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Reconstruction Progress in Iraq

Anbar Province Team Leader Kristin Hagerstrom, Wasit Province Team Leader Wade Weems, and Muthanna Province Team Leader Paul O'Friel

Via Satellite

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10:30 a.m. EDT

MR. GALLEGOS: Good morning. My name is Gonzalo Gallegos. I'm the Director of the Office of Press Relations here at the State Department. I appreciate you all coming. I appreciate the participation of the journalists and of our PRT leaders there in Iraq. This morning we have Wade Weems who's our team leader in our PRT in Wasit. We have Kristin Hagerstrom who's our team leader in Anbar. Is it Camp Ramadi? And then I also have Paul --

MS. HAGERSTROM: In Ramadi.

MR. GALLEGOS: In Ramadi. Thank you. In Ramadi. And I also have Paul O'Friel. He's the team leader in Muthanna. Appreciate you all's participation. Paul may have to leave a little bit early. He's got a flight to catch. But I thought we'd ask you all to please give us a brief breakdown of what you all have been doing, who you all have been communicating with, where you believe your successes are. And then we can open it up to questions from the participants at this end.

So Wade, if you'd like to get started.

MR. WEEMS: Sure. Thanks. As you said in my introduction, my name is Wade Weems. I work as a team leader for the Wasit Provincial Reconstruction Team. We're located at Camp Delta, just south of Al Kut. We are one of the newer embedded provincial reconstruction teams. We were established on July 13th and have been up and running for about three months now. We've hit the ground running, doing a series of engagements in trying to get to know

and understand the local government officials, tribal leaders, community leaders, business leaders. We have of course focused our effort on the -- at first, on the provincial level government. We have, even though we're an embedded team, responsibility for the entire province of Wasit, which includes of course both the provincial level and the district level government. We've initiated really the beginnings of a governance program at the provincial level. That is focused, of course, on budget planning and budget execution mechanisms, making sure that the provincial level can draw down funding for the national level, plan for its expenditure and execute the projects that it's planned. We've also emphasized the importance of the provincial development strategy -- where does this province want to go in the next three, four, five years; what are the needs of the people; what are the objectives of the province and what programs and projects will get them from where they are now to where they want to go. These are just the fundamental basic building blocks of good governance. And the Wasit provincial government has shown interest and effort towards both of these news initiatives.

In addition, we're engaging with some of their focus working groups in agriculture and in investment planning. In the first instance, agriculture is the centerpiece of Wasit economy and it is a focus of our economic revitalization program. They have an excellent economic working group within -- at the provincial level. We're encouraging them to draw experts from outside of the government to open up the planning to nongovernment officials and help us help them find out what the priorities are and in close conjunction with the USAID rep that is part of the Wasit Provincial Reconstruction Team link the provincial level government up with the up with the number of agriculture related programs that USAID has and will have up and running in Wasit. Those are just a few of our first-step initiatives.

Another significant line of operations has been to focus on tribal engagement. A lot of people ask especially in the wake of success of the tribes in Anbar what is it like in Wasit; will you have the similar relationship with the tribal leaders there? The answer is frankly that it's too early to tell. But I can say that we have seen a wave of tribal leaders approach us and ask us what can they do to improve security in this province, what can they do to combat extremist militia activity. And just that alone I think is a hopeful sign. How we go forward, that remains yet to be seen.

I think I'll just conclude with that. Those are our first steps. And I'll let my colleagues here talk about their respective provinces.

MR. GALLEGOS: Thank you. Kristin, would you like to proceed?

MS. HAGERSTROM: Yeah, I'm Kristin Hagerstrom, a Foreign Service officer. I'm the Team Leader in an Embedded PRT in Ramadi. I work at a municipal level, not at the provincial but just in Ramadi, working along with the municipal government, tribal leaders the same, women's groups, other NGOs, building the local capacity to govern and provide services, essential services, to the local people. And my team -- I have a small team, ten people. My Deputy is a US -- is also my USAID representative. USAID is very much back into Ramadi now doing a lot of good things. And then I have -- the rest of my team are specialists who are DOD civilians and U.S. military officers.

