



**U.S. Department of Defense**  
Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs)  
**News Transcript**

**On the Web:**

<http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=2889>

Media contact: +1 (703) 697-5131/697-5132

**Public contact:**

<http://www.defenselink.mil/faq/comment.html>  
or +1 (703) 428-0711 +1

---

**Presenter: Lawrence Di Rita, PDASD(PA) and Lieutenant General Norton Schwartz, Director for Operations, JCS**

**July 28, 2004 12:00 PM EDT**

---

**Defense Department Operational Update Briefing**

Wednesday, July 28, 2004 12:00 p.m. EDT

Defense Department Operational Update Briefing

MR. DI RITA: Good afternoon. I thought we'd just provide some updates on things that may be on your mind, a few things that we can just provide in terms of an operational update.

We welcome back to the briefing room General Schwartz. General Rodriguez is away this week, and we'll put him back into his well-desired spot when he does return.

And with that I'll turn it over to General Schwartz.

GEN. SCHWARTZ: Thank you, Mr. DiRita.

In the past 24 hours, Multinational Force Iraq has conducted nearly 1,700 patrols, 268 of which were with Iraqi forces. Several offensive operations were conducted, resulting in a number of personnel detained, and actionable intelligence from one such detainee led to the discovery of a large weapons cache, which included 175 mortar rounds and 105 grenades among other items. Operations like this do much to reduce the threat, naturally, to U.S. and coalition forces, and the Iraqi population alike.

Similarly, conducting security patrols yesterday, U.S. forces, Marines in this case, searched a suspicious vehicle and found over 200 60-millimeter mortar rounds hidden inside wheat bags in the vehicle. And this find was especially significant in that roughly 40 percent of the indirect fire attacks use this caliber of mortar round.

And as many of you may have seen in the news, this morning a car bomb -- an improvised explosive device -- exploded outside a police recruiting facility in Baqubah, killing what we know at the moment 45 Iraqi individuals, wounding 94. There were no coalition forces involved. And naturally we feel for those families that experienced loss of life. The strike on civilian underscores the insurgents' real intentions: to prevent a free and stable Iraq, even at the cost of innocent Iraqi lives. Despite the deliberate attack on those courageous Iraqis who are

stepping forward to advance Iraqi sovereignty, clearly progress will continue.

And with that, ladies and gentlemen, be happy to take your questions.

MR. DI RITA: Charlie?

Q: Larry and General, Iraqi officials are saying that perhaps as many as 70 or more Iraqis were killed in that. Today NATO is debating in Brussels the training of Iraqi security forces, which some are pushing to begin in Iraq as early as next month. Are you concerned that the French, who appear to be one of the few countries against it, might veto that or in fact could veto it?

MR. DI RITA: Well, NATO will work out what it's going to work out. They've been -- the prime minister of Iraq has asked NATO to get involved. NATO has made a political commitment to get involved, and now the details need to be resolved.

But there are things NATO can do to contribute, and we're obviously all hopeful that NATO will provide robust training capability. But the training that is going on now will continue. I mean, we've got the United States and other coalition forces in Iraq already. General Petraeus has the security forces that are principally responsible for police and border and the army working through a very systematic security force training, appropriate to their category of responsibility. So that'll continue.

And obviously there are areas where NATO can be of assistance, we're all hopeful that NATO will decide this.

Q: But is the Pentagon -- is the U.S. military concerned that France might be able to, by itself, veto this move to help the United States train Iraqi security forces?

MR. DI RITA: Well, it's just too early to characterize what's going to happen in NATO. NATO's -- NATO has the issue. It's seized with the issue. The general -- the NATO secretary-general has made public statements to the effect that he is hopeful that NATO can add a lot of training value inside of Iraq. And I think he's working the situation as well as he's capable, and he's quite a capable individual.

Q: General, a lot of these improvised explosive devices appear to be a combination of smaller grenades or rounds, ammunition. Is there still a major concern about these caches all throughout the country? And what's being done about that? You mention one find, but it seems like that there are finds almost every day.

GEN. SCHWARTZ: It is a routine occurrence. In fact, you know, we are now at the point where, since the conclusion of major combat operations, we've discovered 10,000 or so such caches throughout the country and disposed with probably 9,900 of them. But it is an ongoing process. In other words, we find them, we collect up the contents of them, either take them to a central collection point where the captured enemy ammunition, as it is known, is destroyed, or it's destroyed on site.

