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**Presenter: Commander, Multinational Division-North and 1st Armored Division Maj. Gen. Mark Hertling**

**January 22, 2008 9:00 AM EST**

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**DoD News Briefing with Maj. Gen. Hertling from Iraq**

(Note: General Hertling appears via teleconference from Iraq.)

BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Well, good morning and good afternoon. Let me just see if General Hertling can hear us here at the Pentagon.

General, this is Bryan Whitman. How do you hear us?

GEN. HERTLING: Bryan, I can hear you fine. Can you hear me okay?

MR. WHITMAN: We're hearing you very good.

Well, thank you, General, for joining us and for taking the time to be with us and to answer some questions.

This is Major General Mark Hertling, commander of Multinational Division-North and the 1st Armored Division. This is the second time that he's briefed us in this format since he's assumed command for his area of responsibility back in October. And he is coming to us today from Contingency Operating Base Speicher outside Tikrit.

And welcome again, General. Like I said, we appreciate you taking the time to be with us. And let me turn it over to you for a brief update before we get into some questions.

GEN. HERTLING: All right. Thanks, Bryan.

I hope you can hear me. And what I'd like to do is give you an opening statement first, and then I'd love to take any questions from the people who are in the room there.

Today I've been asked to provide an update on Operation Iron Harvest, in the northern part of Iraq, which is part of, as you know, Operation Phantom Phoenix, from the Multinational Corps-Iraq standpoint. Soldiers of Task Force Iron and our partners in the Iraqi security forces have been conducting Iron Harvest in our area -- in our four provinces since the 24th of December. Since that date, we have executed over 40 different operations at

the company and battalion level. Most of those were combined with Iraqi security forces.

Our main effort has been in Diyala, specifically the area called the Breadbasket, near Muqdadiyah, which is eastern Diyala province.

Those operations began the first week in January with synchronized battalion-level operations and a brigade fight. Some of you have been reporting that as Operation Raider Harvest, one of our subordinate unit's nicknames.

It's in this area where we have developed extensive intelligence since early December to prepare for these operations. It's also in this area that we have found significant weapons caches and had some very tough fights. Our soldiers have seen the effects of the enemy's intimidation of local citizens along with brutal murders and barbaric violence.

Twenty-four hours after we announced the operations had begun, there were some reports that al Qaeda forces had escaped the operational area. While a very few AQI leaders did depart and many terrorists and criminals did try to hide in the area we were cordoning at the time, we have still seen significant success in these operations in Muqdadiyah.

The intent of this action was to eliminate AQI safe havens while expanding security for the Iraqi population in Diyala and in the other four provinces -- excuse me, the other three provinces. We have done both of those things in Diyala and in several other places in the northern Iraq area.

To date, we have captured or killed over 40 terrorists that fall into the category of what we and the Iraqi government call high-value individual. We have also killed over 130 additional enemy fighters. We have detained 374 individuals in our operations, and we are developing the intelligence that will lead us to other terrorist locations, some of those locations to which the leaders fled, as well as weapons cache sites.

We have found and cleared 387 roadside IEDs, many of them falling into the deeply buried categories. Those are the large explosive devices, usually buried in the center of the road. And most of those were found on the main trade routes throughout Diyala province. We have found and destroyed 28 vehicle IEDs, the VBIEDs, and 38 house-borne IEDs. Five of those, unfortunately, exploded, and in one case killed six brave American soldiers; in three cases they killed a total of nine Iraqi soldiers; and in one case it killed two local citizens.

Together with Iraqi security forces and newly recruited local citizens, we found 127 different cache sites through the four northern provinces since early January. These contained over 2,100 rockets and mortar rounds, 6,900 pounds of military-grade explosives and 30,000 pounds of homemade explosives.

During our operations, we also found one VBIED factory and one homemade explosive factory.

During these operations, we lost 15 coalition force soldiers -- six, as I said, to a house-borne IED, six to small arms fire in two different events, and three to roadside bombs. Our Iraqi army and police brothers have lost significantly more in fighting for their country during the same period, shoulder to shoulder with us.

Some who aren't familiar with this fighting might ask, "Is all this making a difference?" I'll answer that by giving you a few vignettes. I walked through the town of Himbis (ph), which is in the center of the Breadbasket area, with several coalition force soldiers on the second day of our operations, the day after many were reporting that AQI had fled. Townspeople were hesitant in leaving their homes, and when they did, they were asking us if it was safe to come out. When we assured them it was, they began relating stories of all the murders and intimidation from the terrorists that had been in their area. I walked through that same town last Saturday, and shops were again open, people were walking freely through the town, and many people who I saw on the first day

again stopped to talk to me.