We've been working especially on essential services, the SWET, the sewer, trash, water electric. Not so much us doing it as building the capacity of the locals to do this. We arrived in April of this year, and I will tell you when we arrived there was essentially no -- there was no trash collection, there was no electricity in Ramadi. Those of you who have ever seen Ramadi, it looked like Stalingrad post World War II. Just devastated from the hard fought battle.

Now I can say that Ramadi has 100 percent electricity. They might not have it 24 hours, but we're well over 16 hours a

day for most of the city. There's water running everywhere in the city, and that is especially important in the summer. Trash collection -- and again, these are Ramadis doing this, it's not coalition forces. It's a transitioning away from coalition forces. At this point, the local Ramadi municipal workers are doing about half of the trash collection, coalition forces doing the other half, but that's moving and we have plans within the next two months that they'll take over.

We have a standing city council and a mayor who has been in office -- he's been in office since March and the city council has been there since April. And they actually came from -- I guess we call them neighborhood councils, 13 neighborhood councils that also are governing in their areas and they feed the members to the city council.

With -- I will say when I arrived, I think it was the first week of April, it was probably the last -- it was the last week that mortars came on to Camp Ramadi, the FOB where I live. It's -- I think March 1st was the first day that not a shot was fired in the entire city. And since then, we have had just this incredible time of not a lot of kinetic activity, and that's really allowed us to get out. My team and I, we leave -- we go out into Ramadi every single day. It's that safe of an environment. I mean, it's obvious we still have security concerns, but not the same. And we're able to interact. We're able to interact with our -- with the Ramadi mayor, the city council and the workers, the people who provide all the services, building their capacity to do this, helping them understand how to organize their government.

Saddam Hussein -- in the Saddam sort of era, it is all central, you know, from water, sewer, electric -- it all came down from Baghdad. Baghdad decided the budgets. Baghdad decided everything that was done, even on the very small municipal levels. They're having to learn how to plan and organize, and my role is really mentoring and working along with them to figure out how to do this. And it's been very gratifying.

The other thing very gratifying is to see women coming out. Remember, Ramadi was declared by al-Qaida to be the capital of their caliphate in Iraq. In fact, in October of last year, just around this time, al-Qaida held a parade in downtown Ramadi and filmed it for propagandist purposes. I'll tell you next week there's going to be -- the people of Ramadi are getting together and putting on an enormous rally, a lot of it in memory of Sheik Sattar Abu-Risha, who unfortunately was murdered about 40 days ago, to contrast with al-Qaida with their parade. This will be a real rally all the way down the middle of the street. And they're doing this. I mean, it's not coalition forces. They're in the middle of it.

One thing that the al-Qaida did was push women out of the schools and out of any sort of participation in the economy, just back into their homes. They're slowly emerging. And we had worked with some women's group a couple of weeks ago to put on a crafts fair, basically, women who were -- especially widows who were sewing in their homes or making food in their homes to sell, just a time for them to get together in a safe place and share what they were doing. And it turned into a poetry event with women -- there was a 12-year-old girl who stood up and read a poem she had written for the occasion.

That's what's going on in Ramadi right now. And it's a great place to be. It's a great place to see progress. It's gratifying to go every day -- our team -- and work with these brave people, these brave Iraqis who come in and try to improve their community.

MR. GALLEGOS: Thank you, Kristin. Now, Paul.

MR. O'FRIEL: I'm with a team that's in the Province of Muthanna. It's in the south of Iraq. It's predominantly Shia. We've had a PRT there since the province reverted to Iraqi control in August of last year. Initially, our focus was on helping

the provincial council and the government come up with a development strategy. So we have large-scale development projects that focus on infrastructure -- schools, telecommunications, water.

But we have a new source of funds right now called Quick Response Funds, which are actually very, very useful. They're similar to the military's Commander's Emergency Response Program funds that allow us to use money to target basic human needs.

What we found in Muthanna is that there's a large amount of frustration in that government is seen as not delivering services to the people. So what we decided to use is Quick Response Funds to work with key sheikhs, with clerics, community leaders, to have them identify projects for us that can make a basic, immediate, positive impact in people's lives. And we're seeing some real results from that right now.