So the bottom line is, there is a lot, a lot of ammunition strewn and stored, and what have you, throughout the country. We continue to discover it, continue to destroy it. At the moment, over 150,000 tons of captured enemy ammunition have been destroyed.

Q: If I could follow up, there are some reports that recent suicide bombers have been found chained to their cars, suggesting that perhaps they weren't willing participants in the event. Do you have any intelligence, any information on that?

GEN. SCHWARTZ: I do not. I have not seen a report that would confirm that.

Q: It appears that an increasing number -- today's attack was the largest since the end of the major conflict, in

terms of the number of people killed. And it seems like the attacks are increasingly aimed at Iraqis themselves, including assassinations of individuals who are participating in the new government. Is that because there's a shift in strategy among the anti-coalition forces, or is it due in part to a withdrawal of U.S. presence in some of the areas, neighborhoods, reduced patrols, or a combination of both?

GEN. SCHWARTZ: I would say it's a combination of both; that there has been an attempt, clearly, since the transition to engage those individuals that are associated with the interim Iraqi authority. And as you're aware, a number of assassinations have occurred.

Likewise, there has been this apparent effort to use the IED technique to intimidate Iraqis generally, or in this particular instance from this morning, it was near an Iraqi police service recruiting station, and a number of the casualties in fact were those who were interviewing for future employment as Iraqi police. So it's part of the campaign to intimidate both Iraqi population generally, those who would serve in the security forces, and of course, the leadership of the country.

Q: But at the same time, is it due, in part, because there are fewer American targets on the street -- before, and they're picking targets of opportunity that perhaps they hadn't thought of before?

GEN. SCHWARTZ: I think, you know, we continue to sustain casualties. And so I would suggest that our effort is to use U.S. forces where we -- where they're needed, and to encourage, and in fact to mentor and partner with Iraqi security forces where they can be successful. That clearly is the case in the north and the south of the country, less so in the central region. But the bottom line, the calculation is dependent on what the circumstances are on the ground.

MR. DI RITA: Also, you know, it's not certain who's doing these things. We all have our suspicions, and there's intelligence that suggests who's contributed. But if you look at what Zarqawi said, what was discovered in the letter that was -- you know, that he wrote or was believed to have written -- this is quite consistent with that. They're attacking the things that General Schwartz talked about -- police and local officials, which you mentioned. It's no new tactic to attack soft targets, and soft targets are buses and things like that.

So I'm -- it would be -- I don't know anybody that could kind of say, well, it's -- there's 25 million Iraqis; there's 125,000 troops. At the most, there were 25 million Iraqis and 300,000 troops, or 200 (thousand) and something. There's always been a much -- a greater preponderance of Iraqi civilians, and these people are clearly indicating that they intend to kill civilians to terrorize the country. And it would be -- I wouldn't want to attach some relative weight to --

Q: It seems that that strategy has been turned up since the turnover of authority to the Iraqi interim government.

GEN. SCHWARTZ: And I -- sir, if I may, it seems to me that that is not entirely unpredictable. I mean, the development of Iraqi sovereignty is a threat to those who would like to see another arrangement. And so they are undertaking those efforts that they think might be effective in unhinging that transition.

Q: Since today's bombing was by far the largest since the return of legal sovereignty, were there any indications in the intelligence network this attack was coming? Any chatter in the system?

And more broadly, I know that one of the benefits that was hoped to have accrued by returning sovereignty to Iraqis was an increase in intelligence across the board, Iraqis being more comfortable bringing these tips to the Iraqi government. Are there any specific instances where you've seen this increase in intelligence assistance from the Iraqi people because of sovereignty?

GEN. SCHWARTZ: I can only give you a couple of anecdotes. But in the last week, for example, there were two or three caches, to speak of your question earlier, that were identified and secured not by U.S. or coalition forces

-- that is, non-Iraqi coalition -- but by Iraqi National Guard units specifically. And of course, the genius in that is that they have the capacity to gain intelligence themselves, particularly of the human variety, and that is, in fact, what happened in these two instances.

