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Presenter: Commander, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division Col Tom James **February 22, 2008**

DoD News Briefing with Col. James from Iraq

COL. GARY KECK (director, DOD Press Office): Well, good morning, everyone. Glad you could make it in on this rainy, drizzly day here at the Pentagon.

And we are privileged to have with us today Colonel Tom James, who's the commander of the 4th Brigade Combat Team of the 3rd Infantry Division, and his brigade is operating as part of Multinational Division-Center. They've been there for about three months now, and this is his first time coming back to brief you in the Pentagon via this format. He is currently at Forward Operating Base Kalsu near Iskandariyah, and he'll give us the normal operational update and what's going on. And then will take questions.

So with that, let's turn it over to you, Tom. Go ahead.

COL. JAMES: Well, thank you very much, Gary. I appreciate that introduction. I'd like to start off with an initial statement and then answer your questions.

First off, good morning. I'm Colonel Tom James, commander of the 4th Brigade Combat Team of the 3rd Infantry Division based out of Fort Stewart. First, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to talk to you today about our operations in AO Vanguard which we're really proud of.

Task Force Vanguard consists of over 3,000 tremendously talented soldiers. We assumed responsibility of our area of operations from 4-25 Infantry out of Fort Richardson, Alaska on 1 December 2007, and have conducted full-spectrum operations for the past 83 days. Our operation encompasses North Babil province and stretches from the Euphrates River Valley in the West to the Tigris River Valley in the East. Our area spans just over 40,000 square kilometers, an area roughly the size of Switzerland, and contains approximately 625,000 Iraqis. The decisive point is the town of Iskandariyah because of its Shi'a-Sunni balance, its location along the major southern avenues of approach into Baghdad and its large industrial complex. We also have transition teams and contingency plans that cover operations south in Karbala, Najaf and Hillah.

Our mission is to secure the population, interdict accelerants moving towards Baghdad, defeat extremists and neutralize resistance groups, primarily focused on defeating sectarian violence, and build capacity of the Iraqi security forces, government institutions and economic programs. And our last task is focused on transitioning security and local development tasks to the Iraqi security forces and local governments.

The current security situation is stable, and I am optimistic about the future. Sunni extremists are severely disrupted. They no longer find sanctuary and support from the population. We attribute the current security situation to three major reasons; reason number one, our COIN strategy adjustment and the surge deployment; reason number two, Iraqi security force capabilities have incredibly increased, or extremely increased; and the third is the Sons of Iraq program and the population standing up to defend their neighborhoods.

I'll expand on each of these three reasons for a second. First, we are living with the population. The five-brigade surge gave coalition forces the resources required to concentrate combat power in extremist-dominated areas. They allowed us to occupy key terrain in these areas to avoid enemy reoccupation.

Our brigade permanently occupies 15 distributed positions -- five patrol bases, coalition forces with Iraqi army; three joint security stations, coalition forces with Iraqi police; and four military transition positions, which are coalition forces that are partnering with Iraqi brigades and Iraqi battalions in the 8th Iraqi Army Division; and we also have two forward-operating bases. These locations facilitate partnership with Iraqi army and police. They provide greater maneuver flexibility and allow us to receive and process more intelligence and link in with the population. When the people know that coalition and Iraqi security forces are living with them, they feel more comfortable providing information on extremist activity and they feel more secure in their neighborhoods and homes.

Secondly, the Iraqi security force has proven -- is improved significantly. The difference between their capacity during my last deployment and now is truly amazing. We partner with four Iraqi army brigades, two Iraqi army battalions and, as well, 15 police headquarters. Most of these organizations are capable of processing intelligence and executing precise independent operations. We still have some equipment issues, but we continue to work this hard, and I see positive momentum in this area.

Thirdly, the Iraqi population is tired of their families being terrorized by extremists and have stepped up to secure their neighborhoods.

The Sons of Iraq program employs local Iraqis to secure their neighborhoods under the supervision of local tribal leaders and overwatched by Iraqi security forces. We use these static security positions to thicken our security lines in areas where we cannot fully commit coalition or Iraqi security forces. We currently have just under 8,000 SOIs in our area that man 552 checkpoints. This includes both Shi'a and Sunni SOIs.

To this point, I have focused on the Sunni threat. We also have a Shi'a extremist and criminal threat in the southern portion of our area of operation. The Shi'a threat is neutralized, based on precise intelligence-driven operations executed by Iraqi police and Iraqi army.