A few days ago, in another town in this area, a town called Shirin (ph), a young cavalry leader introduced me to a 12-year-old Iraqi girl who was brave enough to provide a list and a sketch map to Iraqi soldiers, and that list and sketch map showed the names and hiding places of terrorists who were still in the area and who had harassed her and killed two of her brothers.

In Muqdadiah, soldiers of the 5th Iraqi Army Division, the unit that we're partnering with in Diyala province, were assisting fuel and ration trucks in delivering heating oil and food to homes that were suffering through a very tough winter. I just returned from that area just a few minutes ago as well, and those trucks were still on the road.

Two nights ago, one of our battalions found a torture chamber with two people still inside. When freed, these men reported that there had been up to 11 people tortured in that very small room, right prior to the day we arrived. They had been tortured for 12 consecutive days and nights, beaten during the day and left hanging from hooks from the ceiling at night. Their captor told them they were afraid of being found during the night raids by the coalition helicopters, so they would leave them hanging from the ceilings and they would depart, to return the next day. We are in fact, by the way, conducting those raids based on the intel we received, at night.

What was the act that AQI found so dangerous that they would torture these men? Well, they were contractors and they were hanging power lines to improve electricity and continue to improve the infrastructure of this part of Iraq. So basically they were trying to help improve the conditions for normal Iraqi citizens. That's why they were being tortured.

The fight against these extremists is a tough one, and there is more fighting ahead. We'll continue to pursue these individuals, and we'll continue to continue to make stable environments for all the Iraqi people. The citizens of Iraq are seeing that improvement in the expanding security conditions in their communities. We are also seeing a gradual increase and restoration of services and a better economic activity in each one of the regions we're in. But most importantly, what I'll report to you is that, again, we are all seeing the hope on the faces of Iraqis as they see a more secure future in some of these towns we had not been to recently.

There is certainly more to do, and we're going continue to do it. Operation Iron Harvest and Phantom Phoenix is certainly nowhere close to being over. We'll continue to pursue the terrorists, and with the Iraqi army, Iraqi police, the local citizens and the provincial local and central government we'll continue to expand security for all the good Iraqi people that desperately want it.

That's my opening statement. I'd love to take some questions now.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you, General, for that overview, and we'll just go ahead and get started here.

Go ahead, Pauline.

Q

General, it's Pauline Jelinek of the Associated Press. How would you assess the strength of al Qaeda in your area now after those 40 operations that you mentioned as opposed to before? In other words, how much damage do you think you've done over all to them?

GEN. HERTLING: Yeah, that's a great question, and what I'll you is I think that the terrorists that have been in that area unimpeded for the last several months and in some cases years have done significant damage not only to the infrastructure of the town, but also to the psyche of the various people that lived in the area. They had developed safe havens and caches. Some of them were very well formed. They weren't hasty positions or

hasty cache sites. These were ones that have been in place for a very long time.

So what I'll tell you is just the increase in expanding security has caused significant damage to them -- the capture and kill. We're seeing reflections in human intelligence as well as from other intelligence that we're getting that's saying they are still looking for a place to hide, and that's what we're attempting to do.

You know, what's interesting, Pauline, I think a year ago we were often reacting to al Qaeda and what they were going to do next. Now I think the tables have turned a little bit, and they are attempting to react where we're going to go next and that's a critical difference. So I think in, specifically the bread basket area, I've seen it with my own eyes, and things are safer; the people are coming out. I talked to a group of town's people this afternoon, and they were very hopeful of things getting going again. In some of the other provinces that we've also been conducting operations -- in Salahuddin here, south of Samarra and north of Baiji, in the deserts where al Qaeda has attempted to gain footholds, we've continued to pursue them. In Mosul, we still have a very -- Mosul and the rest of Nineveh's province we still have a very tough fight to go. In Kirkuk, things are improving significantly.

So that's my area assessment, and I hope that very long answer answers your question.

MR. WHITMAN: Let's go over to Mike and then to Joe.

Q

General, it's Mike Mount with CNN. Can you expand a little bit about what you just said about terrorists seeming to anticipate where you are heading next as opposed to where -- you chasing them to where you think they're going next?

What does that mean in terms of a change?

