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**Presenter: Maj. Gen. David M. Rodriguez, commander,
Multinational Force Northwest and Task Force Freedom**

**Friday, August 19, 2005 9:00 a.m.
EDT**

Defense Department Briefing

(Note: The general appears via teleconference from Iraq.)

BRYAN WHITMAN (Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): General Rodriguez, this is Bryan Whitman. Can you hear me?

GEN. RODRIGUEZ: Yes, I can hear you.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, good morning -- or good afternoon, General, and good morning to the Pentagon press corps that's here. I think most of you know our briefer that we have today, Major General David Rodriguez. He last spoke to you here from Iraq on July 1st, and of course he spent a lot of time in this room briefing when he was with the Joint Staff. He is now of course the commander of Multinational Forces Northwest and commander of Task Force Freedom. He is going to give you an operational overview of what his unit is doing and the ongoing security operations in northwestern Iraq and then has graciously agreed to take some of your questions. So with that, let's go ahead and turn it right over to you, General Rodriguez.

GEN. RODRIGUEZ: Okay. I appreciate the opportunity once again to provide an update on the combined efforts of the Iraqi and coalition forces in the Multinational Force Northwest area of operations. The Iraqi security forces continue to make strides in improving security for all Iraqi citizens. We continue to focus on building durable institutions that have the capacity to serve the Iraqi people in a transparent manner that builds accountability and trust between the government institutions and the Iraqi people.

We have remained steadfast in our efforts to help the Iraqi people win the struggle for their freedom. These combined endeavors are creating tremendous opportunities for successful elections and a free Iraq.

Some of you have been here and seen firsthand the great courage of the Iraqi people and the heroic efforts of the soldiers in the 1st [brigade] of the 25th [Infantry Division] Stryker Brigade, the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment and the 11th Armored Cavalry Regimental Headquarters. It is an honor for me to represent all them to you today.

I commented before on the courage and confidence of the Iraqi people and the growing confidence of the Iraqi security forces. I can tell you this trend is continuing.

As for America's soldiers, they continue to serve heroically under very demanding conditions, and there is a special place in our hearts for the families of the troopers who have given their lives to accomplish the assigned mission. We offer our condolences to those who have shared in the loss of a husband, wife, brother, sister, son, daughter or comrade. We offer encouragement to those who have been wounded in action and are recovering and to those assisting them to recover. We are incredibly proud of all of them. We continue to press the fight in memory of their sacrifices.

Signs of Iraqi growth and progress continue amidst the insurgents' objective of destroying the Iraqi nation and the people. Preparation for the constitutional referendum are progressing. Through the combined efforts and effective partnership of the Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq, the provincial government and the Iraqi security forces, over 60 election registration sites have opened on time in both the Nineveh and the Dohuk provinces, and we are registering increasingly larger numbers of citizens daily.

The Nineveh provincial government continues to hold regular regional security and town hall meetings throughout the province, which are attended by progressively larger numbers of community leaders. The regional Sunni leaders and population are also increasingly involved in a political transition that will determine the future of Iraq.

Units of the 2nd and 3rd Iraqi Army divisions are conducting more effective combined and independent counterinsurgency operations, and they are continuing to develop to be a source of pride for the country of Iraq as they stand their ground fighting for the Iraqi people. The Iraqi people continue to provide quality and timely information to Iraqi security forces that enable us together to combat this insurgency.

The Mosul and Nineveh provincial police are on the streets of their cities actively enforcing the rule of law. On any given day, about 800 are in training, and each month some 400 complete the eight-week basic course for Iraqi police. The Ministry of Interior will open an accredited police academy in Mosul in the next 30 days to further bolster their training and readiness.

Since the January elections, 62 mid-level or above terrorist leaders have been captured or killed in Mosul and Nineveh, 44 of these since early May, all this through the combined work of Iraqi and coalition forces. And several of these key leaders have been eliminated from the ranks of the insurgency as the result of independent Iraqi operations.

The Nineveh provincial government continues to expand its undertaking of reconstruction programs and planning for economic growth. They have recently approved and initiated numerous infrastructure projects, including healthcare facility renovation, new sewers, electrical distribution, schools and roads that will improve and provide for the basic needs of the people.

We will continue the hard work until the job is complete, and as we move forward every day very much encouraged by what we see in the hearts of the Iraqi people as they create opportunities for their future.

I'm happy to take your questions.

MR. WHITMAN: Thank you, General. And we'll get right into it here.

Go ahead, Will.

Q General, this is Will Dunham with Reuters. Can you tell us what the findings were from the investigation into the December mess hall suicide bombing? And did it determine how the suicide bombers got in and exactly who they were?

