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**Presenter: Commander, Multinational Division-North Maj. Gen. Mark Hertling**

**February 11, 2008**

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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 welcome. I think we are set to go. We'll have an image here momentarily, I think.

For those of you who paid attention to me last week, this morning we've actually had a little change in our schedule, and we have Major General Hertling with us today. This is Mark Hertling.

General, this is Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon. Can you hear me okay?

GEN. HERTLING: Bryan, I can. How can you hear me? All right?

MR. WHITMAN: (Off mike) -- hear you just fine. We're going to turn the volume up just a little bit on you there.

As most of you know, because this is his third time doing this for us, this is, like I said, General -- Major General Mark Hertling, who's the commander of the Multinational Division-North, as well as the 1st Armored Division. I think the last time that he talked to us was in October, so I'm sure he'll have an update for us and take some of your questions.

He is speaking to us today from Contingency Operating Base Speicher, which, as you know, is just outside of Tikrit.

So with that, General, let me thank you again for joining us and doing it on what I guess is relatively short notice. But thank you again. It's always a welcome pleasure to have you back here into the briefing room. So let me turn it over to you.

GEN. HERTLING: All right. Thanks, Bryan.

For those in the press room that were expecting the much better- looking and the more articulate Jim Boozer, my deputy commanding general, he unfortunately got stuck because of weather, and I came back down from Mosul just about an hour ago so we could link this up.

Bryan, what I'd like to do is read a little bit of introductory remarks and then we'll take questions.

About six weeks ago, I informed all of you in the press room that we had started Operation Iron Harvest in Diyala province and the rest of our three provinces here in the north, and that's part of the MNC-I Operation Phantom Phoenix -- don't mean to confuse you on that, but two different names for operations that are ongoing.

I've been asked to give you an update on that, as well as answer your questions on what is going on in the four northern provinces of Diyala, Salahuddin, Nineveh and Kirkuk. And when I talked to this group last month, we were in the early stages of the campaign throughout the province.

To date, coalition forces and Iraqi security forces have had successful operations throughout the north, but especially in Diyala. Diyala is much safer today than it was a month ago. Citizens are less afraid to go out on the street, and markets are opening. Al Qaeda has gone to ground. We are hunting them out, where they have gone to ground, or they have dispersed and we are pursuing them to new areas. But there is still much work to be done to bring normalcy to Diyala province.

A major part of the ongoing -- excuse me -- a major part of the reasons for the ongoing success is Diyala's -- is the -- Diyala and the Iraqi security forces' capacity to work with us in these very complex operations. And then it's been our combined ability to establish with the Iraqi security forces enduring bases in the province, and finally the improving ability of the government at the national and the local level to serve their citizens. And I can answer some questions on that, if you'd like, later on.

I know, as reporters, you're interested in numbers, so I want to give you just a few of those, too. From 24 December, which was the start date of Operation Iron Harvest, until 10 February, yesterday, we have conducted 74 different operations at the company level and above, most of them combined with Iraqi security forces. We have captured or killed over 70 high-value individuals, and we have captured or killed hundreds of enemy fighters. We have found over 430 caches, many of them with tons of explosives and weapons that would have killed or injured Iraqi citizens or coalition forces.

We have found in some of these caches computers which have led us to other cells based on the intelligence we found on the hard drives, and communication devices and DVDs with things like AQI training videos, which some of you saw last week, videos with men teaching young children how to use a variety of weapons and some even with pornography --all indicators of the type of depraved enemy we face.

During operations, we also have found and cleared 653 IEDs; 42 house-borne IEDs, many of them in the middle of neighborhoods with children; 35 vehicle-IEDs and three VBIED factories. But we've also had a few incidents where HBIEDs or IEDs or VBIED that we didn't find kill or injure coalition forces, Iraqi security forces and in many cases Iraqi civilians who were only trying to reestablish a peaceful standard of living. The VBIED that exploded yesterday east of Balad in the town of Yathrib, killing and wounding dozens of Iraqis, is an example of this.

I'll report to you tonight that our campaign is on track and we will continue to pursue al Qaeda in our area. We may shift our forces soon, but we'll continue to conduct intelligence-driven operations and link our actions with the provincial governments and an increasingly capable government of Iraq as security and economic potential in our four northern provinces improves.

But I know all of you have specific questions, so I'll stop now and take those questions.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thanks for that opening, and we'll get right into it. Go ahead, Kristin.

Q Sir, it's Kristin Roberts with Reuters, hoping you can give us your assessment of the strength of al Qaeda right now in your area. The last time we spoke, we spoke about al Qaeda being driven into your area from the west and from the south. So can you give us an idea about their strength today versus maybe two weeks -- two months ago, rather, and the numbers of fighters you're seeing right now?

