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**Presenter: Lieutenant General John R. Vines, Commander,
Multinational Corps Iraq**

**Tuesday, June 21, 2005 9:00 a.m.
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Briefing on Security Operations in Iraq

STAFF: Well, I have 9:00, at the top of the hour right now, so let's go ahead and get started. I see we have General Vines. Good morning to everybody.

Our briefer today is Lieutenant General John R. Vines. He's the commander of the 18th Airborne Corps, but is currently serving in Iraq as the commander for Multinational Corps Iraq. As Multinational Corps commander, General Vines is the commander in charge of coalition forces operations in Iraq. He's going to provide us with a brief operational update and then he'll entertain some questions from you.

He cannot see you, as you can see him, so when we go to questions if you could please identify yourself and your news organization that would help him recognize some of you, because I know that many of you have met with General Vines before in the past.

So what that, General, thank you for joining us this morning, and I'll turn it over to you.

GEN. VINES: Thanks. It's good to be there with you from Baghdad. It's about 110 and dusty, but the soldiers are magnificent.

Let me talk just briefly about a couple of things going on here in country. As you know, next week will mark the first anniversary of sovereignty of Iraq, where the government assumed responsibilities for its own governance. It was the 28th of June of 2004. Since that time, there's been significant progress throughout the country. Very successful elections were conducted in late January of this year, despite threats of intimidation and attempts to disrupt the election. The transitional government has been seated; the Transitional National Assembly has been seated. The writing of the constitution is under way, and we expect that there will be a constitution drafted, a referendum in October of this year, and then we anticipate that there will be national elections in December of this year. That's the current timeline.

The security forces of Iraq are continuing to make significant progress. There are over 100 battalions of the Iraqi army fielded, and over 80,000 other forces -- border police, Ministry of Interior forces, Facilities Protection Services -- have been fielded. Their performance on the whole has been very good. Where they're well led, they've proven that they are patriotic, they're willing to fight, and they do extraordinarily well.

On a given day, today, for example, typically there are about 30 battalion-sized combined operations

involving coalition and Iraqi forces throughout the country that are taking place in Baghdad. All of you, I assume, have heard of Al Barq. It's been quite successful in the security of Baghdad. Veterans Forward is in the northwest in the Tal Afar area, western Ninawa province. And then out in Al Anbar province the Marines are conducting Operation Spear out there and they're having good effects out there.

But Iraqi security forces are operational throughout the country, and on the whole, they're doing quite well.

And so my concern, quite frankly, is not about their ability to conduct the operations. It's about continuing to develop national capacity, so those forces can be fed, so those forces can be sustained with equipment and spare parts and replacement personnel and the like. So development of government capacity is a concern, and it continues to develop. But that will, I think, be critical to the success of the security line of operation here in Iraq.

The soldiers of the coalition are magnificent. Late last week I presented a squad of the 617th MP Company, Kentucky Army National Guard, three Silver Stars, two Bronze Stars with V for "valor," included two females. A magnificent action. It was, quite honestly, one of the most compelling combined arms operations that I have seen. It just combined everything we expect and ask soldiers to do, and they epitomize the citizen soldiers. Soldiers are doing a great job.

In a way, the operations here in Iraq and indeed across the United States have perhaps created a bit of complacency with some elements of our population, because they've been relatively successful. The United States has not been attacked again since 11 September. And so there's some questioning, perhaps, of whether or not what's going on here is worth it. Critic -- quite honestly, I think we have a pretty clear-cut choice. We either deal with terrorism and this extremism abroad, or we deal with it when it comes to us, as it would inevitably, as it has previously.

So the security forces of our country -- our police, our homeland security elements, our intelligence services and our military operations -- all have contributed to that.

So overall, I think, that's some of the challenges that we face here in Iraq. And I'll be happy to try to answer your questions at this time.

STAFF: Charlie?