So I think the supposition that Iraqi forces in some ways can be more effective than the non-Iraqi forces is certainly true in terms of interaction with the population which will produce the intelligence you addressed.

Q: And as far as today's attack, any chatter in the system in advance that you could tell us about?

GEN. SCHWARTZ: I can't address that.

Q: Larry, about the Army inspector general's report that was released last week, two questions. One is, there was some suggestion by critics that there was an attempt to bury the report by releasing it on the same day as the 9/11 commission, and I wonder if you might just respond to whether there was any attempt to conceal it.

MR. DI RITA: It's just a ridiculous suggestion. First of all, it was at a congressional hearing, and to the best of my knowledge, we have very little control over the timing of congressional hearings. In fact, that report was completed when it was completed. The Army, and the secretary of the Army, in particular, was personally involved in getting it ready for public dissemination. And when it was ready, we told the Congress we'd like to come up and talk about it, and Senator Warner asked for a hearing. So -- and we didn't choose the date of the hearing. So it's just a ludicrous suggestion.

Q: And secondly, the report, when it was presented to the Senate Armed Services Committee, there was some skepticism among the members and some criticism that perhaps the report didn't go far enough or answer all the questions about Abu Ghraib. Perhaps you -- I wonder if you could just talk a little bit about what the limited scope of this investigation was, and how perhaps some of those questions the senators had might be answered in upcoming reports, and when we might get --

MR. DI RITA: I mean, it's reasonable. I mean, senators, as we all are, are very interested in getting to the breadth of understanding of what happened at Abu Ghraib and, more broadly, what's going on with detainee operations. The Army inspector general was tasked to and did go look at training, procedures, how the people that ended up -- not individuals, but the types of individuals that are assigned to prison operations are trained, how interrogators are trained. So they were looking at a lot of doctrinal activity, and they were looking at a lot of -- once the doctrine was set and there were procedures in place, could you track through down to a unit whether the procedures were being followed? And they identified areas where more training was needed, where units may have been less aware than they should have been of the doctrine and of the training.

So that's the kind of thing that the Army inspector general was doing. It was kind of a -- accepting at face value what was decided by doctrine, procedures, authorized guidance, are the units in the field aware of that guidance and following it? It was not so much inspection into individual situations, although, in order to determine the things I said, they did go look at reported cases of abuse.

So it's important to remember that that slice that the Army inspector looked at was one slice of several. There's the ongoing investigation into the military intelligence assignments to the prisons and what their responsibilities are, begun by General Fay, taken over by General Jones; that continues, that investigation is ongoing.

Admiral Jacoby, [sic] [Correction – Brigadier General Jacoby – Assistant Division Commander (Support) 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division (Light), not the director of the Defense Intelligence Agency], was asked by General Barno in Afghanistan to provide an analysis of activities inside of Afghanistan on the basis of specific allegations. The Army Reserve is looking at Army Reserve-related issues; do we have the right training for reservists and are we assigning the right people. Admiral Church, at the secretary's direction, is trying to track, and has been doing very good investigatory work on how procedures may have been established in one area of operations and

applied elsewhere, and on what basis were they applied, and was it appropriate that they were applied -- Guantanamo procedures, for example, that may have found their way into other theaters, for whatever reason.

I mean, there's a range -- the Schlesinger panel itself is going to do I think precisely what the senators are looking for, which is: Is there gaps in the ongoing investigations? You know, with the, I think eight or 10 formal investigations, are there any gaps that another investigation or an expansion of an existing investigation could close?

So, I think senators share the desire of the secretary and the chairman to get to the full breadth of understanding of this, but no single investigation was ever intended to do that. That's why so many multiple activities are taking place to examine all facets of detainee operations.

Q: Any idea when the -- what was the Fay report, now I guess it's the Fay-Jones report, whatever it is, when is that going to be -- come to fruition and when we're going to see it?

MR. DI RITA: Yeah. Everybody wants these things resolved when they can be resolved. But the investigators are off doing their work and we have not been working against timetables. I know that -- I noticed a statement that Secretary Schlesinger made to the effect that he was hopeful that the Fay investigation could be concluded in early August because his panel was hoping to be briefed and understand what the Fay investigation is. But General Fay and General Jones are working against the facts, not against a timeline, and everybody I think shares the desire that they conclude their work as soon as they are capable of doing that.