I was just out breaking ground on two projects earlier this week. In fact, I'm going back down to do more of this, where we have taken projects that have really -- water projects. People were drinking from the same water as their animals. And we went out and are going to give them a new water distribution system. And the response that we've had from Iraqis is tremendously positive. People are looking for this. People are looking for the things that we can do to help them build a better Iraq.

Another project we're going to be working on is a school. We're going to take it literally from the Middle Ages. It's a mud brick school and we're going to bring it into the 21st Century -- rebuild it, put a solar power panel on it to give it dependable power, bring some computers in -- and we're going to change the lives of these schoolchildren. And the principal of that school is enthused about this. On television, on Iraqi television, he was saying the Americans came, they're going to transform my school and they're going to give us a sister school in the United States. They're going to make us just like an American school. This is what I and my children want.

This is the type of thing that we can do on the reconstruction teams, where we can change the environment, create a sense of hope, which I think is extremely important for what we need to do here. I personally believe -- I believe this very strongly -- that doing good is our best weapon. It's our sword that allows us to counteract the militias, that allows us to counteract this negative influence. But it's also our shield. We go out into the province, just like Kirsten, every day. This is our protection. It's the people who support us, that help us do what we need to do.

MR. GALLEGOS: Thank you, Paul, Wade, Kristin. At this point, I'd like to open it up for some questions from up here. And I'm going to ask our reporters to identify themselves and their affiliation.

QUESTION: Yes, I'm Michel Ghandour with Al Hurra Television. The question is for Mr. Weems.

Mr. Weems, you said that the tribals come and offer their assistance, how can they help fighting al-Qaida and how can they help you to build their city. What are you providing them and how you can help them to do this job?

MR. WEEMS: All right. Well, thanks for your question. As I said earlier, at this stage we are trying to understand who is in the province. We've only been there about three months. We've spent the past two months speaking with high-level sheikhs, probably about 40 to 50 of them, understanding the issues in their respective areas, understanding what they want to do, what their view of the provincial government and the local governments is, and trying to understand

their aspirations.

Whether they go forward with local security arrangements or concerned citizens arrangements, whether they play a role in actually assisting with the security, it's too early to tell right now. And frankly, that is largely a military decision. But I do know that they will play another role, a significant role, with the PRT. As Paul mentioned earlier, we can engage directly with them to understand what the issues are at a very local level. What do the people really, truly desperately need? And it also helps us have a check on the government's performance. Is the government actually providing the essential services and the projects and spending its growing budget in a way that is beneficial to the people. And that is another potential role that these tribal leaders can play in working with us.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MR. GALLEGOS: Yes, Samir.

QUESTION: Mr. Paul -- does any one of you speak Arabic?

MR. O'FRIEL: (In Arabic.)

QUESTION: Do you mind if we can get a few sound bites in Arabic, my colleagues, for a few minutes?

QUESTION: Are you going to translate?

QUESTION: He could sum it up.

QUESTION: Just can you give us like -- I don't want to take the time of my colleagues, if you give me like a sound bite in Arabic about some of your successes, and then translate it to my colleagues, I'll appreciate it so much.

MR. O'FRIEL: Okay perhaps not right now. Maybe we just continue with the questions. But I'd be more than happy to at a later point.

MR. GALLEGOS: We can talk about trying to get the two of you together, Samir, at a later point. I'd appreciate that, Paul. And we'll work with our media --

QUESTION: My question is like how long will you continue on these activities and programs? When do you think you achieve -- like you accomplished a mission in one of your provinces, for example? When will you be satisfied that you accomplish what you wanted to do and you can move to another city?

MR. O'FRIEL: I'll make a stab at answering that question. We want a tremendous opportunity here to work with willing counterparts to improve the daily lives of people. And what we've found in our interaction is that people want a better future for themselves and their children. It's hard to give any sort of fixed timeline because there's so many different things that could impact that effort. There are those who want chaos and anarchy and destruction because it serves their purposes. But what we're going to be working toward over the next year is to develop a consensus for

positive development. So I would hope by the end of this year or towards the beginning of next year is that we will have sufficient consensus to really have sustainable development taking place in the province of Muthanna.

MR. GALLEGOS: Yes.