GEN. HERTLING: Well, Kris, I wouldn't want to give exact numbers, because I'd be wrong. What I will tell you is that there are less now today than there were six weeks ago. We know that for certain. We also know that they've moved to different places. They were in many of the major cities, like Baqubah, like Muqdadiyah, some in Mosul, some in

Hawija. And we've seen them move outside of the cities into the desert areas in smaller groups. So we're doing exactly what we're trying to do, and that is, make the cities safer for the Iraqi citizens while continuing to target al Qaeda and the other extremist groups.

In terms of numbers, to be honest, Kris, I wouldn't want to hazard a guess. All we know is that they are still capable of inflicting harm on the Iraqi people. And until we substantially reduce that, we won't be happy.

Q Sir, are you driving any of them out of the country?

GEN. HERTLING: We have had indications that many of them are leaving the country because of what they perceive as an increasing amount of pressure. We have also had indications that several of their leaders are leaving the country with cash, the cash that they were sent to pay fighters with. We are seeing some indications in various forms that there is an attempt at reconsolidating outside of the country and coming back in, so we're watching the borders very closely and, in fact, have captured several fighters at some of the border posts. So not large groups are we driving out, but there are some that are definitely leaving because they perceive, rightfully so, that it's not safe to be here because of our pursuit operations.

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead, Courtney.

Q Hi, General. This is Courtney Kube from NBC News. Just one quick clarification on that. Do you know where they're going? What countries these al Qaeda leaders or al Qaeda fighters going to? And then, can you give us a little bit more details about the ones who are leaving with cash? And where, specifically, is this cash coming from?

And do you have any idea about their intentions when they're leaving? Are they going to start up new cells in other countries, or are they just fleeing?

GEN. HERTLING: Well, it would be a conjecture for me to determine what their intentions are when they leave, but I do know that many of them are leaving with cash. I don't know if it's for personal gain or because they're tired of the organization and what it's doing and they just want to find another place to live. There have been some indications of that.

In terms of the countries I will state only one, that some of them we have seen specifically leaving to Syria. Some of them are going back to Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

I think what we're seeing in terms of how they're getting cash are various forms of corruption. We are seeing an increasing spike in kidnappings and holding ransom -- holding individuals for ransom and then using that cash to pay the cell leaders or in some cases take the money outside of the country. So a combination of crime, corruption, fraud, and all the kind of the things that you would see within a criminal element are going on to fund the organization. And this is not only AQI, this is also ISI, the Islamic State of Iraq, and several of the other extremist groups.

Q And then also, General, you mentioned some that were going --

GEN. HERTLING: If I could, last, I think it was four days ago, one of our units found a couple of truck drivers, fuel truck drivers, in an underground cell. You may have seen that in press reports. And those two individuals were just fuel truck drivers coming out of the Baiji oil refinery, which, as you know, is in our area of operations. They were kidnapped. Their trucks were stolen. They were put in an AQI prison, tortured with 11 other guys.

We only found two men there when we actually uncovered that prison, and those two individuals said that these were al Qaeda, they were terrorists who had captured them and had beat them and stolen their trucks. And they had overheard them talking about the use of the fuel to garner funds and generate funding for the organization.

Q You also mentioned some that were going to the desert, that were fleeing the cities in your area. Do you have any sense of -- are these members of al Qaeda -- are they going to ground? Do you have the sense that maybe they're going to try to wait out the U.S. presence there? Or are they going to build up new terror groups? Or do you have any idea what they're moving up there to do?

GEN. HERTLING: Well, I think their motives to get out of the city is to gain safety. They know that we are trying to secure -- that we are trying to secure the city and gain the support of the population, which we are doing in droves. The people are beginning to see a better life. So I think the terrorists who have been inside the cities realize that they not only have to deal with Iraqi security forces and coalition forces, but they also have to deal with the citizens of the specific towns and cities, who are beginning to see increased security, so they're turning people in.

That's their biggest fear. So many of them are going to the desert regions to just get away from being ratted out by the citizens by being pointed out and captured.

They're not getting the support. In fact, we've seen indicators that they are -- and you know the terrain over here; you know what it's like. They're staying overnight in abandoned mud huts or next to canals or in caves. So literally they are going in small -- much smaller groups than they have been in the past to just get out of the city so they can avoid capture. But even now we've seen reflections lately, and this is what -- going back to the early questions about driving people out of the country, we are now even beginning to see -- gather intel that some of them are saying it's not even safe in the desert because the night raids are coming to get them. That's some of the reflections that we're beginning to see, and that's a good thing. We want them to keep thinking that they can't sleep well at night because we're coming after them, because, quite, frankly, we are.