So I wouldn't want to attach a timeline to it, but I note Dr. Schlesinger's view of his panel, which is he's like to -- they'd like to provide sort of preliminary assessments sometime next month. And to do that, they do need to hear from some of these other investigators.

Q: Okay. You said General Jones. Did General Kern or --

MR. DI RITA: As I understand it, General Kern was named as the appointing authority, and then he appointed General Jones to do the investigatory work that General Fay was less appropriate to do.

Q: General Schwartz, has anything significantly changed with resources or anything changed in the hunt for Osama bin Laden? And is he still believed generally to be in the Afghan-Pakistan border region?

GEN. SCHWARTZ: The short answer is yes. That continues to be our sense, and that we continue to have considerable resources devoted, both intelligence and otherwise, to continuing the effort to locate and to capture or kill if that opportunity presents itself.

Q: Has anything changed since the handover of power in Iraq, for example, in the resources devoted to the hunt for bin Laden?

GEN. SCHWARTZ: No change.

Q: Larry, last week General Custer told ABC News that he thinks that the big myth is that the foreign fighters are everywhere in Iraq, that there are a thousand. He says, "My feeling is that it's largely the Arab street. That's the story everybody wants to hear." That was just a couple days after Secretary Wolfowitz said that there would be a lot more terrorists in Afghanistan if they weren't flooding into Iraq. What does Secretary Wolfowitz know that General Custer doesn't?

MR. DI RITA: I'm sure there are lots of things that both know that neither of the other does. But to get to your specific point, I didn't see either one of their comments. The fact that there are foreign terrorists in Iraq is undeniable. I wouldn't -- I'm not in a position to quantify. I think the commanders there have done their best

assessments.

Deputy Secretary Wolfowitz sees a range of intelligence and draws his conclusions. I think General Custer and the other commanders probably do the same -- or the commanders in Iraq do the same thing, draw their own conclusions based on probably more tactical intelligence than -- a term I hate using in this context -- but strategic-level intelligence; in other words, the kind of products that the policymakers see every day that aren't necessarily the same kinds of products that are seen by tactical decision-makers who are getting real-time intelligence from the street.

So it's -- I think the basic point is there is no question that there are foreign terrorists in Iraq. But I think it's equally true that there is an element inside Iraq who are Iraqis who are resisting the transition to Iraqi sovereignty in a way that probably reflects a holdover view that we've talked about a lot here. So I don't think either one of them intends to be set up in tension to the other, notwithstanding somebody who might draw that conclusion based on what you said.

Q: As Iraqis assume more control of their country, do you have any reason to believe that attacks like we saw today won't continue or get worse?

MR. DI RITA: Look, I don't think anybody wants to handicap this. It's a dangerous environment. There are people there very committed to stopping what's happening. But there -- I think the general view from the prime minister and the other Iraqi officials who are saying this -- not me -- is that there is a large -- a much larger number of people who are highly committed to seeing that sovereignty take root and that the government proceed.

I mean, we can see this week there's going to be this Iraqi national council. There are some who, for very good reasons, I'm sure, counsel delay -- "jeez, this isn't the right time; you're going to get the wrong set of people at this council" -- and the Iraqi officials responsible for this council have insisted we're going to move forward; this is the time to have the council.

So I think I wouldn't want to handicap whether it's going to get better or worse. It's bad.

And we've discussed motives behind why people are conducting these attacks. But I think one of the principal motives is, they just don't have the same vision for Iraq that the Iraqi government has, and that's sovereignty and self-government.

Q: General --

MR. DI RITA: I don't know if you wanted to contribute there, add to that.

GEN. SCHWARTZ: (Off mike.)

Yes, sir?

Q: General, the tally of patrols and joint patrols that you mentioned earlier seemed to me, at least, to be more or less on a par with previous tallies that have been addressed from this podium. Yet the implication of one your earlier answers and the anecdotal reporting from the ground has suggested that the profile of U.S. forces has diminished, at least in certain areas, since the hand-over. Could you just say a bit more about that, about whether the profile has changed?