QUESTION: Hi. This is Catherine Schmidt with the *Houston Chronicle*. So my question, you know, a lot of the news that we've been seeing out of Iraq has been you know, bad or at least a mixed message, so -- and there are a lot of people who argue that Iraq can't be stabilized. So from your work on the ground which, you know, is saying good news, do you think that we're reaching or approaching a tipping point towards stability in the country? And secondly, what would be the effect on you folks you know, this like nascent work you've been doing in the provinces if we were to withdraw?

MS. HAGERSTROM: If I can address that. It probably is very mixed. I'm in one area of Iraq and that's what I see. And I move from the very municipal level up to perhaps Anbar Province. So what's going on in Iraq right now is that there's a combination of what's happening locally all over. So there's not one story actually that represents all of Iraq. It is something that you have to see and whereas my story in Anbar and Ramadi is very positive right now. I'm not commenting on other sorts of areas. I'm not experiencing that.

MR. O'FRIEL: Let me make an invitation to you. I'd like you to come out to Muthanna and see on the ground just what we're doing. You're going to see Iraqis and Americans working together to build a better society. This is a good news story. And I think that people need to know about it. And this is a Shia province. These are people who want better lives for themselves. We've reached out an open hand and they've taken it. So I'd invite you to come to Muthanna and see for yourself on the ground and maybe open up a project with us.

MR. GALLEGOS: Are you all getting feedback in your --

MS. HAGERSTROM: Yeah, we are. We're getting feedback.

MR. GALLEGOS: Okay. I'll have the -- the techs are working on that.

MR. WEEMS: The process of creating good government takes time. And it is slow going. And sometimes a great leap forward is not the most glamorous story. When Wasit Province executes 100 percent of its budget this year, I'm sure that won't make the front page anywhere. But that is a huge step forward and it has been something that this PRT and I know other PRTs around the country have worked hard to enable their counterpart governments to spend Iraqi money to answer Iraqi needs. And this is a significant step, but it is one that will -- may go partly unnoticed.

We are initiating another project in Wasit to get young men -- unemployed young men off the street, give them some basic skills and working with an NGO in the province, have them use those skills to construct desks and furniture for the local school system, to do housing construction for some of the internally displaced persons in the province. Again, this is not a high-profile story, but it is a significant step forward -- getting Iraqis back to work in areas of high unemployment is a critical step forward and another contribution that the PRTs are making. So yes, I do think there's progress. It's hard to tell if we're at a tipping point, per se. But there's a lot of good news that I think goes unreported.

MR. GALLEGOS: Would one of you want to take on the -- her second question which had to do with the problem with

an early withdrawal?

MR. O'FRIEL: I think we're -- at this point in time, it's all hypotheticals. So let's be honest about that. But you know, clearly what we want to do right now is when we have the troop presence here to provide security is to develop those relationships that allow us to sustain whatever shock might come. It could be anything. But if we have strong relationships, we can deal with any type of early withdrawal because at that point we have a relationship and that relationship will be a strong one.

MR. GALLEGOS: Go ahead.

QUESTION: Molly Hooper, Fox News. I know that you just said this idea of a withdrawal is hypothetical, but it's also being discussed all over the place. And I am wondering what you are hearing, what concerns you're hearing from the people that you're working with at the local level, the provincial level. What are they saying to you and what questions are they asking you about a possible withdrawal?

MS. HAGERSTROM: Actually, in Ramadi it's very interesting because shopkeepers -- shopkeepers in the souk have a tendency to walk up to reporters or soldiers and Marines and say, "Please don't leave." They're very aware of the conversations going on about that, and they'll engage you in conversations saying, you know, we need you here right now.

I think all of them would like to see eventually us leave, but surely not now. I mean, that's what they keep emphasizing. We're still the key to their security. That's changing. They're taking over a lot of their own security, but they need us there right now. And it's some -- in some ways it's a little frightening to them. And when I talk to the mayor, my counterpart, the mayor in Ramadi, he's concerned. They watch the news also, so they know that. And they know that this isn't going to be forever, so they know they have to stand up and build their capacity to govern and provide services.

QUESTION: I would like to repeat the question. How are you providing -- how are you helping the tribals in Muthanna, in al-Wasit or -- not in Muthanna, in al-Wasit and al-Anbar in Ramadi? Are you providing them arms, money? How do you help them?

