we didn't know exactly, you know, what the percipient event was. We just knew that something had changed and that we went in there with a little bit different attitude.

It was mostly like a job fair. We set up booths in the back of the room. The mayor and others did their speech and said, we've turned a corner. And then at the back of the room were these defined rebel zones and a lot of projects laid out on the tables to say, "Hey, come make your bids now." And this was the first time we'd actually just laid it out for them like that and they were -- the brochures and the bids were gone in very short order. And so we kind of knew that they had the same sense that we did.

QUESTION: Now, if there was four- and five-car convoys, armored, I assume, then what -- sort of what's your level of protection and in what sort of force and strength do you travel when you go out on the streets now?

MAJ SUTTEE: Yeah. I'd like to point out, and we -- I don't necessarily represent the security aspect of this, but security underpins everything that we do here. And the five battalions in the city, partnered with the Iraqi police and the Iraqi army, have done such a great job of just securing the city, I think we're at 102 days now total with no attacks in the city. Now, it's not 102 consecutive days. But since that April date that I was talking about, you know, that's fairly significant.

The cache finds are up 200 percent. And where we go to work every day down at our Ramadi municipal civic center to work with the mayor and the director generals, we can go in a two-vehicle convoy there. We can go down to the provincial government center -- and for those of you who have been to Ramadi, you would know that that place was probably, a year and a half ago, even eight months ago, one of the most dangerous areas in Ramadi. You can go there with three vehicles, so you can move around with a lot more confidence. And you can get out on the road in front of the provincial government center and talk about what's happening there as we bring the governor and the provincial council and the provincial chief judge and all his people back in so that rule of law and provincial government can be reestablished.

MS. HAGERSTROM: Yeah, I don't know if there's -- there's no place in the city that we couldn't walk outside here.

MAJ SUTTEE: That's right.

MS. HAGERSTROM: You agree. So we do go out and we talk and we walk on the street and talk to people.

MR. GALLEGOS: Okay, due to the communications link and the time delay, I'm going to ask you to hold up asking your questions until I recognize you. And I'm going to be more than happy to give you follow-ups, but just so that -- I want to ensure that they hear the entire question, that we move smoothly. So, happy to (inaudible).

Param.

QUESTION: How concerned are you that security will not reemerge as a problem in this area, especially since Kristin said that this was a key al-Qaeda base previously? And could you give us a perspective of how the neighboring areas are in terms of security and the prospect of a return by the al-Qaeda?

MS. HAGERSTROM: You know, what I would say about -- I talk to my Iraqi counterparts all the time about this issue. And they'll tell you the reason why al-Qaeda, they don't believe, will come back is because the tribal leaders and the people of Ramadi, by joining with coalition forces, have basically signed a death warrant, all of them, because if al-Qaeda comes back, they will kill them all and they know that. So they're all in it together. And that's why when Major Suttee was talking about finding caches; it's the locals who are turning them in. These aren't ones that are coalition forces finding on patrol. It's the locals turning them in. It's the locals turning in people who they think may be, you know, linked to al-Qaeda, trying to come back into town. They're all in it together. And I think that -- it's that strength, it's that bond they have.

You know, we have some very brave people who work for this city for Ramadi, the mayor and his DGs, who come in and at first though it was a very dangerous thing to do, it's maybe not as dangerous now. But they're all identified and they're all in this together. And the Imams in the mosques also, that's another stabilizing factor because they're preaching to, you

know, pro-Iraqi police force messages and in some cases actually pro-coalition force messages or they're neutral, they don't discuss the subject.

So it's always a worry. It's something we're -- everyone's alert about at all times. But when you have a population who's buying into this and all in it together, and as long as we can continue to assist the local government to deliver services because that really is the stabilizing factor is to make sure people have water and electricity, kids can go to school, people can get on with their lives. And that's what we'll ensure is when their lives get totally back to normal, that will ensure that al-Qaeda doesn't come back in.

MAJ SUTTEE: Sure. And if I could just pile on that for a second. I mean, Kristin talked about stability ops. And really the pillars for security ops, it's underpinned by security. We've kind of detailed how we've done that piece. But real pillars -- we talk about bolstering the economy, rule of law, which is just absolutely essential to everything, and then just transparent governance.

And again, go back to the partnership that we have with EPRT in all three of those areas. The civil affairs, we can do that but we're rank amateurs. I mean, we are a provisional civil affairs unit. I'm an artillery battalion XO in my job back in Camp LeJeune, North Carolina. I have no training in local government or economic development. But with the expertise that the EPRT brings and the enablers that I can bring through the security and ability to move and then just resources that the State Department has coming and that we actually have right now, I think it actually forms a pretty good partnership. So it's always going to be a worry and we'll worry about it until the day we leave. But if we build upon kind of these pillars underpinned by security, that's what Kris and I are asked to do and that's our part of this.

MR. GALLEGOS: Farah.

QUESTION: Hi. I'm Farah Stockman with *The Boston Globe*. I was curious to know where is the reconstruction money that you're talking about coming from? Is this IRRF money? Is this money from the Iraqi Government? We understand that the central government has started giving money to the provinces now to run their services and maybe to pay some of these Sunni police recruits. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about that. And also just where did this local government come from? We've got a mayor. Was he elected? We know that provincial elections, I don't think, have happened yet. So how did this local government form?