GEN. SCHWARTZ: We continue to do about 12,000 total patrols per week. About a quarter of that is done either in a unilateral sense or in a joint patrol context with Iraqi security forces. So the implication that somehow -- that we have, quote, "reduced" our profile doesn't square with the numbers.

We are continuing to work our activities in those areas where it is required. Some of them are not on the beaten path. For example, patrols have occurred out in the western part of the country -- recently, in the al Qaim area, for example -- that might not be visible to media in the Baghdad area.

Bottom line is, based on the metrics that we're following, the level of effort is roughly the same as it was before transition.

MR. DI RITA: But let me -- and I'm not sure if I even understand the nature of the discussion on this point, because notwithstanding what General Schwartz said, one of the things I think we've been -- we couldn't be more clear in what we've been saying for the last year, which is our objective is to get Iraqi security forces trained and out there securing their own country, and over time that's happening. And I don't think there's any question but that people want to see more Iraqis doing this, and first and foremost the U.S. military that would like to see more Iraqis providing for their own security. And we're a long way from the Iraqi security forces being able to secure that country. We're just a long way from that, but they are moving in the right direction. And if that is in areas accompanied by an appropriate or proportional sort of reduction in the U.S. presence, all that's happening is what we said would happen and what we've been saying, I think, for a year.

Q: (Off mike) -- an issue of the timing, isn't it, particularly in this political season -- the timing of how this all happens and why it would happen?

MR. DI RITA: Well, I would say the timing started a year ago when it wasn't this political season. We said: Stand by; everybody be on notice: this is going to happen, so when it starts to happen people shouldn't be shocked that it's happening. I think we've been repeating it 'til we're blue in the face that sooner or later Iraqis are going to start to develop their own sense of security through their own security forces. And it's going to happen as quickly as we can make that happen, and it's going to happen -- we think it will be facilitated by the transition to Iraqi sovereignty, itself a date that we said a year ago would happen.

So I don't know the context that you think this is interesting in, but I'm just telling you this is happening, in part, because over time we said expect this to happen. And whether it's a dramatic shift or not, I think I'd go with what General Schwartz says, which is that the general level of effort is about the same. But nobody should be surprised to see more Iraqis doing their own security. I mean, I just --

Q: Can I just sort of --

MR. DI RITA: Sure.

Q: -- jump on that a little bit? How many Iraqi security forces are there now? And how many are fully trained and fully equipped?

GEN. SCHWARTZ: The total numbers are about 225 (thousand) to 230,000, roughly. You know, there's probably 5,000 or so in the Army who now are trained and completely equipped. We've got 29 battalions of now the Iraqi National Guard that numbers in the area of 45,000 or so, and they have been performing really quite well of late. And then you've got the police, which is a large number. And in the police area, 75,000 or so, there is a greater array of who are trained and who are not. For example, 6,000-or-so personnel have completed the eight-week academy course -- about 4,000 in the school in Jordan, about 2,000 in the school in Iraq. Then there is a large number, about 25,000, who were former police who have gone through a three-week refresher course, if you will. So that leaves about half of the Iraqi police still not having attended an academy course.

But the bottom line is that, as Mr. Di Rita suggested; the idea here is -- and this is clearly General Petraeus's mission -- is to work up that glide path of equipping, training and mentoring the Iraqi security forces so we can make the transition. And in some parts of the country, it's occurring already, and the north and the south are key

examples of that.

Q: General Schoomaker said the other day from that podium that there was a dialogue ongoing and that some commanders did believe that the presence of U.S. troops in those patrols is causing some of the attacks inside those cities, and that the dialogue is ongoing to possibly pull them out and have the Iraqi face in the cities. So that's where the story's coming from.

MR. DI RITA: And it's ebbed and flowed. I mean, that -- well, he was responding to a story from the day before, so --

Q. But commanders are talking privately about that.

MR. DI RITA: It ebbs and flows. I mean, we've gone that way at other periods during our presence inside of Iraq where we've tried -- let's get a little less visible presence. Sanchez talked a lot about that; they were experimenting with ways that they could be less obtrusive. It's going to continue to ebb and flow. But I think the general trend will be what we've described, which is more Iraqis getting trained.

And, Jim, I don't want to put -- I don't want to over-emphasize; we've got a long way to go, and we do, and we recognize that.