MR. WEEMS: I think that -- on behalf of Wasit, I think that I answered that question. We are at a preliminary stage in speaking with the tribes. We are not providing them with arms. We are not providing them with money. We are trying to understand, as I said, the needs of the people in their tribal areas and possible roles that they could play in the province. But at this stage, we don't have any -- certainly we're not providing them with arms or money.

MS. HAGERSTROM: In Anbar, also remember it's the tribals who are providing something to us. They're providing the bodies for the Iraqi police and the Iraqi army, in fact. So they come in and a year ago there were less than a thousand Iraqi police in all of Ramadi, and now there are around 10,000. So these have all come -- basically come from the tribes because the tribal leaders went to their people and say it's time for us to do this, to join in with the police and join the Iraqi army.

MR. GALLEGOS: To move this along a bit, there's been a report out discussing, first of all, the effectiveness of the PRTs, how successful have they really been, how much difference are they making. And then the second point of the IG report discussed the fact that there doesn't seem to be a -- haven't developed a mechanism to measure the success

in any formal way. Could you all discuss those two points a little bit: number one, how effective do you all think you can be, are you being there? I think you've outlined some tremendous successes, some positive directions that you're heading. Maybe clarify what you all see as what qualifies a success for a program there and then talk a bit about how you measure that success.

MR. O'FRIEL: Sure, I would say that PRTs are the way to go. They're the future of what we're going to be doing here because they're engaging the population. So they are successful. They have been successful. Certainly we in Muthanna have gone from our initial engagement now to a much more deeper and wider one. We're reaching out to a whole range of people and really addressing basic human needs.

In terms of metrics, in any type of conflict like this metrics are a very hard thing to come up with. But if I'm going into Ramadan food distribution and at the end of it a lady on -- is telling Iraqi television -- is that she is so grateful to us for what we did and the generosity that we showed, that's a pretty good metric. If I go into a village that has not had water since it was first founded, and the people there say we're grateful to you because you've taken this initiative in partnership with our local sheikh to do this, that's a metric.

At this point, you know, we can talk about hard metrics, soft metrics, but the PRTs are our way forward. And what you have is you have three different PRTs in each different province. Each province -- as they say all politics is local -- each province has its own identity. And so each approach is based upon a reading by the Team Leader of the local circumstances on the ground. So it's tailored for the situation. But it is the way forward. We've got a very talented group of people here. I've got fantastic people on my team and I could say that each one of my colleagues has on their team as well. We're out. We're in harm's way. Every time we go out, we face the threat of an improvised explosive device or any other threat. But we have people willing to do that because we collectively believe that we can make a difference. And I would argue to you that on the ground we are. And if you don't believe that, as I said, come out and see for yourself.

MR. GALLEGOS: (Inaudible.)

QUESTION: Presumably, the Special Inspector General and his team have been there. They've looked. They've examined, presumably, or maybe you know that they haven't. Where are they getting -- how are they getting a different kind of impression?

MS. HAGERSTROM: I think because they're not actually here on the ground with us every day and seeing the movement, seeing the progress. The problem with any sort of a -- and I haven't read this inspection report, I haven't had time -- is they come and take a snapshot of what it looks like months ago, and I believe they were here in April or something, before actually the EPRTs had been stood up, take a snapshot. And by the time it gets out -- we find this in our own service. Whatever people were complaining about the PRTs, that was probably the problem six months ago. That one's probably been taken care of and we probably have a new one.

Our organization in the State Department and the Embassy has been very responsive to -- if we see something wrong and we need it fixed, they do it if we bring it to them. Again, I haven't read the report. But you know, you have to remember things are different at different parts of Iraq. People are moving at different paces. We have a Team Leader who is working Sadr City, where his pace is going to be a little bit different than in Ramadi. Has that team been successful? Well, you've got to measure it against what they're facing there on the ground. You really do.

QUESTION: You mentioned about the gratitude of the ordinary people that you come into contact with and other -- some of your local counterparts. I'm sorry, my name is Viola Gienger. I'm with Bloomberg News. It's one thing for people to be polite and grateful and for, you know, in anecdotal situations. How much are you seeing ordinary people either believing in the prospect or understanding that what they need to do is take active -- have active participation in something, whatever can resemble a civil society way there right now? I mean, is there -- what evidence are you showing that there's some understanding building of that?