MS. HAGERSTROM: Okay. The money comes from all sorts of -- and when we talk about reconstruction, by the way, it's -- you know, the major reconstruction using U.S. funds is pretty much over in Iraq. We're talking here a much smaller-scale project. And a lot of the money now is coming from -- well, it's starting to come through from the Government of Iraq. The mayor just signed -- how much were those contracts worth? He just signed a hundred and --

MAJ SUTTEE: 107 million.

MS. HAGERSTROM: \$107 million worth of contracts for all of Anbar Province and a large part of that for Ramadi. That's all Government of Iraq money. We have had instances where we've had the local government tell us, "We don't need your money," to the U.S. -- to the coalition forces, "We don't need your money now. We actually have some Government of Iraq money coming for that project," a health clinic or whatever. So it's a combination.

There's also, by the way, a lot of USAID money coming in, working especially on stability, on day labor projects, and small business. We have lots of small businesses opening here and a lot of that is a USAID project. What was the last question? It was about --

QUESTION: Yeah, about forming the government.

MS. HAGERSTROM: Oh, forming the government, yes. The mayor was actually selected by the governor with some advice from other people. The city council itself came from the Ramadi municipal, plus we have now 12 districts within. And those districts have their own governing sort of -- or advisory bodies. And so the president of those district -- small district governments send people to the city council.

We're still working on this. I mean, the structure -- it's getting better all the time, but we have a major piece of training coming in soon, again by USAID, a group who is going to be funding a project to come in and do a lot more training and governance. But again, the mayor, in fact, was by himself for a while there. I think the city council actually didn't come in until April, so the mayor was the first guy out there.

MAJ SUTTEE: Yeah, and if I could add a couple things, and you've heard me say this already a couple times, but this is about stability and your question runs across a couple lines. One of the big stabilizing factors that needs to occur in al-Anbar Province is the central government, the Government of Iraq as we call it, starting to put money into this province. And it's something that we hear about every day when we go downtown.

The first step in that was the IRRF funds which you spoke of, 107 million for all of al-Anbar, \$45 million for Ramadi, and many of those contracts have been signed now. We expect to see ground breaking in the next couple of weeks on those projects. And my CA teams are actually out there looking for those because this is all Iraqi. This isn't something that the Americans funded and chose, you know, which projects would be done. So that's the first step.

The second step would be helping them to -- you know, kind of advertise those, kind of win the information piece to the people saying, "Hey, this is a project that is benefiting this neighborhood and it came from your central government and was -- the contractors were selected by a counsel at the Anbar level."

In addition to that piece of Government of Iraq money, another piece here in al-Anbar that we're looking for, and specifically in Ramadi, is a piece of what's called the Iraqi Claims Law Fund. In certain parts of the country that were devastated -- and Ramadi is certainly a city that looks like a man-made disaster -- the central government has released funds to pay private individuals for their homes that were destroyed or damaged, and Fallujah received that money a couple years ago. The money -- the claims law is still effect. In fact, our mayor was asked to establish a committee. He's established a committee and we think that in the near future that the Government of Iraq -- and definitely with some pressure from the governor of Al-Anbar -- will release that money. That will be a huge stabilizing factor again.

And the last thing -- excuse me -- and you touched on this. Was the mayor elected? You've heard that provincial elections are off. We don't know exactly when those will occur. Certainly, in al-Anbar we'd like them to happen very soon because we consider that to be a huge stabilizing factor as well. It's not that our mayor, because he was appointed, is not popular; everywhere we go with the guy, he's a son of the city and they love him. But what we'd like to see is the

entire government as representative.

MR. GALLEGOS: Libby.

QUESTION: Hi, I'm Libby Leist with NBC News. Could you just refresh us on the numbers of troops? You mentioned five battalions. How many troops is that? And do you hear worries from the local leaders that you work with that domestic support in the United States is not supporting a sustained troop presence in Iraq? Do you hear worries from them that, just as progress is getting going where you are, that U.S. troops may start withdrawing?

MAJ SUTTEE: Yeah, I got it. Five battalions plus all the combat service support that's required to keep those people out in the city every day is about 6,000 service members here, in and around Ramadi. And the area of operations is actually larger than the city, so it's the outlying areas as well. I think they say it's the size of Rhode Island. I don't know.

MS. HAGERSTROM: Connecticut.

MAJ SUTTEE: New Hampshire, Connecticut. I'm getting a lot of different answers here. Anyway, that's roughly the size of the forces here.

In terms of the second part of your question, we don't hear anything about the American support at all. In fact, some of our local government members who are going through the training that the State Department brings may actually get to visit the United States, so they're much more concerned about getting the visa applications in and, you know, being able to actually go visit the country where we come from.