GEN. SCHWARTZ: I think the key thing is we shouldn't apply a cookie cutter here. You know, achieving security in one location may not be the same solution set as achieving security in another. And that's what we pay commanders for.

Q: What is the military doing to keep the coalition together in the light of the kidnappings, which from the insurgents' point of view have been somewhat successful; they've changed the policy of the Philippines and some countries -- or rather, some companies. Is the U.S. able to bring any pressure to bear on other countries, on even companies, to stay in Iraq even though their people, their countrymen are being kidnapped?

MR. DI RITA: I don't know if it's a military question or a policy question. I mean, if you want to -- I'll be happy to add to whatever General Schwartz --

GEN. SCHWARTZ: At the military-to-military level, clearly we are encouraging our colleagues to remain steadfast. And I wouldn't say that this is a pressure thing. It's regrettable when countries and individual entities decide to accede to the demands of terrorists. I mean, it's just proven over time to be a sort of ineffective approach to dealing with terrorism. So we're not -- I think people understand that's how the United States feels. I don't think that we need to pressure anybody, nor would we. People need to join this coalition because they believe in the mission.

And in fact we've seen countries like South Korea and Japan and Italy and Bulgaria and other countries say, "We're staying, and this is important and we're not going to be affected by this," as unfortunate and tragic as the situations involving some of their own nationals have been, too. So I think there's probably more countries that have said we're not going to accede to these demands than have said what the Philippines and a few companies, I think you mentioned, said. So.

Q: Larry, does the Pentagon still have a directive or rule or whatever you call it technically that prohibits political campaigning on military bases or the use of the U.S. military for political campaigning?

MR. DI RITA: I don't think the rule is quite as expansive as you just described it. But basically, when a political candidate -- as I understand it, and we can provide more specific detail for you -- when a political candidate appears at an installation for some kind of official activity, if the installation commander is aware of it and has made the installation available to that candidate, the candidate can't do media queries and he can't be -- I think

the ruling is specifically he may appear on camera and in photographs but he may not make a statement or respond to media queries while on the installation; he or she, I should say.

Q: So they can make essentially their stump political speech as long as they don't engage the media? Is that the difference?

MR. DI RITA: They may not make a statement or respond to queries while on the installation.

Q: They can't make a speech?

MR. DI RITA: Right. That's the policy.

Q: Because there were a couple of speeches yesterday, one by the vice president and one by John Kerry, which clearly appeared to be statements, at least, if not political speeches.

MR. DI RITA: The prohibitions do not apply explicitly to the president, the vice president and the speaker of the House. They've got official responsibilities that, particularly in a time of war, the president is going to go to military installations, and so will the vice president, and the speaker is certainly encouraged to do the same thing.

I can't speak to any specific issue that you're raising, but my understanding is that an event that occurred yesterday was in accordance with our procedures.

Q: Including John Kerry?

MR. DI RITA: I think that's specifically what somebody has advised me, that it followed the procedures. [Note: it was subsequently clarified that Senator Kerry was not on a military installation – his appearance on 27 July was in downtown Norfolk, Virginia, not at the Norfolk Naval Base.]

Q: Hmm. Okay.

Q: Larry, these detainee status review tribunals in Gitmo, are they going to begin this week as expected, or is there a delay? And does the release of the four Frenchmen yesterday signal an accelerated move on the part of the Pentagon to begin releasing these people outside of tribunals?

MR. DI RITA: That -- the desire to release is as accelerated as it needs to be, which is, everybody from the secretary on down has indicated the desire to move people out if we should not be retaining them. And if we can determine that, we'll get rid of them. We'll send them back to their countries of origin, if possible.

And I -- some of these discussions have been going on. In other words, determinations have been made about people over time, and it's a matter of negotiating with their home countries on the modalities for releasing them. That is -- that has continued.

The combatant -- the status review procedures -- Secretary England is hopeful to start them soon, perhaps this week. He's still resolving some of the sort of policy guidance that needs to be actually well understood, and there are some logistical issues that have to be worked through. But it is hopeful that this can be started pretty soon. And as I said, I think his desire is that they may even start this week.

We'll take this -- the last two. (Inaudible.)