MR. WEEMS: We see evidence of it every day. Now, I'll caveat that by saying it will take time for the citizens and -- the citizens of Wasit to look to the provincial government, to look to the local government as the providers of basic services and security. But I have -- and am inspired, frankly, every day by the commitment of Iraqi citizens who are willing to work with us on civil society efforts, NGOs that are willing to, frankly, put themselves at risk in order to initiate some of the programs that I discussed earlier. There are committed Iraqis who have in their mind a vision of a strong, economically and political strong Iraq. And they put their lives on the line every day and it is a tremendous inspiration to me and I know to the rest of those in the PRT program.

At the provincial level and the government officials themselves, I see their interest in what we have to offer. The agriculture specialists on my team have linked up with the agriculture working group and they're trading ideas, they're trading different visions of how to revitalize and improve the agriculture economy in the province.

At the local level -- and you have to remember that at the municipal level that is a level of government in Iraq that has never had power, has never had authority or responsibility, yet I meet with mayors and local councils that want to talk about urban planning, that want to talk about how to spend money in an intelligent and smart way for their people.

These are very hopeful signs to me. It will take time to build faith and hope amongst the entire population, but I see signs of movement in that direction all the time.

MS. HAGERSTROM: If I could respond also, one place we've seen an incredible growth is the number of women who will come out to events, who feel safe enough now to do that. And by the way, you know, this whole thing about people being grateful, we don't do that. I mean, to me the thing that's very important is to build up the local government and the local -- even with the imams and with the Iraqi police and the tribal leaders. We steer away from us taking a box of school supplies and handing them out. Basic counterinsurgency, you don't do that. You -- those supplies need to go to the schoolmaster. You don't need to be seen passing things out. What you want to do is build up your institutions and your NGOs and the Iraqis. How much better it is for a child to receive something from its own government, from people who are also Iraqis, rather than an American passing something out? So you won't see much of that in Ramadi. I -- we don't do that. We don't need anyone being grateful. We work in the background. I mean, a lot of times I work with the local women's groups to -- for them to put on an event or something. We're not there. This is theirs. This is for them to do. And if we can help them organize, give them a little bit of money to do something, that's the way it should be.

MR. GALLEGOS: All right. Well, did you all have any final words?

MS. HAGERSTROM: I wanted to say one thing. I -- just before I left Ramadi a couple of days ago, the commander of the brigade where I worked showed me some really stark statistics, comparing Ramadan from last year to this year. Last year during Ramadan, there were some place around 70 IED attacks in the city of Ramadan, I mean in the city of

Ramadi, sorry. The same period this year, not a one. There were in fact within the city proper only two incidents in all of Ramadi and those were both some small arms incidents. Last year during Ramadan, there were no caches discovered. This year, something like thirty caches and all of those were turned in by the locals. It's very interesting to me to compare the same period -- that Ramadan period. al-Qaida had talked about coming back in during Ramadan. And it just -- it didn't happen. And with the murder of Sheikh Sattar, I think initially they -- maybe at the first, there was some fear. But I had where -- the people of Ramadi, I've had people come to me and say, you know what, al-Qaida miscalculated. They felt that would chase us away that would somehow stop us, stop our progress. When the truth was they said, we're all in it. They're all in this. And killing one man as horrible as that was, did not kill their momentum in what they're doing.

MR. GALLEGOS: Well, I want to thank you all.

MR. WEEMS: I'd just to finish up with two quick points, please. Can I just say just two things quickly? One last thing that I'd like to say is that about a week ago, ten days ago, there was a demonstration in front of the Provincial council in Al Kut. It was about seventy farmers who had come downtown to Kut to demonstrate about land reform issues. It was a peaceful demonstration. But just the fact that they thought that they could come downtown and speak openly to the provincial government and they thought to do it because they expected some change is exactly the kind of hope and faith that I want to see in the citizens of Wasit. I agree that we don't care much about gratitude. I don't really care if those people are grateful, but that we have strengthened the provincial and local governments enough that people think that they can affect change by speaking to them or demonstrating. That is the kind of progress that I want to see.

Thanks very much.

MR. GALLEGOS: We appreciate your efforts. I hope you all have a great day. Thank you.

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