Q: General, Charlie Aldinger with Reuters. There was expectation early in the year that you and other commanders in Iraq would be ready to recommend by about this time a possible date or the possible beginning of some kind of permanent draw-down of U.S. forces in Iraq. Are you ready to do that?

And if I might tack on a couple other things, how many troops does the U.S. now have in Iraq? And do you expect you'll begin drawing those down before the referendum and the elections, or will you have a spike in size then? I guess, first, are you ready to recommend or have you recommended beginning of a permanent draw-down?

GEN. VINES: We're not at that point yet. We continually assess the capabilities of the Iraqi security forces. We say that it is conditions-based. And clearly we know that insurgents will do everything they can to disrupt ratification of a constitution. To them, that's a terrifying event, that the government is established in Iraq.

The decision ultimately over whether or not and when to draw down will not be made at my level. I will be a part of that recommendation. At this point, I would not be prepared to recommend a draw-down prior to the election, certainly not any significant numbers.

It may be that some of the units that are here now, we will not ask for replacements. And we continue to assess that, and we're not at the point where we make that decision yet.

Q: Again, if only to follow up briefly, how many forces does the United States now have in Iraq? And do you expect there might be a spike, in fact, more, to provide security for the referendum and then the general election?

GEN. VINES: Well, there's about 135,000 U.S. forces here in Iraq, and then there's some others around the region that provide support, so it depends on how you add those up. Conditions will dictate that. Right now, I would not be in a position to recommend any spike; I don't see that. Is it possible? Yes, if we think the conditions have changed, but right now I don't foresee a spike to support that referendum.

Q: Thank you.

Q: General Vines, it's Bret Baier from Fox News Channel. We've heard a lot about the insurgency and what the makeup is. And heard some from Operation Spear that there's more evidence of increased numbers of foreign fighters. Can you break down what the enemy looks like for us? And, sir, is there a division within the enemy ranks, perhaps foreign fighters versus Iraqi insurgents?

GEN. VINES: Good question, Bret. Good to talk to you.

There are four broad groups, I think, within this insurgency, and the insurgency, quite honestly, is quite narrow. The level of support for violence is pretty narrow. The jihadists or the Zarqawi elements -- sometimes referred to the al Qaeda and associated movements here in country -- that number is not very large, but it is very violent. It has access to some technical capability, and it uses foreign fighters, historically, primarily to murder other Iraqis. It brings in foreigners, and they kill themselves and others, sometimes in vehicles, sometimes with -- they'll put a vest on and detonate it among a group. And it's -- so foreigners that are brought in typically do things that Iraqis won't do to each other. That's the history of them.

There are also some Sunni religious extremists within the country. That is also a fairly narrow group. Their opposition to the new government is based on religious objections. Again, that group is quite small, but it is very violent.

Then, there's some regime elements who essentially -- a broader group, a few thousand, perhaps, and if they had a bumper sticker it would probably say, "If you like Saddam, you'd love us," because they want to resume power. And then, there's also some -- a broader group of principally Sunni, but a large -- a fairly significant number of Iraqis want to see all foreign forces leave the country, and that's understandable. We have no long-term objectives here.

So I'd say it's four broad groups.

Q: What about the division? Is there potentially a division between foreign fighters and Iraqi insurgents developing?

GEN. VINES: Well, I would say absolutely. Foreign fighters coming in here to murder Iraqis; it's astonishing to me that that is not clearly evident to many Iraqis; that people recruited in other countries by extremists who wish to seize power are brought in to murder children, women, innocent men and women. And what we see here is those people are hidden from the Iraqi populace. They don't circulate freely, and they're kept in small cells. And then, they're brought forward to when they're ready to their murderous work.

And so, yes, there is a very definite schism between the foreign fighters and the average Iraqi.

STAFF: Jim?

Q: General, if the number of insurgents and foreign fighters is relatively small, and there is a division between the foreign fighters and the insurgency, how is it then that we've seen in the past two months probably some of the deadliest months since the end of major combat? And what can you tell us about the increased sophistication of the enemy forces there? Where is that coming from? Is it internal, or are they getting outside help?