Q General, it's Mike Mount with CNN. I just want to go back to my colleague's original question about numbers, and I know you can't really identify a true amount. But are we talking dozens, hundreds or thousands of al Qaeda? And also, if you could just give us some context on the number of attacks now in your AOR compared to what we were talking about six weeks ago and where they're kind of concentrated and how that's coming along?

GEN. HERTLING: Yeah, what I'll tell you -- I'll answer the second question first, Mike, because it's the easier one to answer. We have a great deal of statistics on that.

The attacks against both Iraqi security forces and coalition forces, which we track on a daily basis, have about leveled off from December. We saw a significant drop. It was double last June to what it was in December. We saw a huge decline through the months of June through December, and now it's kind of leveled off. And we think that's because of two things. Number one, it's an increased op tempo -- operational tempo on our part. We're conducting more operations than ever before in the north. Plus, as been stated before, many more of them are attempting to come to our area and go to the last groupings of locations where they think they can find safe havens, which they're quickly finding they can't.

But again, going back to your question about numbers, I don't mean to be evasive, but we just don't know. I mean, we have -- if you ask me about any specific town or city, I might give you a guess and it might be more accurate, but over all in the north, which is the size of the state of Pennsylvania, what we're seeing is some people moving between groups. We're actually -- in fact, I talked with an individual yesterday, as part of reconciliation, who wants to lay down their arms and is promising to lay down arms and the arms of his group in order -- because he's just had enough. He's had enough fighting. And we're seeing increasing indicators that more and more groups -- not just al Qaeda, but others are coming forward. The hardcore guys are still out there.

And again, to make a guess on how many, it would be a disservice to you and to me if I did that. I just don't know.

Q Can I just follow up on the number of attacks? Do you actually have a number of attacks -- the number that you're talking about now, where you said it's leveled off, and the regions where you're seeing, I guess, the most attacks now? Where are your hot spots?

GEN. HERTLING: Yeah, hot spots. I can tell you this morning we had 27 attacks, six of which were successful. We track them on a daily basis. So that was the last 24 hours. Monday is usually -- or Monday morning, which reports on Sunday, is usually a light day. Friday is the lightest day of the week. On Friday, I want to say in the north we had 18 attacks throughout the northern four provinces, of which I think two, I think, were successful. It ranges anywhere on a daily basis from about 20 to anywhere on a high day might be 45 or 50, depending on the circumstances, the weather and how sporty the enemy feels he can be on that given day.

For the areas which are improving, Salahuddin province and Kirkuk province. Well, let's start off with the best province right now, is Kirkuk. It is the province and the city which has the least amount of attacks repeatedly, and they're really down in the lower levels. I think they had two yesterday.

Salahuddin is the next best province. There are still some areas within Salahuddin province, specifically the cities of Baiji, Samarra to a lesser degree, although that's become very peaceful in the last couple of weeks since we've instituted some security measures there and the population feels a little bit better.

Diyala continues to be up there but not as much as it was a month ago. There are still some hot spots in Diyala, and we're working with the coalition forces to go through some of the smaller towns, like Muqisha, Kahn Banisad, and the smaller towns around the eastern part of Diyala province in the city of Muqdadiyah.

And frankly, the majority of our attacks continue to be around the city of Mosul. But we are stressing that right now. We are enabling some actions up there. We're working very closely with General -- Lieutenant General Riyad (sp), the new commander of the Nineveh operations center, to integrate our actions a little bit better and to go on the offensive against the forces -- the al Qaeda forces that remain in and around the town of Mosul.

Q General, I'm Carl Osgood. I write for Executive Intelligence Review. I'd like to ask you a little bit about your counterinsurgency tactics, if I could, because we're told that one of the reasons for success in -- such success in Anbar is because it's all Sunni population, largely belonging to one tribe. In your area, especially around Mosul, it's much more mixed.

You have Sunni, Shi'ites, Kurds and even other groups. So I'm wondering if you have to make any adjustments in your tactics in order to avoid, let's say, alienating one group versus another.

GEN. HERTLING: Yes -- (chuckles) -- we do. We estimate that there are about 136 or so tribes in Nineveh province and in upper Salahuddin province, a couple of major ones, very different from Anbar. There are seven different religions in and around Mosul, and you have some very interesting sects -- like you say, the Kurds, Shi'a, Sunni, Yazidis, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Christians, in and around the cities. So yeah, it's very challenging.