GEN. RODRIGUEZ: I'm sorry, I'm having a hard time hearing. Could you repeat the question, please?

Q General, it's Will Dunham with Reuters. Can you tell us what the findings were of the investigation into the December mess hall suicide bombing? And did it determine how the suicide bombers got in and who they were?

GEN. RODRIGUEZ: The latest information we have on that was that it was believed to be an Ansar al-Sunna terrorist suspect who was involved in the Marez bombing. And the exact technique and how he got on that was never able to be fully determined. But we continue to pursue all intelligence leads that we have on that, but that was never determined finally.

Q Let me just follow up. Was the perpetrator -- was the bomber somebody who managed to infiltrate and work on the base somehow?

GEN. RODRIGUEZ: The investigation showed that we think he infiltrated on the base just to conduct the bombing; it was not a member of the workforce on the base.

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead.

Q General, Sandra Erwin with National Defense. Can you tell us what kind of IED -- what is the level of IED attacks that you see in your area? We heard from General LaFontaine last week that the attacks have doubled. Can you give us a sense of what kinds of threats do you see now in your area from the IEDs?

GEN. RODRIGUEZ: I think the question is about IEDs. And we have, of course, had a tremendous effort ongoing to combat the IEDs, which are the most prevalent weapon that has been used against us. Over the last three months, they have decreased in both number and effectiveness by about 20 percent. This has been a combination of several things. One, of course, is the tactics, techniques and procedures that we're using as we conduct our operations. The disruption in the senior leadership that we've been able to have on the leadership of the insurgency, they've been a little bit less complex because of the pressure that we've been able to keep on them. And also, we continue to get a large number of tips from the Iraqi people to help us discover them and get the word when they're putting them in, as well as the impact of several large caches that were seized throughout the last three months. So we continue to use all available technology, tactics, techniques and procedures to decrease the impact and effect of IEDs on our forces.

Q A follow-up on that. Some of the other officials we talk to say the IED sophistication has been increasing; but you're saying the opposite; you're saying that they're going down in numbers and sophistication?

GEN. RODRIGUEZ: Yes. Right now in this area they are going down in number as well as in sophistication. For example, there have not been as many buried and camouflaged, covered or concealed as had been in the past. And I think I explained why we thought that was.

Q Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead.

Q General, this is Gordon Trowbridge from the Army Times newspapers. There's been a lot of conversation over the last couple of years about troop levels in Iraq. I wonder if you could just give us a sense of whether or not you think you have adequate force to conduct the operations that you need to conduct in your area.

GEN. RODRIGUEZ: Yes, we have adequate force to conduct the operations in our area of operations.

And we have actually -- recently there's been an Iraqi security force that was moved out of the area and moved to another area. So it actually has decreased the level of Iraqi security forces up in the area. And we have approximately 35,000 Iraqi security forces up here, in addition to the approximately 10,000 coalition forces on the ground.

MR. WHITMAN: All right, John.

Q This is John Lumpkin with AP. To follow up on Will's question about the mess hall -- mess tent bombing -- and these may be things that aren't known, but have you been able to determine whether the bomber somehow snuck past perimeter security or if he had some help from the inside? Was he wearing any kind of Iraqi uniform? Was he an Iraqi or from another country? And is -- and it sounded like this -- is the investigation itself complete?

GEN. RODRIGUEZ: He was believed to be wearing an Iraqi uniform, and he was not believed to be working on the base. And the investigation is complete, yes.

Q Was he an Iraqi national?

GEN. RODRIGUEZ: We are not sure whether he was an Iraqi national or not. We believe he was associated with the Ansar al-Sunna group, but we could never determine whether he was an Iraqi national or not.

Q And then did he sneak past perimeter guards or did -- is it your sense that someone let him in?

GEN. RODRIGUEZ: There was -- we do not believe he snuck past or went through the perimeter guards and gates.

Q How could he have gotten in?

GEN. RODRIGUEZ: Well, it's a large perimeter, and we think that he was somehow able to infiltrate through the perimeter, not going through an official gate.

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead, Joe.

Q General, this is Joe Tabet with Al Hurra TV. My question is, do you have any information or any number about the Islamic militants who are -- who cross the Iraqi border with Syria every month to carry out attacks?

GEN. RODRIGUEZ: I think I can tell you the people that we have caught are -- were involved in some of the suicide bombings over the last several months. Most of the suicide bombings, we believe, have been by foreigners who have infiltrated into the country, mostly from Syria. And also we have captured approximately 70 in the last three months. So as for a sense of numbers, between the 70 that we have captured and that were detained, and approximately a hundred who were either killed in suicide attacks or engagements with coalition forces and Iraqi security forces, we believe there's about 170 been in -- infiltrated in that we've come in contact with or destroyed or captured in the last three months.

