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[Special Briefing](#)**Office of the Spokesman**

Washington, DC

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Briefing On Reconstruction Progress in Iraq

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With Thomas F. Burke, Jr., Provincial Reconstruction Team (Embedded) Baghdad 5 Team Leader, and Col. Paul E. Funk II, Commander of the 1st "Iron Horse" Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division

(10:30 a.m. EST)

MR. GALLEGOS: Good morning. I want to thank you all for attending. Today, we have Provincial Reconstruction Team Leader Thomas Burke. He's at Provincial Reconstruction Team 5 in Baghdad. And we have Colonel Paul Funk, who is Brigade Commander, 1st "Iron Horse" Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division. I'm going to ask them both to have some words with you all, describe what they're doing, how they're doing it, who they're doing it with, and then we'll open it up for some questions.

Gentlemen, if you'd like to begin.

MR. BURKE: Okay. Well, if you don't mind. Good morning to everybody. My name is Tom Burke. And sitting next to me is Colonel Paul Funk, the Commander of the 1st Combat Brigade for the 1st Cavalry Division out of Fort Hood, Texas.

I am the Department of State Team Leader of the Embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team, commonly called Baghdad 5, or EPRT Baghdad 5. And I've been here at Camp Taji, which is north of Baghdad, for four months. I am a career Foreign Service officer with over 20 years of diplomatic service in such countries at Yemen, Belarus, Sri Lanka, Venezuela, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Israel, India and many others. I also happen to be a retired Army Special Forces officer who has served 20 years in the military prior to joining the State Department with several tours in Vietnam. And I like to call Jacksonville, Florida home now.

Let me tell you a little bit about what it is that I do. My team consists of nine Department of Defense military and civilian personnel, along with a USAID representative and three bicultural, bilateral advisors.

All of these people have stepped up to meet the requirements of the surge until other state and federal agency colleagues can be assigned to the team. They are all volunteers from the active Army Reserve, National Guard, US Navy and USAID. Many have taken on jobs that they were not initially assigned for. But the beauty in working with such a team about (inaudible) is their adaptability to learn new skills and apply them in such a difficult environment in this unique and important mission. We are embedded directly with the 1st Brigade Combat team. In fact, we are so far embedded that some folks think I'm Paul Funk's shadow as we travel together throughout the countryside.

Our area of responsibility is rural and agricultural in nature and it's large. There are numerous villages of all sizes, several small to medium towns, and two small cities. The primary economic activity here is agriculture. We do have 27 former state-owned enterprises though, of which we are working to restart seven of them based on their regional economic impact.

The reconciliation movement is clearly evident in this area and a principal effort within the team and the brigade. The sheikhs and the villagers (inaudible) awakening. It involves the informal leaders of both the Sunni and Shia sects recognizing the need to work together to build to their country and to secure their families and to give hope to the future.

Over a period of several months, the reconciliation has gathered momentum through the dynamic efforts of Paul Funk's leaders engaging several key Sunni and Shia sheikhs and a dialogue towards establishing a secure future. The changes in Abu Ghraib and Taji began with a simple outreach promoting the idea of an Iraqi national unity against terrorism. The first reconciliation meeting was only a dozen sheikhs. Since then, the sheikhs have held two other large reconciliation meetings, involving hundreds of tribal elders and village businessmen.

The sheikhs are now using their traditional roles to bring about reconciliation and to promote local governance. This movement is building momentum and the government in Baghdad needs to ensure that they continue to focus on providing solutions to the challenges faced by the provinces.

USAID and its partners have stepped in with several key infrastructure programs that are showing results every day as you travel through the villages and developing employment for people through their various partners.

In the four months that I've been here that we've been able to operate together, the security situation has changed dramatically. Reconciliation has expanded and continues to do so. Because of this, my team, the EPRT, has been able to get out and work in coordination with the maneuver units of the brigade along with the local citizens and the community leaders and begin the real work towards reconstruction and development to a self-sustaining Iraq-led community.

Our primary goal as an EPRT is aimed at reconciliation and developing the economy in our area. USAID contributions have resulted in developing dynamic short and long-term programs involving agriculture, both crop and livestock, as well as in local governance programs. There is great support and enthusiasm from the populace as they want safety, prosperity and a chance for a better life for their children. More are looking for small business opportunities. They are signing up for public works projects, to be part of the security forces, are going back to farming and agricultural production.