GEN. VINES: It appears to us that they're getting outside help to conduct their insurgency. Attacks against the civilian populace were certainly -- were, in May -- was the highest total since major combat operations terminated in 2003. And it is primarily, again, murders in mass numbers: people who drive cars into mosques or into crowded markets and detonate them. And again, it's very difficult to protect a populace against someone who is willing to murder themselves and others. And so we've seen an increased attack against them.

The foreign fighters are what amounts to a terrorist cruise missile. They can target a specific element without having to worry about their own survival. So they chose to use those in numbers. And because in reality, the insurgency is not very broad; you're not seeing large numbers of armed groups, you're seeing one- and two-person cells that are attacking a large group by driving into a crowded market and detonating themselves.

Q: But if I could follow up please from this other sophistication aspect; just how sophisticated has the enemy become? And where is it believed that they are getting this outside advice, expertise?

GEN. VINES: Well, they are certainly getting some outside advice, but there is some technical expertise that was resident in the Iraqi army, probably from their explosive ordnance personnel. And in reality, it is not so much that there's incredible technical expertise, but we see occasionally multiple IEDs. We might see an improvised explosive device that would detonate, and then when the first responders are there, both the Iraqi security forces and the coalition forces arrive on the scene, perhaps one will detonate 30 minutes later. Their tactics have become more sophisticated -- in some cases -- to be sure. And so that is, again -- terrorism enabled by some limited military capacity. And it is resident here in the country.

Q: And I'm sorry to press this, but where is this outside expertise coming from? Is that known?

GEN. VINES: The suicide bombers, of course, you know -- you heard where they're probably coming from. They're coming from places like Sudan, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Egypt. That is our belief. The tactical expertise to do that, that capability exists here in the country.

Q: General, Lisa Meyer from AP Radio. I want to get you to clarify a couple of things that you said earlier in your statement. You said that where the Iraqi forces are well-led, that they're performing well. Is there a leadership problem which exists, or is it simply that you can't get people up and running, I guess, quickly enough? And the other thing that I wanted to ask you about: you were saying that there are -- your concern is about government capacity to support operations. Can you go on a little bit on what you mean by that?

GEN. VINES: Sure. Leadership is something that has to be developed. People don't just walk up and say, "I'm a leader," and demonstrate capacity. And so -- keep in mind that we hit the one-year mark next week. And so leaders have to develop. And there have been many strong leaders that have emerged, and mid-grade leaders in other units still have to be found. And let's just be honest about that.

So it is not a case of not having quality persons. They exist, but sometimes you have to make sure that

they're in the right place. And so developing leaders takes a long time. We know this, for example, in the United States military. It's a career-long progression.

In terms of national capacity, many of the things that we take for granted, for example, in the United States -- our logistical support that comes from a well-developed Department of Defense and our various depots, our personnel systems that ensure well-trained replacements, the ability to deliver pay on time, every time; those capacities are not resident in a government that didn't exist a year ago. And so we have to make sure that when we're providing food for soldiers, that that food is available every day. When we're providing life support, that it's available every day.

And so developing the capacity for a bureaucracy, which -- bureaucracy has taken on, perhaps, a negative connotation in some parts of the United States. But a bureaucracy is necessary to sustain a government, and certainly to sustain security forces. And that's what's in the process of being developed, and it takes time.

Q: If I could just follow up on that. How long do you think that's going to take? A year, two years, five?

GEN. VINES: It'll be a continuous process. And that is not my primary area of focus. I use the forces that the bureaucracy sustains and fields. And so I have less visibility on that. Other agencies are working that, and we've seen progress. But I suspect they will be working at still developing capacity a couple years from now. That would be my guess.

STAFF ?: (Go ahead ?), Jim Mannion.

Q: General, Jim Mannion from Agence France-Presse. There have been two basic views of the insurgency expressed. One is that it's in its last throes, and the other is that it's going to be -- this is a situation that's going to continue for years. Where do you see it?