The brigade combat team also conducts numerous operations focused on extremists and criminals over the past two and a half months. In December we conducted Operation Marne Roundup, a successful combined operation to clear AQI in the Euphrates River Valley west of Iskandariyah, in the vicinity of the town of Khidr. During the operation and with assistance of SOIs, or Sons of Iraq, and local citizens, we killed approximately 18 extremists, captured 25, found and cleared 51 IEDs, and found and cleared 43 caches. We established Patrol Base Kelsey, named after a soldier that gave his life during this offensive operation.

Since we established the patrol base, 100 families have returned to their homes. We initiated numerous projects, to include rubble removal, school refurbishment and electricity repair, just to name a few. We also organized a local sheikh council to capture the needs of the people, as required.

Just south of Khidr is the town of Jurf al-Sakhr. Four months ago, it was a war zone dominated by extremists. It is now a secure community with positive governance and economic growth. An active police station and Sons of Iraq program secure the area, and over 40 businesses are growing, based on small-business education and microgrant stimulation.

This is a model community concept that will be adopted throughout our AO. Just the other day, I was at Jurf and witnessed a government-funded road crew paving a once war-ravaged street.

We continue relentless pursuit of the enemy and denying extremist sanctuaries throughout our AO. Over the

past 83 days we conducted over 70 combined operations, both coalition and Iraqi security forces. We captured over 50 high-value enemy targets, cleared over 100 caches and cleared over 70 IEDs.

With the security window opened, we continue the exploitation phase, focused on governance and economics. We have an embedded reconstruction team resourced with governance and economics experts. Mr. Van Franken (sp), our EPRT leader, has a team, and as his team is an essential part of our brigade combat team, we include them in all operational planning and execution.

Under economics, they focus on developing small businesses, agricultural associations, poultry and fish farms and reconstruction projects. Under governance, they focus on local governance training, governance linkages and beladiya assistance, which are the public works and the essential services for the people.

Looking to the future, we will conduct Operation Marne Rugged next month. This operation is one in a series of operations in the Task Force Marne AO focused on clearing AQI from the Tigris River Valley. Operation Marne Thunderbolt, focused in Arab Jabour, to our northwest, is one operation. Marne Grand Slam is focusing in Salman Pak, to our northeast. Then our operation, Marne Rugged, will focus on the Tigris River Valley between the Samma (ph) jungle and a town called Suwayra.

Based on the success of the two operations to our north, we envision up to 30 AQI fighters will cross south of the Tigris River in an attempt to blend with the population between the Samma (ph) jungle and Suwayra. Operation Marne Rugged is a combined operation focused on clearing these extremist elements from the Tigris River Valley, establishing a combined patrol base on extremists' avenue of approach, and developing actionable intelligence through engagement with the local population.

We'll also assist with the Iraqi security force governance and economic systems capacity building in the area.

The force organization for the operation will include two Iraq army battalions and one coalition battalion. We estimate about 30 days to clear the area and establish the patrol base. We have already started setting the conditions through engagement with the Iraqi security forces and local tribal leaders.

In conclusion, our ultimate goal, of which we share with our Iraqi security forces, is a free, safe and secure area of operation, with a strong representative government that enjoys positive economic growth. We share this with our Iraqi security partners. We know we have a great deal of hard work ahead. But I can report tonight that our campaign is on track, and we will continue our relentless pursuit of the enemy.

I cannot close without mentioning the superb work of our outstanding soldiers, and especially the sacrifices of their wonderful families. Their ability to adapt rapidly to extremely complex situations never ceases to amaze me.

I want to thank you again for this opportunity to speak to you today, and that completes my opening statement. Standing by for your questions. Thank you very much.

COL. KECK: Okay. Thank you, Tom. We appreciate it. So let's begin.

Mike, go ahead.

Q Sir, it's Mike Mount with CNN, and I suppose I'll ask this kind of obvious question that always gets asked of you folks.

You had mentioned that the surge troops were part of one of the elements that is kind of keeping security in the area. What would happen, do you think, if surge troops in your area are pulled out? Do you think the security forces there are strong enough, and the Sons of Iraq are strong enough to hold? Or are the surge troops a really strong, key element in your area?

COL. JAMES: Good question, Mike, and that is a question that we often receive, and it's a good one.

As you think about the security forces, as they've developed over time, we have focused on the surge force

coming in and buying time.

It's a bridging strategy to allow the Iraqi security forces and government to develop over time, while concurrent with that, we reduce the capability of the enemy force. And I've seen just in my short period of time here that that has been extremely successful.

You know, we are not a surge brigade, but our division is a surge division, and the other brigades within the division were surged. We were, like, on the six of the five that deployed, so we ended up rotating in and backfilling 4-25, as I mentioned earlier. But as we fall in, we see the enormous success that has been traded by the surge force. See, our area is not occupied by a surge force, but those that surround it, those to the north of our area are, and we've seen how they've reduced the enemy force that we've had to deal with. And as they've done that, the Iraqi security forces have built up and gotten better and better, and now they -- as the force starts to transition out, they can handle the threat at hand and the government institutions can also help with that as well.