However, there are great and ongoing challenges faced by the Government of Iraq in meeting the needs of the people and the provinces which extend to our local governments and village councils. Unfortunately, there remains neither a budget nor authority to raise local revenues or taxes for common operational or administrative government functions. And there is no capital budget authority for the local councils to actually pay for improvements in their communities or the hiring of (inaudible) public works. We have been training our local councils in basic government processes and procedures, but we have a big gap with a lack of fiscal authority. Until that is corrected, all the Iraqi funds remain very centralized and the government remains a top-driven entity without being able to pass laws in support of its people.

I really appreciate the opportunity to be talking with you today and now, I'll turn the podium over to Colonel Funk.

COL FUNK: Hi, good morning. I'm Paul Funk, the Commander of the 1st Brigade Combat Team of the 1st Cavalry Division. Thank you for the opportunity to answer your questions today. I have a few brief comments that will help accent Tom's statement.

The 1st Brigade Combat Team has been responsible for the northern and western outskirts of Baghdad since December of 2006. It covers the portions of three qadas, which are a U.S. equivalent to a county or a parish (inaudible) qada west Baghdad, the Taji qada north of Baghdad and the Tarmia qada a bit further north than Taji and also a small portion of the al-Anbar Province, about 375 square miles. We stand about 4,000 troopers strong and work daily, side by side with three Iraqi army brigades who are actively working to bring a sustainable security arrangement to the local populace as we transition to Iraqi security force control.

This security arrangement is Iraqi army, Iraqi police, and volunteers from the local Sunni and Shia tribes who have grown weary of the intimidation tactics of extremist elements, working together to secure their homes, their children and their future through coordination amongst themselves, the tribes, and the local government. From a security perspective, there has been a significant progress with the change in tactic (inaudible) surge, our direct targeting of extremist cells and their financing, the brutal tactics of al-Qaida and the resulting growth and migration of the awakening into our area of responsibility, the growth and capacity of the Iraqi security forces and the subsequent creation of a sustainable security arrangement, we have seen attacks drop from an average of 150 a week in late January and February timeframe to less than seven attacks just last week.

The result has been nothing short of phenomenal. When I walk through the local markets, they're full. Small businesses are erupting everywhere. And we use micro grants in-kind to help fuel this small business momentum. A sense of a return to normalcy has caught on; remarkable progress, but we still have a long way to go. The extremist threat still remains. These extremists who have lost (inaudible) spectacular attacks in order to create the perception that Iraq is out of control and to convince the people that the Iraqi Government is simply unable to protect them. We will continue to see these attacks, but they are beginning to be the exception, not the rule. Since the evolution of the sustainable security arrangement and the subsequent drop in attacks, the people no longer talk about security as a prime concern. Now it's services, government, academics for their children and the future. Security does not truly exist through the use of force.

The next stage of this campaign involves a concerted level of follow-through to connect those who have chosen to reconcile to the local and national governments and to a continued marginalization of extremist elements. How? Well (inaudible) governance and essential services. We have used the Commander's Emergency Response Program to hire those who have chosen to reconcile to secure their communities and to reestablish essential services, such as

irrigation, electricity, trash, sewage, roads and (inaudible) schools and to invest in local businesses. We have hired thousands in public works initiatives to provide the workforce needed to keep the essential services running and to invest in the local economy and to take away the extremist option of using money as an incentive to attack the Government of Iraq and our soldiers.

These programs have been working effectively, yet the simple fact of these programs are funded by the coalition. We see the funding with the help now of USAID as a bridging strategy to push local government capacity to fund and manage these (inaudible) work with the provincial and national government of Iraq not only to see the benefit of these Civil Service initiatives to solidifying the gains from reconciliation, but to fund them as an enduring investment into the future of Iraq. Our relationship with the local Iraqi leaders and the leadership demonstrated by Tom and the EPRT have been pivotal in moving away from the coalition force-generated initiatives, to working with local and provincial governments' leaders to build the capacity to manage their own incentives. This is the follow-through needed to cement the gains of the surge and to allow Iraq to step forward. Thank you for your time. And Tom and I look forward to answering your questions.

MR. GALLEGOS: Thank you, gentlemen.

Samir.

QUESTION: Okay.

MR. GALLEGOS: Could you identify yourself and your organization, please?