GEN. VINES: The solution to the insurgency in Iraq is not a purely political solution. It has to be a government that's acceptable to the broad populace as a group. That has to be acceptable -- Sunni, Shi'a, Kurd and other elements. And if that government, if the transitional government has the wisdom to oversee the constitutional drafting and drafts a constitution that is acceptable to the larger segments of the population and is ratified -- I mean, my assessment is the insurgency could dwindle down very quickly. And that remains to be seen what form the constitution will take.

It could be sustained militarily for a period of time. Our responsibility is to provide space and time for this process to work, so that this new government and the constitutional process, the election process, is allowed to proceed without being murdered in its infancy by insurgents who don't want to see it succeed.

The Iraqi security forces are making good progress, but the solution ultimately will be a political one, of course.

STAFF: Jim?

Q: Sir, Jim Garamone with American Forces Press Service. The level of attacks, I guess, is up to around 70 per day. Are you seeing any drop-off in recruiting for Iraqi security forces or a drop in the intelligence tips that you get from the Iraqi population because of this increased level of attacks?

GEN. VINES: No, not at all. Recruiting remains very strong. And in fact, the tips are up.

That's one of the things we monitor very closely, is how effective the attacks are. And it's not just

whether or not they're attacks; it is what is the effect on the Iraqi population, because let's be honest about that. That is -- what they're attempting to do is to intimidate, threaten, coerce the population. And we see increased evidence that the population is rejecting the insurgency. It is rejecting attacks against the population.

You know, imagine: Zarqawi asserts that it is acceptable to murder innocent Iraqis, to murder innocent Muslims in the pursuit of his objectives. Iraqis obviously don't agree with that.

And so the number of tips are up. And that's one of the indicators that we continually monitor, is whether -- what's the effect on the population. And we see the population increasingly rejecting the insurgency at large. It wants to see an Iraqi government that provides for its own security.

STAFF: The general did Jim's, so let's go to John's. (Laughter.)

Q: John Lumpkin with AP. Trying to follow up on Charlie's question from the beginning, am I to take your statements as that we should expect to see roughly the same level of troops in Iraq for the foreseeable future? U.S. troops, that is.

GEN. VINES: No, I don't think you can say that. I mean, there's -- there are a lot of factors. If, for example, there was a political solution and an agreement by some of the leading elements and the conditions changed, it could come down. The force structure could come down.

I will make a recommendation based on military conditions. And those conditions right now -- I'm assuming that the insurgency will remain at about its current level. What we see in terms of numbers of attacks, what we see in numbers of tips; what we see in the flow of foreign fighters, which is quite small, it is relatively static, it's not growing, not spreading. And I make assessments based on military conditions. And my leadership, my military leadership, will take that, factor that in, and then we'll make some determinations because the troops strength here, of course, will be made by our civilian leadership.

Q: General -- Joe Tabet, Al Hurra. Could you give us more details about what you said about the outside help? And you said also that the insurgents are coming from Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Sudan. How and who is providing support for them?

GEN. VINES: The indicators are that we see some dozens -- we will never know exactly, I don't think, whether it's 75 or 150 a month, coming principally, we believe, across the Syrian border. And we can count those by the number of people we detain who are carrying passports from various countries and where we believe they came across illegally. Once they're detained, the Iraqi government, as well as the coalition, talk to them, question them about where they came from and how they came.

And so in terms of support, we believe that there are facilitators, principally in Syria. And I have absolutely no indicator that the Syrian government is directly involved in that. But there are facilitators principally, we believe, in Syria that assist them in getting to the border and getting them across the border. And then we believe there are people who facilitate smuggling from the border regions into other areas, such as Mosul and Baghdad.

And so we believe that this insurgency is driven in large measure by money. What we find is that there's monetary value assigned to attacks against the coalition.