GEN. HERTLING: Yeah, I hope I didn't -- I hope I didn't say that. If I did, that's not what I meant. What I said was we are continuing to pursue terrorists. They are going to some places. We know where they're going oftentimes. We're continuing to collect intelligence to find out their trails and where they're leading us. So they're not anticipating at all where we're pursuing them. And in fact, I guess what I would say to you is they are trying to get away or find new safe havens, and every time they think they have them, we attack there.

Q

From these various operations over the years, we've seen that the terrorists have kind of squeezed out, moved up north. Now they seem, you know, obviously to be in your area. With these operations, do you see them kind of collecting in another area, or do you think this is maybe the final stand for al Qaeda?

GEN. HERTLING: I would never use the term "final stands." I think we're going to have to continue to pursue these individuals wherever they go. Whenever you think -- or whenever you feel comfortable that you've eliminated them in one area, they tend to reemerge. So this is a continuous pursuit operation, and we'll never say that we've completed pursuing them, because they may always come back.

What I would suggest to you, though, is in the past there has been that squeezing, or I've heard it call the whack-a-mole, where you hit them one place and they show up somewhere else. But that was during the time when I don't think the security forces were large enough to actually contain them and continue to pursue them in areas where they thought we couldn't go.

The difference today is, I think, especially in the northern area, where we are, we have a very capable and continually expanding Iraqi security forces. I have working next to all of our soldiers four different Iraqi divisions,

and they're growing in size and capacity every day. So I think that's what's making a difference.

In the past, the northern areas have been somewhat of an economy- of-force zone, to use the military term. We've had just enough forces to do a very little bit of the operation. Well, now we also have four Iraqi army divisions alongside of us, and where we can't be, they can be. And in many cases we're conducting operations with them. So it's continuing to improve the situation on the ground in all the communities.

Q

General, this is Joe Tabet with Al Hurra. With the number of detainees that you have captured through your Operation Phantom Phoenix, what is the percentage of foreign fighters who are active with al Qaeda?

GEN. HERTLING: Well, I wouldn't want to answer for Phantom Phoenix, because that's my boss's operation and that's looking at the entire country of Iraq. That's General Odierno and what he's looking at from all provinces. What I will tell you in our area of operations in the north, I wouldn't break it down by a percentage, but we are seeing some foreign fighters from a variety of different countries.

Saudi Arabia; we have seen Algerians; we have seen Moroccans; we have seen Syrians. And I could go on and on and name each nationality that we have seen passports or ID cards as we've captured individuals. I wouldn't want to put a percentage on it though because I think that would allow our enemy to see just how much intel we have on them.

MR. WHITMAN: Jeff, go ahead.

Q

General, Jeff Schogol, Stars and Stripes.

The most recent progress report on Iraq says that al Qaeda is finding some support among Sunnis in the North, such as Ninawa province. How is this possible, when their tactics appear to be torture, intimidation and murder of the local population?

GEN. HERTLING: I'm sorry, you came in very broken. Can you ask that question one more time, please?

Q

The most recent report on progress in Iraq says that al Qaeda is finding some support among Sunnis in Northern Iraq, such as Ninawa province. How is this possible when, as you said, al Qaeda's tactic seems to be to torture, intimidate and murder the local population?

GEN. HERTLING: Well, I think, that's the key point of it and that is, in fact, what we saw in Diyala province, that al Qaeda would come in, al Qaeda in Iraq would come in with weapons. They would intimidate people, as we saw in Diyala just a few weeks ago, and I reported to the Baghdad Corps. They would come in; they would kill the local citizens; they would cut off their heads; parade heads down the streets of towns -- very brutal and violent tactics. And what you would see as a result of that is, people were afraid to either go to the police or stand up against these people.

Once you get security forces in those areas, as we have seen recently in Diyala, al Qaeda either flees or goes to ground, as we say in the military. But then you have the opportunity for the local citizens to point out the individuals, to show where their hiding places are, which has occurred in Diyala. I would suggest to you that Ninawa province as a whole, whereas we've seen a slight uptick in violence in Ninawa province, specifically in

Mosul, the two Iraqi army divisions and our forces up there are also pursuing in that particular province. And I don't think they're getting as much support as -- I'm not sure what report you're reading, but I don't believe they're getting as much support as you implied in your statement.

Q

Despite their tactics, how is it that al Qaeda in Iraq is getting support in Northern Iraq?