Q: Okay. On the political issues, again, what are the restrictions on service members supporting or giving support to candidates?

GEN. SCHWARTZ: Not do so in uniform. And there is legislation, I -- if I'm not mistaken, I believe it's called the Hatch act, which precludes military participation in rallies and things of that nature. So -- and during a season such as this, commanders do remind their troops what the left and right aiming limits are in this sort of situation.

Q: But essentially you can support a candidate, but not in an official capacity --

GEN. SCHWARTZ: Absolutely true.

MR. DIRITA: The same applies, to the best of my understanding, to DOD civilians -- not in an official capacity. And the secretaries, the deputy and others have been quite clear about the desire not to -- that this department not be political or be seen to be political.

Q: But just a -- and to go back to the president and the exemptions for the president and vice president --

MR. DI RITA: And the speaker of the House.

Q: -- and the speaker, who obviously have official capacities, but the speech by Vice President Cheney yesterday sounded very much like a campaign speech. So there are no restrictions on the kind of official statements they can make.

MR. DI RITA: The vice president -- this is a country at war. The vice president of the United States went to a military installation to talk about the country at war. And I believe, to the best of my observation of what he did yesterday, it was not only appropriate, it was the right thing to do.

Q: Well, he didn't say vote for Bush-Cheney in 2004.

MR. DI RITA: I think he did the right thing.

Q: Just a question about Afghanistan. U.N. workers have been killed in this mosque bombing. Doctors Without Borders has announced it's pulling out. There's concern about mischief from a warlord in effect dropped by President Karzai. As Afghanistan moves towards elections, do you see it as more or less stable, more or less dangerous nowadays?

GEN. SCHWARTZ: From a military point of view, operational point of view, it is pretty stable. We continue to have the cross-border activity that we have had in the east and the southeast, and we've been focusing on both the remnants of the Taliban and the al Qaeda residual as well in a number of areas of the country. The numbers -- we have roughly 19,000 or so troops in Afghanistan as we speak. And as we run up to the elections, you may be aware that at the Istanbul summit, NATO has chosen to augment those fielded forces with one or two additional battalions to provide for additional security. So the bottom line is that we are going to be posturing the force to make sure that we provide the best possible environment for the elections to come.

MR. DI RITA: And it's important to remember that -- I think something on the order of 8 million Afghans have registered to vote; almost half of that is women. There's something very special going on in Afghanistan. The president is making decisions about his ticket. Political opposition leaders, who may indeed be warlords, are deciding what they want to do within the political system to respond to that.

Now, there's still a few months to go before the election, and there are people in that country, that the general just talked about, a small number of Taliban holdovers and perhaps some foreign fighters that would very much like to disrupt what's going on. But there's a political process moving forward, and it's going to be -- there could well be violence associated with it. But Afghans themselves appear to be investing in this process and people should feel as though something very special is going on there, with all the attendant dangers that are associated with it, and challenges.

GEN. SCHWARTZ: Thanks a lot, folks.

Okay, thank you.

(C) COPYRIGHT 2004, FEDERAL NEWS SERVICE, INC., 1919 M STREET, N.W., SUITE 220, WASHINGTON, D.C. 20036, USA. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. ANY REPRODUCTION, REDISTRIBUTION OR RETRANSMISSION IS EXPRESSLY PROHIBITED. UNAUTHORIZED REPRODUCTION, REDISTRIBUTION OR RETRANSMISSION CONSTITUTES A MISAPPROPRIATION UNDER APPLICABLE UNFAIR COMPETITION LAW, AND FEDERAL NEWS SERVICE, INC. RESERVES THE RIGHT TO PURSUE ALL REMEDIES AVAILABLE TO IT IN RESPECT TO SUCH MISAPPROPRIATION. FEDERAL NEWS SERVICE, INC. IS A PRIVATE FIRM AND IS NOT AFFILIATED WITH THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT. NO COPYRIGHT IS CLAIMED AS TO ANY PART OF THE ORIGINAL WORK PREPARED BY A UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT OFFICER OR EMPLOYEE AS PART OF THAT PERSON'S OFFICIAL DUTIES. FOR INFORMATION ON SUBSCRIBING TO FNS, PLEASE CALL JACK GRAEME AT 202-347-1400.