I think the thing that I would tell you is, and it's the same where you live, it's what's happening in your neighborhood that matters. If your lights were out and you had no electricity for two and a half months, I don't think you'd worry about U.S. public support; you'd be worried about when you can run the air conditioners in 115 degree weather. And so they certainly look at their city as the mountain that they have to climb and they're focused on it every day, and we're here to help them. And those are the conversations that we have. In fact, there's not a lot politically that we talk about and there's not a lot that we talk about outside the city with them.

MS. HAGERSTROM: We do have a lot of congressional delegations coming in. And when they do talk to the local officials, you will have the local officials say, "Please, don't leave yet." Because they need to get on their feet and they need to get the stability and on their feet, so they will say, "Please, don't leave." And I think congressmen have actually been approached in the souk by people saying that.

QUESTION: Do you think you have the right amount of support right now as far as troop levels? And do you yourself worry that there may be calls for withdrawal?

MAJ SUTTEE: I'd say in our world and the Ramadi world, we're fine with the amount of troops that we have. And I don't actually think about withdrawal. I mean, I know when I'm going to be leaving Ramadi. And yeah, it's not something I think about. We have so many things to worry about inside the city to fix and to help the Iraqis build capacity with. But it's really -- it's pretty all-consuming, I think.

QUESTION: If there were any -- if there was any reduction in the number of troops that you have, would you be concerned about the stability you've talked about?

MAJ SUTTEE: Well, you know, we talk about it in terms of the number of troops that are here right now. I mean -- but it's not something that we dwell upon. I mean, we'll try to take advantage of the time that we have right now, the 102 days with no tax to stabilize the city. So you know, we'll try to strike while the iron's hot. We feel that if you build enough of this, this feeling that there's positive hope for the future in the population that regardless of whether there's five battalions or one battalion here that the city with their well-trained Iraqi police will be able to do the job.

QUESTION: Charlie Wolfson with CBS. Kristin, I'm curious about what you said about your ability to get out and walk around and see people. That's quite a change from other circumstances we've heard about in the past. And can you just kind of go into a little more of that about what you do, whether you're able to go out and see local leaders in their place or do they have to come in and see you? And also to the extent you're able from conversations with other PRT team leaders around Iraq, can you say whether you're the exception or you're the rule now -- what's your ability to do that?

MS. HAGERSTROM: We actually every day move the forward operating base. We leave the base and we go to offices that have set up with the local government. So we -- you know, we convoy over there and we drop our armor and we go into our offices and we're in the area all day, so we're actually with the Iraqi people all day. And there are other places we go. We go to local councils. We'll go to sheiks' houses. We go -- we're out there. We go around -- especially a lot of my team members will go out to the more rural areas to work on agricultural issues and they're out all day doing that. And what -- you know, you can walk on the street, you can buy an ice cream cone. It's not -- yeah, you know, the Ambassador did actually -- was walking out without armor. I wear armor. But the Ambassador's gone out and some reporters have, actually.

Talking about the other PRTs, we talk and -- because ten of us came in together of the embedded EPRTs and so three of us into Anbar, six into Baghdad and then one in northern Babil. Everybody's having a different experience. We talk among each other. And I don't know a lot about Baghdad, but I do know that each of those team leaders tells me that what's happening in Anbar might not be what's happening with them, but different things are happening, there are different lines of progress they're having there. And they're all out there now -- all out and engaging with very local officials and working with the same issues we're working with: the electricity, the water. It's very interesting that we all end up doing those things. It's really essential services that are so important to the people.

MR. GALLEGOS: Farah.

QUESTION: Just to follow up, you were saying that everybody is having a different experience and that's one thing we know about PRTs, is that they -- you know, they are a group of people that go out and do things their own way. To make something work, they come up with individual solutions. And I guess what I'm wondering is, to what extent is this local government development happening everywhere in Iraq? We're all very concerned or interested in what's going to happen with the federal issue and a lot of people say that, okay, we may not have a lot of progress on a national level, but we're seeing a lot of progress on the local level. You know, to what extent is -- do you have a sense, is the rest of Iraq experiencing local governance being grown in this way?

MS. HAGERSTROM: Maybe not exactly in the same way, but they are experiencing the same sorts of things. They're trying -- they're making links with local government officials and they're trying to build on those ties. And a lot of it is

just building trust and building ties and it might -- they might not be moving as fast as we are because we're in a very permissive area here.

By the way, I do talk especially to Fallujah and out in al-Qaim in the far west and al-Assad. They also are having a lot of progress; Fallujah a little bit less than us, but they really are working. They have a very strong city council there and a very strong mayor also. And even though their security situation hasn't been as good as it has here, they -- I know that they have women sewing projects, they have all sorts of small business, a lot of also reconstruction work going on there and a lot of day labor projects. So everybody's moving along.

And I haven't been, actually, in places in Baghdad, so I wouldn't comment on most places in Baghdad, but I do know everybody's working at their -- within their own areas and the experiences are unique.

MR. GALLEGOS: Any more questions?

(No response.)

MR. GALLEGOS: Okay. At this time, I want to thank you both. Kristin, Major Suttee, we greatly appreciate your time and your conversation. Take care.

MS. HAGERSTROM: Thank you.

MAJ SUTTEE: Thank you.

(The briefing was concluded at 11:38 a.m.)

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