GEN. HERTLING: Well, it's through intimidation. I mean, if someone were to pull one of your family members aside and says, hey, either do what I say, or I'm going to cut off your brother's head, and then does it, you tend to react to that in a very negative way. But if you don't have weapons or you don't have security forces to counter that kind of action, it's kind of difficult to push back against these violent and barbarous criminals.

MR. WHITMAN: Gordon, go ahead.

Q

Gordon Lubold with the Christian Science Monitor.

To go back to concerned local citizens, can you give me an idea of, in your area, how many you have again, and how many you think could be transitioned over to the ISF?

GEN. HERTLING: Yeah, I can. That's -- and that's a good question. We have just under 15,000 by my last count. It's about 1,400 or -- excuse me -- 14,900 and something.

We think of that -- and in fact as we've signed up new concerned local citizens, we literally give them a paper to fill out, a form to fill out, and we ask them how many of them would prefer to go in there to Iraqi security forces. We're getting, on average, depending on the town, anywhere from 15 to 20 percent who say they would like to stay in some type of Iraqi security force. Now, of that -- I'll break it down even further -- the majority of that 15 to 20 percent -- the vast majority of that 15 to 20 percent want to go into the Iraqi police forces. And the rationale for that is quite simple. They want to stay close to home. They know if -- many of them know if they join the army -- much like we do, if they join the army, they may be stationed outside their hometown, and many of them want to stay around their home location.

So linked to the transition of the CLCs into Iraqi security forces are the training of those police officers. And that's one of the things that we're going to continue to expand upon. And in fact there's a plan in the northern provinces right now that we're working very closely with the northern governors on, is to build another police academy here in Salahuddin province that will continue to improve the population of the Iraqi police, specifically.

But at the same time, what I'll also tell you is, the ones who decide that they do want to go in the Iraqi army -- the Iraqi army is also expanding. Of the four divisions that we have in our area, there will be a stand-up of two additional brigades within the next couple of months. So we're helping to recruit -- or we're helping our Iraqi brothers to recruit for their brigade forces in two of those divisions as well.

Q

All right. As a follow-up on my -- of the, say, up to 20 percent, then, are you saying that they are probably assured a spot in the ISF, either army or police? And also, when it comes to field -- you know, recruiting them into the police force, is that a provincial government issue versus a central government issue in terms of funding and resources?

GEN. HERTLING: Well, what I would tell you is this: If it's about 20 percent that want to go in the Iraqi security forces, if all of their paperwork is clean, if they've got good records and no history of past evil, then I would virtually assure every single one of them getting in the Iraqi security forces because there is the need for police and army -- shurta and jundi, as they call them -- soldiers and policemen.

So yeah, I think of the 20 percent, which is about -- somewhere between 1,500-2,000, we think. I'm certainly assured that most of them will go into -- we'll be able to get those into the police or the army.

With regard to whether it's a provincial or a central government issue, what I will tell you is that the provincial government asks for additional police forces. The central government approves the number and pays them through the minister of the Interior. But across the board I'm seeing a great support for all four of our provincial governors in terms of if they're asking for more police forces, they normally get the authority to hire them and get them through the schools.

MR. WHITMAN: Courtney.

Q

Hi, General, this is Courtney Kube from NBC News. Just one follow-up on Gordon's question. Last week General Odierno mentioned that there were several somewhat isolated incidents where the CLCs were infiltrated. I think he said they were Iranian surrogates and maybe an instance of an al Qaeda. Have you seen any instances of that in your area? And then, also, on the EFP front, can you update us on that? Is it increasing, decreasing in your area?

GEN. HERTLING: Yeah, Courtney, it's good to hear you. There are certainly infiltrators within all of the Iraqi security forces, and there are some within the concerned local citizens. As I've stated before, though, in each case of someone joining a CLC group, they are vetted through the biometric system; you know where they live as they sign up for this. You have their fingerprints and all the things that are associated with biometrics. So if there is, in fact, an infiltrator, we can follow up on that if they do some type of criminal act.

But I would say, yeah, it's certainly assured that any kind of organization like this you might have someone that has strange beliefs that would attempt to enter the organization, but -- especially in the Iraqi security forces and the army specifically, we have to watch those very closely, and I think the army is doing a very good job weeding out those that have past histories with extremist organizations.

But I agree with General Odierno there will certainly be some in each one of those organizations, but at least we have and the Iraqi government has the ability to determine who they are.