So, in terms of technical support, I don't see it from a government, I don't see support by other governments. We would certainly ask that the Syrian government continue its efforts and redouble its efforts to help stop this flow of illegal foreign fighters across its border. But I see no indicators that the governments are actually supporting it.

Q: General, a follow-up. Do you think operations as Spear Operation is a good choice to fight the insurgency, or do you suggest something else?

GEN. VINES: Okay, would you restate the question? I didn't pick up the first part.

Q: I said that do you think that operations like Spear Operation was or is a good choice to fight the insurgency, or do you suggest or do you see something else?

GEN. VINES: There was a fairly strong base of intelligence that areas where Operation Spear are being conducted -- and it's in an area near Al Anbar -- (inaudible) -- Al Anbar, it's in the vicinity of Karabilah -- indicators that insurgents were using that as an area to train and to infiltrate foreign fighters into eastern Iraq. So we feel like that we can't allow them to have a sanctuary, real or virtual, where they can train, equip, plan, and move foreign fighters further east to attack coalition and the Iraqi forces.

So that is only one part of a strategy, of course. Iraq ultimately needs to gain control of its own borders, and this is designed to help support that. It has to seal off the flow of foreign terrorists that are coming in and attacking this government. And again, this is designed to do that. There are people in Al Anbar who are upset that combat operations are there. But there's indisputable evidence that foreign terrorists are flowing through there into eastern Iraq.

Q: Before we move on, the general raised a point -- General, could you tell us specifically what is the monetary value put on attacks against coalition forces, Iraqis, whoever?

GEN. VINES: Well, it varies depending on the region of the country. But in some cases as little as \$150 is paid to someone to put in an improvised explosive device, but perhaps a mine or two or three artillery shells into a hole with a remote detonator. So when we detain persons who were involved in that -- and they're sometimes forthcoming and they tell us exactly what they were paid and why they were doing it -- and so in many cases we find that this has no ideology. These insurgents don't have an ideology except violence and power. They have nothing to offer the Iraqi people. And so those who seek to regain power hire people for money to attack the Iraqi security forces, as well as the coalition. And so as little as \$100 will buy an IED.

Q: What's the top dollar? And who's paying?

GEN. VINES: (Chuckles.) Well, I don't know that you can assign a top dollar. I mean, how much do you pay someone who's going to murder some other people when they kill themselves? So -- but it's typically in the -- a few hundred dollars involved in specific attacks, is our experience.

STAFF: Let's go over here, to Jamie.

Q: General Vines, a short time ago, you said that you're assuming the insurgency will remain at the current level. Can you explain why, if you have the same number of U.S. troops there, and every day more Iraqi security forces are being trained and equipped and joining in those combat operations, that you're saying you don't see in the near term any progress being made against the insurgency?

GEN. VINES: Well, you will recall that I said that the solution was primarily a political solution. So I -- we have to make certain assumptions as we develop courses of action. My line of effort and operation is primarily in the security line, and so I have to make some assumptions about what forces we will need that perhaps will replace the ones here. There is a significant amount of progress being made, but you have to draw from some assumptions.

We don't see the insurgency contracting or expanding right now. We see leaders who are paying other people to put IEDs in to attack the coalition. What we don't see are groups of 2(00) or 3(00) or 400 people operating together. What we don't see is them controlling cities. What we see are small cells that pay people to attack the coalition.

The challenge, of course, is there's a large -- very large infrastructure here. There's oil. There's water. There's electricity. There's governance. And all of those can be attacked if you're paying people to do that. It requires security forces to do that.

So we make some assumptions about what it's going to take to protect many of those facilities and the elements of government. And so we think we've got about the right number of coalition forces to assist the Iraqi forces in doing that.

So intelligence-wise, I don't see anything driving the insurgency up, and I certainly don't see it growing at this point. Could either one of those change? A political solution could absolutely change the dynamics.

STAFF: We're just about out of time. We've got time for one more. Tom, you've been waiting very patiently.