QUESTION: Yes. My name is Samir Nader. I'm with Radio Sawa. Mr. Burke, why do you think this awakening for reconciliation among the tribal leaders and the improvement in security is going parallel at the same time? I mean, it's kind of a new development. Why is this happening?

MR. BURKE: Why is the reconciliation happening?

QUESTION: No. I mean, with the improvement in security --

MR. BURKE: I think it's a -- I think -- thank you for your question. I think the best way to answer your question is that as people are able to leave their homes, as they're able to travel to the stores, as they're able to integrate once again into a common society, the next step for them is to reconcile, to talk to each other, to begin the process of forgiveness (inaudible) under the current government. So security has allowed them to step outside their homes, security has allowed them to gather. The tribes, the people are now beginning to reconcile. And up here in Taji, the sheikhs and the people have started calling it "the awakening." Samir, I hope that answers your question.

QUESTION: Okay. Thanks.

MR. GALLEGOS: Michelle Kellerman with NPR.

QUESTION: Yes. Thank you. I wonder, Mr. Burke, if you could weigh into this whole debate back here in Washington about the possibility that some of your colleagues might be forced to take on assignments in Iraq if not enough volunteers come forward this week? The blogs have been filled with responses from one of your colleagues out there, John Matel. Tell me a little bit about what you would tell to people who are considering going to serve there?

MR. BURKE: You're going to put me on my bully pulpit then, I guess.

QUESTION: (Laughter.)

MR. BURKE: First of all, I don't think the comments that were made last week represent all of the Foreign Service officers in the United States Government. And to answer your question, I'm going to try to respond in this way. When we joined the Department, we signed an oath, that oath implies certain responsibilities. I don't think any of us expected that we'd have to go serve in a war. But you know, there's thousands of Foreign Service and Civil Service officers and their families stationed abroad and they're heroes, just as much as the heroes are over here in Iraq. The people serving the United States Government in other countries face increased threats because they are United States diplomatic persons.

I would say that -- there's an old expression the army used to have and maybe they still do -- it's "lead or get out of the way." You signed an oath, we signed an oath. You have the decision to make, once you sign the oath if you're given a task that you do not feel you can perform. But as I understand it from some side of the blogs, that there are many officers who are coming forward to take these challenging assignments, recognizing that Iraq has evolved into the United States' number one goal overseas and that's to establish political stability. It's a hard thing to say no to. There are folks out there though who can't come overseas, who don't want to come overseas. They have to make a choice: if they're going to stick with the Department, if they have special skills that are needed over here (inaudible) and go find another job. I hope that answers your question.

QUESTION: If I could just ask one follow-up just to give me a sense of whether you feel that you're contributing. I mean, one of the issues is does the U.S. State Department really need 250 people out there in the field? Do you feel like you can accomplish what you've been sent out to do?

MR. BURKE: I serve in an embedded PRT, with some of the greatest men and women that I've ever served with in my lifetime. That includes Foreign Service colleagues as well. I wake up smiling every day and wanting to come to work because Paul Funk and I basically go out every day and I get to see what people in Baghdad can't see and that's people out there farming, cleaning canals, in their markets, talking. And yeah, I think I'm making a large contribution out here on an EPRT (inaudible) in one of the best assignments to this date and time after 20 years. I hope that answers your question.

QUESTION: Yes. Thank you.

MR. GALLEGOS: Yes, ma'am.

QUESTION: (Inaudible), New Zealand. I was curious in reading a USAID report. It had one paragraph about how people had gone out and given loans to start small businesses and one of the small businesses started was to sell cell phones. And I just -- there's two questions and that -- one is I noticed, Colonel, that you called them -- rather than saying loans, you

said micro grants in-kind and is that a cultural thing? And the other one is I think cell phones are used as part of the IED thing. Is there some kind of balance you have to do between getting people up and running and doing things and ensuring that you're not enabling the bad elements?

MR. BURKE: Well, that's a great question, and absolutely. Everything is about balance. The -- as far as I know, we have not provided any grants in-kind or any micro grants or micro loans to any cell phone businesses. We probably would and we know several guys that are selling cell phones down in the market that we would trust. So the grants in-kind, though, are more about getting people the tools they need to succeed in business, no matter what kind of business they might have.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MR. GALLEGOS: Samir.