In terms of the EFP finds, in the north I'll report to you that we have found a few EFPs. They are not of the high qualities of EFP -- high quality of EFP that we have found in the past. We're calling them knock-off EFPs. They're not as well made, they're not as effective, but there have been a couple of them, so we think this is an attempt by various groups to make the same kind of devastating weapons system that they know have been effective against armored vehicles. But we haven't seen the effects of EFP in the northern provinces that I think some of my brothers in other units have in the south or in Baghdad.

Q

These knock-off EFPs, is the assumption -- do you know who -- is the assumption this is al Qaeda that's setting them, or can you give us a little bit more detail about what makes them lower grade or lower quality?

GEN. HERTLING: Well, yeah. We don't know. We think it may either be al Qaeda or the Islamic State of Iraq. We're trying to do some additional forensics on them, check some of them for fingerprints, because in a

couple of instances we found them and they didn't explode, so they were not as well-made. So we're determining some additional forensics that will allow us to determine potentially who made them, where they came from.

They're just not as well-formed. They don't have the explosive weight behind them that will cause the brass slug that's normally associated with a well-made EFP, and they just don't have the explosive power of being -- they're not being sealed as well as some of the other ones that have the effects of a well-made EFP.

MR. WHITMAN: I think we have time for one more. Go ahead, Jim.

Q

General, this is Jim Mannion from Agence France-Presse. Can you tell me what it is you're doing to hold this territory that you've retaken from al Qaeda?

GEN. HERTLING: Yeah, I sure can. Again, the difference this time as opposed to in the past, where coalition forces would go in, clear an area and then move on to the next area and leave the last area for al Qaeda or any other extremist to come in and retake, the difference this time is we are doing it in conjunction with Iraqi security forces, specifically the Iraqi army initially.

And using the example of the town I was just in this afternoon, we went in in a combined effort with an Iraqi army unit, a battalion out of the 5th Iraqi Army Division. We cleared the town. We began the processes to hold it. And then we're bringing in police forces -- hence again the requirement to hire more police -- and we're building joint security stations -- JSSs, we call them -- obviously, a typical Army acronym -- joint security stations with coalition forces, Iraqi army, Iraqi police, then -- and in some cases, concerned local citizens also make up that organization.

As things begin to develop and we get more and more into the hold and the eventual build stage, coalition forces will begin to leave. As the Iraqi police stands up more and more capability, the Iraqi army will begin to leave and the police will be left, along with local citizens, in securing the inside of town.

There's a great example of that going on right now in Kirkuk -- in Kirkuk province and the city of Kirkuk -- where the police have literally gotten to the -- beyond the clear/hold stage to the build stage, and the police almost exclusively hold the population in the town and are responsible for the security. The Iraqi army has moved to the outskirts of town, and there are very few coalition forces in the vicinity of Kirkuk, and we're seeing a significant reduction in terrorist and insurgent activities in that town.

MR. WHITMAN: General, we have just about reached the end of our time. And before I bring it to a close, let me give you the last word for any comments or thoughts that you might have as a result of our discussion today.

GEN. HERTLING: I would, Bryan, thank you. And this may, to the audience back there, seem trite because so many commanders say this, but I got to tell you that the power of the coalition forces and the quality of your servicemen and women over here continuing this mission, they have -- and this is, as many of you know, this is a repeated tour for me -- I have seen a great deal of hope and a great deal of pride in what soldiers are doing, more so this time than ever before, because they feel like they can touch and taste and feel success in this mission, that they are making advances.

You see that same look of pride in the face of the Iraqi army, the soldiers, and the things that they are doing. They are standing up and taking responsibility for the things that are involving security of the Iraqi people. The government is happening. It's making some progress. They've got a lot of challenges that they're facing, and doing some good things toward that end.

So I really believe that there's a renewed hope that everything is going to be okay with this mission, and the Iraqi people are feeling that as well. So I would pass on to you that for the Americans in the audience, you have a great deal to be proud of in your coalition forces over here. If there are any Arabs or Iraqis in the audience taking notes, they have a great deal to be proud of in the Iraqi security forces.

And across the board, what I'll say is, all the soldiers over here are extremely proud of those that support them, especially their spouses and family members, because they continue to be the true heroes on the homefront. And we're very thankful for all of our spouses and children and family members that continue to support us in a very tough mission over here. So thank you all very much for listening to me and giving me this opportunity today.

MR. WHITMAN: General, thank you for your time on, at the end of what I'm sure has been a long day. We appreciate it and we hope to do this again with you sometime very soon. Thank you again.

GEN. HERTLING: Okay, thanks, Bryan, appreciate it.

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