The concerned local citizens group, which were so successful in Anbar and to a lesser degree but still very successful in Baghdad, are very difficult to apply in Nineveh province, our northern province, and Mosul. But we are beginning to see some individuals stepping forward, as they perceive an increasing security in the areas, that say, "Hey, I want to contribute to helping stem the violence."

It isn't going to be a large awakening movement. In fact, there's almost a little bit of a step back whenever you use the term "awakening" in the north, because they don't feel like they ever went to sleep. But there is concern about the different groups coming together, and you do have to balance some of the challenges between the different groups and the power bases within our provinces -- very different from Anbar; you're absolutely correct.

Q So --

GEN. HERTLING: (Off mike) -- your question about counterinsurgency, it's very complex in the north. It's the most complex I've ever seen it, and I've been over here before.

Q Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: (Off mike.)

Q Sir, this is Lisa Burgess with Stars and Stripes. Could you perhaps expand on that a little bit more as it applies to your job in keeping security? Do you find these different groups, especially in the Mosul area, still struggling for power? And how does that make your job more difficult?

GEN. HERTLING: Well, I'd turn it a little bit, Lisa, and I would say that one of the things that we have an

advantage with in Mosul is, we have a very good Iraqi army -- in fact, two divisions of Iraqi army in Nineveh province, the 2nd and the 3rd Divisions, commanded by General Muta'a (sp) and General Khurshid (sp).

The central government has just appointed, as I said a minute ago, Lieutenant General Riyadh (sp) to command the overall security forces in Nineveh. So he commands the two Iraqi divisions, the emerging police force, the border control forces, and has just been given responsibility as well to coordinate for the Iraqi special operations forces. So you now have, as the Iraqi security forces gains in capability, a central commander who is a very capable man, and he and I see eye to eye on everything, and we're working very closely together.

So in terms of a populist movement, if you were to support the Iraqi security forces, there isn't as much as a need for it in Mosul. And that's the difference. Remember, you know, the CLCs, or the "Sons of Iraq," as they're being called today, was a bridging mechanism. It was a means to end. It wasn't an end to itself. In Nineveh province and Mosul, you already have that end. You have a well-established Iraqi army division, improving every day in capability, and some pretty good policemen, which could use some additional training, but they're still there. So I think that somewhat negates the need for a large awakening or CLC movement in Mosul.

And besides the fact, the atmospherics of Mosul are very different from some of the other cities. It's a very -- I've used this term before and gotten in trouble for it, but I'll use it again -- it's a very cosmopolitan city because there are so many different people with different backgrounds in that city that you can't just separate Sunnis from Shi'as as you've done potentially in Baghdad or formed an awakening group as you did in Anbar. I'm very sorry for the long answer, but this is a very complicated issue in Mosul.

MR. WHITMAN: Fred?

Q Sir, Fred Baker, American Forces Press Service. I read a report of a raid in Mosul that was thwarted by intelligence they thought came from within the ISF. Can you talk about how you manage intelligence as operations become more joint? And can you -- you touched on it just briefly. Can you give an update on ISF forces there and their capabilities and operations?

GEN. HERTLING: I'm not sure I heard the first part of the question correctly. I think what you said is that you had read a report where there had been information about an operation that had been leaked. Is that the gist of the conversation?

Q From within the ISF, and therefore al Qaeda was gone before the U.S. forces got there.

GEN. HERTLING: Yeah, I've talked a little bit about this before.

There is a challenge with operational security and it may not be because of evil intentions. What I stated to a member of your profession a few weeks ago was reminding them of the fact that as U.S. Army forces over here, we have encrypted radio and secure communication devices. In many cases, and in fact in most cases, the Iraqi army are still using cell phones and unencrypted devices.

So some of the things in terms of operational security may have not purposely been leaked but information gets out. I mean, it's the old loose-lips-sink ships, not to show my age. But, you know, the old posters of, hey, don't talk about it around the coffee or the tea shop, because other people might hear it.

You've got literally Iraqi army and Iraqi police living in the area that they're working in. And when they hear about an operation, they might tell someone about it. And there's that extreme and then potentially the other extreme where, in fact, there may be some individuals who are actively attempting to gather intelligence about operations. It's something we've got to be aware of, and try and improve our operational security.

But to be honest with you, no, I've got to tell you, the difference now from my last tour over here is the unbelievable capability of the Iraqi army and, in many cases, the Iraqi police. That Iraqi security forces: They're doing operations; they're getting after it.