QUESTION: I would like to ask the Colonel, what are the security challenges now after the improvement in security? What are the remaining challenges? I mean, is al-Qaida still strong?

COL FUNK: (Inaudible)

MR. GALLEGOS: I'm sorry. Colonel, if you can hear me, we lost the audio, right as you started that response. So let's see if we can get it back up here and let's see if we can keep it going. Sorry, we lost you right as you started to answer that, Colonel. Would you mind giving us a -- responding again to that last question?

COL FUNK: Absolutely. We'll, let me start first by saying, while al-Qaida is not strong, they are still dangerous. And there are other extremist elements in this country that still have to be dealt with and we'll continue to deal with them on a daily basis. But we are pursuing al-Qaida throughout our area of operations.

MR. GALLEGOS: Thank you.

Did you have a follow-up, Samir?

QUESTION: Yes.

MR. GALLEGOS: Yes. Go ahead.

QUESTION: How do you assess the influence of the roles by neighboring countries like Syria and Iran? Are they playing -- continue to play a negative role in the security situation?

COL FUNK: Well, I will tell you, I will still say that the borders remain porous although they're getting better. And I would also say that there are some influences in this country that are not -- from other actors that are not positive in moving Iraq forward.

MR. GALLEGOS: Michelle.

QUESTION: I just wonder if there is some sort of long-term thinking about how long you envision this particular PRT is needed in that region, how long -- whether there's thinking about once you guys pull out, will these -- how do you judge whether the reconciliation efforts are enough?

MR. BURKE: I think I'll take that for a second. I think we're going to be here as long as (inaudible) it's an indefinite, but I -- it's an indefinite answer. I don't think anybody can put a time on it. I can tell you that what we're doing right now is we're -- government has changed from a centralized government to decentralized. You have the government in Baghdad that is trying to build their own -- build and develop their capacity, and you have the same thing out here in the provinces. And it's going to take time. Will EPRTs be needed as long as the brigades are out here? I believe that we facilitate the work that they do. I think we bring a little bit -- we bring a civilian side of the house to what it is that the brigade does under civil-military operations. So I think that EPRTs will be here as long as the military is out in the field.

QUESTION: If I could just follow up --

MR. BURKE: (Inaudible) after they go -- please, go ahead.

QUESTION: I was going to ask about sort of the dealings with the sheikhs. You know, I mean, this is an area of the world where the alliances shift all the time, whether there are any sort of guarantees that you can, you know, leave, that you can leave this place in a -- with a functioning government with allies that are there.

MR. BURKE: Well, I think, Paul, I'll take part of it and maybe you can respond to it.

COL FUNK: Okay, great.

MR. BURKE: Dealing with the sheikhs, in my opinion, has been one of the most fantastic opportunities I've ever had. There's no guarantees in this business of diplomacy as there's no guarantees in some businesses. But the sheikhs have been true to their word to us at this point in time, and that's important to me. Here, a man's word is a man's bond. When I'm at a sheikh's house, I'm under his protection. And when he tells me he's going to do something, he either delivers or he doesn't promise anything. So I believe for the short term that the sheikhs' words are great, that they believe in reconciliation and their alliances, and that they will keep them as long as the government continues to grow and as long as the government continues to provide services. I'll switch it over to Paul.

COL FUNK: And just to go back on the first part of your question, I think that now is the time for the diplomats to be here. I think they're absolutely vital. I think that this program and actually linking all the lines of operation together is critical in moving this country forward. Tom and I work in a true partnership. We spend a lot of time together. And believe it or not, we can -- we work things out. And that's the important piece. More importantly, he gives me the counsel I need when we're talking to some of the sheikhs or some of the local governments, and he knows how that is supposed to work. I'm a soldier and he's the diplomat, and we kind of keep it that way and it seems to work.

On the second part of your question, I think what has fundamentally changed here in this country is the fact that the people are sick of the extremists, both the Sunni and Shia extremists; that people just want to get on and move in peace, and we're here to facilitate that.

MR. BURKE: I hope that answers your question.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MR. GALLEGOS: Okay, any other questions? Charlie?

QUESTION: No, I'm good.

MR. GALLEGOS: Well, gentlemen, I want to thank you for your time. I appreciate your efforts, and thank you for the work you're doing out there. Have a safe day. Godspeed.

MR. BURKE: Thank you very much. It was nice talking to you all. Have a good day.

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