Q Just -- let me follow up, General. This morning the Iraqi national adviser, Mowaffak Rubaie, said that every month 150 Islamic militants are crossing the border. Do you agree with him?

GEN. RODRIGUEZ: That number, based on what we're seeing up here, is entirely within the realm of the possibility. But you've got to understand we only see the Rabiya crossing in the northwest part of the Syrian

border. It does not include what they see down in the south. So -- but based on what we're seeing up here, that's a reasonable estimate, yes.

Q This is Lisa Burgess with Stars and Stripes. General, my understanding is that the Mosul police are primarily made up a single tribe, the Jaburi. How does this homogenous makeup affect their relationship with the population and with the army forces?

GEN. RODRIGUEZ: The makeup of all the forces, whether the Iraqi army or the police, is obviously critical to building an institution that can execute its mission as well as develop trust among the people. So we work hard to ensure that that force is diversified. They are not all in balance right now, and so what we do is we recruit -- targeting recruiting and -- as well as train people from a wide variety of both religious ethnic backgrounds. Right now, the Jaburi is about 20 percent of the Nineveh police force out of 14,000 people. So we continue to diversify that force and try to make it a force that is representative of all Iraqi people.

Q For clarification, how many of the Mosul police are Jaburi?

GEN. RODRIGUEZ: The Mosul police force, Jaburi is a little higher than that 19 percent, but I don't know that right off the top of my head. There's also a little bit higher percentage than 19 percent who are the leadership in the Mosul police department.

Q So when you say a little bit higher, do you mean --

GEN. RODRIGUEZ: But you got to understand --

Q Fifty percent --

GEN. RODRIGUEZ: Well, there's probably about 10 -- 10 to 20 percent, and what you go to understand is when the police department had the challenges last November, the current police chief was requested to do the job by the minister of Interior. So because of the chaos that was -- the situation at that particular time, the initial group of people that he went to were people from his tribe, because that was who he could trust.

So as I said, we continue to work the diversification issues in both the Iraqi army and the Iraqi police to build a team that is loyal to the Iraqi people and leaders.

MR. WHITMAN: Let's move? back around.

Q General, I'm Carl Osgood with Executive Intelligence Review. Can you talk a little bit about the situation with the provision of basic services: electricity, water, medical care? What's the situation with these services? Is it better than they were three months ago?

GEN. RODRIGUEZ: We continue to improve the basic service. The provincial government is actively involved. They have improved on most fronts. It's a challenge, of course, with electricity because of the booming number of electrical demands that is occurring across all of Iraq at this point in time, as well as some of the challenges that we've had in getting the electricity to last a mile to the people from the distribution centers; because that's been a little bit lagging in the Iraqi efforts to build that.

On water, on sewer and basic needs, hospitals and medical care, we continue to improve on a daily basis, and the provincial government is standing up and leading those efforts.

MR. WHITMAN: (Off mike) -- Will.

Q General, Will Dunham with Reuters. On the mess hall bombing, you mentioned that the bomber was wearing an Iraqi security forces uniform. Has it been determined whether he was an actual member of Iraqi security forces? And also, could you just talk about the general posture of Ansar al-Sunna in your region?

GEN. RODRIGUEZ: No, we weren't able to determine exactly whether he was in the Iraqi security forces or just had stolen or acquired an Iraqi uniform for the Marez bombing.

Ansar al-Sunna is one of the insurgent groups that has an impact throughout our region; they have in addition to the other insurgency group. We have also had some impact on some of their senior leadership in the last three months, but they continue to actively pursue their goals in this region. Because it's spread across a wide range of Iraq and -- it is a lethal insurgency force that has been trying to tear down the future of Iraq.

Q General, Jeff Schogol with Stars and Stripes. We've heard that when soldiers and Marines find possible roadside bombs, it can take hours for explosive ordnance disposal people to show up. Do you have enough EOD people in your command?

GEN. RODRIGUEZ: Yeah, we have enough EOD people in the command. It takes us approximately 30 to 40 minutes to respond to the roadside bombs. We also use engineers in many of the situations where it's not quite as complex. And the challenge that we have is not so much the number of EOD personnel, but the coordination and the response and the speed with which we can get them out to the locations throughout the area. So we have enough EOD personnel to do the job, and we have not had a problem with getting them out to do the job. We would like to improve the response time and we're working on that, but it's about 30 minutes most times around here.