In fact, we found a major cache yesterday that we would have missed, over 400 pounds of explosive in this cache, in a house in Mosul. We probably would have missed it had it not been for the Iraqi platoon that was with one of our companies that saw something unusual and pointed this cache out. So I think the combined efforts of the Iraqi security forces, with the coalition forces, has been very instrumental over the last several months, in terms of getting after the enemy.

MR. WHITMAN: We have time for about one more.

Courtney, why don't you finish this up.

Q Thanks.

Hey, General, it's Courtney from NBC News again.

Secretary Gates said -- I think it was today in Baghdad -- that the idea of a pause in the troop withdrawal -- you're smiling; I guess you know the question already. The idea of a pause in the --

GEN. HERTLING: I always love it, Courtney, when you ask me, no, I always love it, Courtney, when you ask me questions to comment on the secretary of Defense, because you know what I'm going to say. First of all, I didn't hear what he said. But go ahead, and I'll try and answer from my perspective. It's going to be a great question, I'm sure.

Q I'll give you my read on what he said, then. He said that the idea of a troop withdrawal, a pause in the troop withdrawal, after the surge forces are home, makes sense.

And if you could just tell us, as a commander on the ground of an area that sees the vast majority of the violence in Iraq right now, what's your take on that? Do you agree with the notion of pausing the withdrawal after the surge? Or do you think that a drawdown after that, perhaps going down to something like 10 combat brigades by the end of the year -- do you think that that is feasible still?

GEN. HERTLING: You know, Courtney, I don't know. I mean, I could give you my personal feeling, but my professional feeling is that right now we don't know. I mean, we're talking about next summer.

I was talking to my good buddy Major General Walt Gaskin, who is the Marine commander who just gave up his job out in MNF-West on Saturday and turned it over -- turned the area over to the new commander out there. And, you know, when he talks about what happened in Anbar -- and it relates back to the question we just had -- what happened last March when U.S. Army and U.S. Marines got together and really started the Awakening, what you saw was about the same level of violence that we're seeing right now, about 800 or so attacks a month, literally dropped to 20 or so over a period of just a few weeks. And he was kidding with me a little bit. He said, "Hey, I don't know what happened, but the next day everything was -- there were birds chirping and flowers growing." And I'm being facetious, but he said it literally dropped off that quickly.

It could do the same thing in our area. We're pushing it towards that. That's what we hope will happen. And I think the Iraqi people in our area are beginning to see that.

So if you ask me today on the 11th of February what's going to happen next June as we -- June or July as we continue to do off-ramping of units, it's the same as the question on how many forces are -- how many enemies are up here. You know, I don't know. I think the secretary is probably saying we'll take a look at it about that time.

Now, all of that needs planning, I know. And there's people getting ready and -- people getting ready to redeploy and all that, so it affects them. But I've got to tell you, I don't think you can make decisions in February based on what you think the situation's going to be like in July or August.

So I think the -- everything I've heard the secretary say has been right on target. He's dealing with -- he's directing his plans toward the enemy. He isn't directing his plans toward a timeline. That, to me, sounds like a strategy as opposed to a withdrawal. And that's why I really admire Secretary Gates and what he's doing in this whole operation.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, General, we have reached the end of our time. And we want to be respectful of the fact that it's been a long day for you, too. So with that, let me turn it back to you, though, just in case you have any final closing thoughts that you'd like to make.

GEN. HERTLING: Yeah, I would, Bryan. Thank you.

January, as we conducted the first phase of Operation Iron Harvest, as I mentioned earlier, we really got after the enemy. And it does my heart good to walk the streets of Diyala or Kirkuk or Salahuddin and see people back in the markets, see the -- and I'm not trying to get too emotional here, but to see the young people and the Iraqi citizens beginning to enjoy their freedom. And it gives not only me but, I think, many of our soldiers over here a great deal of hope that there is potential for success and pushing back this evilness which is al Qaeda and all these extremists.

But January was also a tough month because in Task Force Iron in our units we lost 21 great Americans who sacrificed their lives for the cause of freedom. And I just want to make sure that people know that there are people over here who really believe in what they're doing and that they're seeing a difference every day in the Iraqi people, the Iraqi government is beginning to become more capable, and it is an honor to serve over here with these great Americans, as well as the great Iraqi security forces, which have become our brothers.

That's the way I'd like to end it, Bryan, if you don't mind.

MR. WHITMAN: Thank you very much, General. And we hope that we can have you back sometime soon.

GEN. HERTLING: Nope, General Boozer's taking the next one. I already told him he owes me one on this one.

MR. WHITMAN: We'll take him any time that he's available also.

GEN. HERTLING: Okay. All right, thanks very much, Bryan.

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