Q: General, Tom Bowman with the Baltimore Sun. General Casey said back in March that he expected fairly significant reductions in U.S. forces by early next year, around March time frame. And I'm wondering: Is that still the working assumption? Is that no longer the case because of conditions on the ground? Or is it uncertain at this time?

GEN. VINES: No, I think General Casey's assumption probably is still valid. I mean, look, there is a certain element of tacit support, not active support, that is derived from the presence of foreign forces. And I think ultimately we want to come down as quickly as conditions permit.

The question earlier -- I need to clarify. The reason I said that I assumed the conditions will remain relatively static -- keep in mind that those elections are only four months away. I mean, they're -- I don't have any reason to believe there's going to be a significant change in four months, absent a political breakthrough. So that is not a long-term projection of the insurgency. I'd remind you we're still trying to sort out what the World Trade Center's replacement is going to look like four years later. So four months is not a long time in an insurgency. So I don't see a huge change during that period. I suspect we will probably draw down capability after the elections, because Iraqi security forces are more capable.

Q: Follow-up. How would you define "fairly significant reductions"? With four brigades? Five brigades? Any sense?

GEN. VINES: That would -- it would probably be somewhere in that range; that would be my guess. A huge bold shift that injects a lot of risk into the situation is probably not a wise course of action. So what I would think is, we would continually assess -- bring down part of the forces, assess what the conditions are, what those effects are, and then continue to do that. To rapidly cut it, without any significant change in conditions or without time to assess them, I would think, would not be a wise course of action.

Q: There's one broad one --

STAFF: We're going to make this the last one. We're going to go with Vince, here. He's going to get a chance. Sorry, Brett (sp).

Q: Yes, General. This is Vince Crawley with the Army Times. There's some members of Congress who

have suggested a phased timeline for U.S. withdrawal, in part to energize the Iraqi government that you've spoken about. Have you given any thought to planning, if you had a timeline for withdrawal imposed? And what would that do to you?

GEN. VINES: Well, we continually assess what would happen if we were -- if we had to change conditions. And part of the change in conditions would be -- we're required to draw down. So I would be opposed to announcing the timeline. Certainly, we know what the timelines would be if we said we want to come down a certain number of brigade combat team equivalents. But I would be opposed to announcing a timeline in advance, because that's not conditions-based. That's not based on the conditions on the ground, that's an arbitrary decision that's just based on a calendar. And I don't think that necessarily meshes with the conditions we might see here in-country.

Q: Roy (sp), can we get clarification on who the general -- (inaudible) --

STAFF: Hang on -- (inaudible) -- second, Lisa. I'm going to let the Brett (sp) ask the last question here.

Q: Okay. It's just a broad question about, General, the public perception of the war. As polls continue to go down here in the U.S., is that affecting morale? If you ask the average American what they think about Iraq, they say, "What a mess." What would you say to the average American who has that perception?

GEN. VINES: I would say they don't have a good perception of what is at stake here. I would say that they don't recognize that the people that are attacking the coalition and that are murdering innocent men, women and children here want to impose that same value system on a large portion of the world. And if they are in control of the borders of Iraq, and they can plan, train and equip terrorists, and export them around the world, they will attack the United States.

I would say that people like Staff Sergeant Nein, the 617th MP Company, who is on his second voluntary tour here -- he's a National Guard soldier who we awarded the Silver Star the other day -- recognizes the risk here. The soldiers over here, for the most part, get it, almost across the board. They see what is at stake, and the fact that you might have a country that can't control its own borders and is hospitable to terrorism is not something that we want to contemplate. Iraq has to be able to control its own security and control what happens within its borders as it affects its neighbors. We want a country here that is not threatening to its neighbors or the rest of the world.

STAFF: General Vines, as I said when we started this off, we really appreciate you taking the time to talk to us, and hope that we'll see some of your subordinate commanders in the weeks ahead doing the same thing, and hope to have you back real soon, too. Thank you very much for your time.

GEN. VINES: Thanks.

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