Q A quick follow-up question.

GEN. RODRIGUEZ: Throughout the Nineveh Province.

Q As a quick follow-up question, what would you consider the ideal response time?

GEN. RODRIGUEZ: Well, anywhere between 10 to 20 minutes would be ideal. But like you said, the challenge is not the number of troops, it's the coordination in the reports and the responsiveness that we all continue to work a coordination effort to get done quickly.

Q Sir, Gordon Trowbridge again from Army Times. You mentioned earlier a figure of about 35,000 Iraqi security forces. I wonder first if you could give us a sense of how those break down, the various MOI organizations versus Iraqi army. And also, could you give us a sense of the operational abilities of those troops? Do you have any units that are capable of conducting independent operations? How much assistance are you giving with command and control and logistics and things like that?

GEN. RODRIGUEZ: The sense for the MOI versus the MOD, there's about 14,000 MOI people who are in the police force for the Nineveh Province. The remaining Iraqi security forces are about 14,000, which are in the army. And then there's a couple thousand in the border police. As far as the effectiveness of each of those, out of the 14,000 police, just to give you a sense, there have been about 1,000 that have been through the eight-week training programs that are back in the force right now. We have trained about 150 of the Iraqi police throughout the province in advanced training, which includes running police stations as well as the judicial process and evidence and specific skills that are required for all police throughout the country. And we have also trained about 2,000 of those people in a four-day familiarization training that both military police, Iraqi army and coalition forces have helped to accomplish. So when you look at a 14,000 police force, we have about 150 that have got the advanced skills training, 1,000 who have got the eight-week patrolman training, and about another 2,000 patrolmen who have got a familiarization training, out of the 14,000.

Now, on the Iraqi army side, of course, all of them have come through the basic training, although we have two divisions -- the 3rd Division came through the entire training process from the beginning, that was built from a training base and it was nationally recruited. And they are out -- all three of the brigades are operating. The capability to do independent COIN operations, we estimate those brigades will be ready about June of next year. In the meantime, they are all operating and fighting now at various levels of readiness. As could be expected, the lower-level units are very, very effective. They're very aggressive and they are good at command and controlling, the small units. That's -- you get to the larger units, it becomes a bigger challenge, which is where we're helping the most, which is in the command and control, in both planning and execution; some intelligence, although the intelligence that the Iraqi security forces bring to us is tremendous benefit to our combined efforts. We also provide combat support and combat service support, such as medevac and resupply when they're operating. And of course we also support them with quick reaction forces.

The 2nd Division, which is over here in the vicinity of Mosul, was one that was a National Guard or ICDC-type unit that was recruited from the local area and was trained as they operated. So they had a lot more OJT, or on-the-job training. And those four brigades are in a wide range of readiness rates. One of them is -- will be about three or four months from gaining the ability to do independent COIN operations with the support I just talked to you about at the senior leadership level in combat service support. And then the other three we expect to be ready to go by next summer; in June of '06 is the plan right now.

But all of them are fighting, and all of them are participating.

MR. WHITMAN: We've got time for maybe one or two more. Let's go to the back, and then we'll finish up with Joe.

Q General, Jeff Schogol with Stars and Stripes again. Is there an exact number -- an exact figure of how many Iraqi troops we need to train before we can start bringing troops home, U.S. troops home?

GEN. RODRIGUEZ: There's not an exact number, because it depends on multiple things. One is the insurgency and the strength of that insurgency and what we've been able to do to decrease that effectiveness.

The second thing is the combination of all the Iraqi security forces and of course the impact that the political process has on the insurgency and the growth of the Iraqi state.

So this is a constantly assessed situation, and I think it's been very, very clear that we'll come home as soon as we can, but not too soon.

MR. WHITMAN: (Off mike.)

Q Thank you. General, Joe Tabet with Al Hurra again. In your area, are you using any technology, like robot, to face IEDs and roadside bombs?

GEN. RODRIGUEZ: Yes, we have robots. We have electronic countermeasure devices. We have Buffalos that have long arms that have -- provide the stand-off. So we're using a combination of many, many technologies, as well as equipment, to include dog -- dog teams is another component of this process.

But like you said, it's a combination of technology. It's a combination of tactics, techniques and procedures. It's a combination of intelligence. So it's a -- as I said, we take this threat very seriously and are combining every effort we can to reduce the threat to our soldiers.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, General Rodriguez, we've reached the end of our time here. We just want to

thank you for taking the time late in your day to spend it with us. And we hope that we'll see you again in another few weeks.

GEN. RODRIGUEZ: Okay. Thank you very much.

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