COL. KECK: Jeff.

Q Colonel, Jeff Schogol with Stars and Stripes. The most recent progress report on Iraq said that the Iraqi government was reluctant to hire the Iraqis then known as concerned local citizens, now known as Sons of Iraq. Is that something you are dealing with?

COL. JAMES: I am dealing with the SOI program. We have just under 8,000, as I mentioned earlier, in our AO, and we help the Iraqi government and Iraqi security forces in screening those SOIs for potential employment into the Iraqi security forces, and we have done some of that. Recently, we screened 663. We have put their packets together, and we have pushed them up to the reconciliation cell in Baghdad. We've also had a confident -- correction -- a conference last, where we had positive momentum related to that. So I envision over the next couple weeks we could see positive momentum with those 663, and I envision over time they will be integrated as Iraqi security forces, specifically Iraqi police, in the North Babil province. So I have seen some of that. That is just the Iraqi security force portion.

We're also working economic opportunities and employment for SOIs as well as they transition out of the program to other opportunities as we see that their security function is no longer needed, and we constantly assess that.

Q What I meant to say was that the Iraqi government appears to be reluctant to take over the contract for the SOI.

Right now they're being paid by the U.S. military. Is that something you have noticed?

COL. JAMES: Okay. Right. I have just -- the contracts that we have paid and that we work, I am familiar with. We have not tried to pass those particular contracts that we work over to the Iraqi government at this point. What we have worked to do is transition them to government institutions, and they receive the pay that way.

Now, we do have some security forces that we have gained contact with to our east, that we are working through the MOI and government -- a government institution, obviously, to help process them as we develop them. And we're working their paperwork, so that that could potentially happen. So we are working through the MOI to potentially get some of our SOIs funded. But that is in our new area that we just recently, at the beginning of the month, operated in. So we continue to work that. So I am working with some of that.

Q Colonel, it's David Morgan with Reuters. Can you talk a little bit about your relationship with the Iraqi security forces and Iraqi police, to give us an idea of where you are in terms of this transition of mission toward -- away from combat and toward oversight?

COL. JAMES: Absolutely, David. That is a great question and one that I deal with on a daily basis.

We have a unique situation in Task Force Vanguard, where we are a brigade that is partnered with an entire Iraqi army division. All four of the maneuver brigades of the 8th Iraqi Army Division, we partner with in MiTT teams. And we also have two additional battalions that we cover down with MiTTs as well, and at the end, the transition teams that

are imbedded with the Iraqi army.

So I deal with them on a regular basis. Every one of those brigade commanders I meet with two to three times a month. And I meet with General Othman, the division commander, once a month. And we also have three district police headquarters that we deal with and also deal with the Babil police chief, Major General Fadil, twice a month, as well. So I'm fully engaged with them, and I'm extremely impressed with what's going on.

We have three battalions that operate within north Babil proper that we coordinate offensive operations with. We do not do an operation that's not combined. Our Iraqi army and coalition forces are hand in hand. And whenever we plan an operation, we coordinate with the brigades and the battalions. We conduct joint rehearsals or combined rehearsals. We conduct combined planning, and we conduct combined operations. And every one of them has been done that way.

We learn a lot from our Iraqi partners. The Iraqi army has really improved over time. They understand how to process intelligence. They're really good at collecting HUMINT, human intelligence, and they're really good at executing operations in their area that they're extremely familiar with. So we've had a very positive outlook on that. And the police, much the same.

Q If I can follow up for a moment, does that mean that the Iraqi security forces are in the lead position in these operations, or are your forces in the lead positions? And how much of your operation's resources and time is spent on what might be described as civil affairs operations, like the provision of services or support for governance and things like that?

COL. JAMES: Okay. The Iraqi security forces are doing extremely well, as you can see. Could you please ask your first part of that question first?

Q Just wondering whether the Iraqi security forces are in the -- whether the Iraqi security forces are in the lead position or whether the U.S. forces are in the lead.

COL. JAMES: Right. In our AO, coalition forces are in the lead position. We are partnered with the Iraqi security forces; they execute operations in AO Vanguard. So we are in the lead position now, but I see the capability of the Iraqi security forces to conduct independent operations in the not too distant future.

And then you asked -- did that answer your question? Can we move on to the civil affairs?

Q Thank you.

COL. JAMES: Yes, we work very hard with civil affairs operations. We have civil affairs teams with our three ground maneuver battalions, and as well, the EPRT works hand in glove with the civil affairs as well. And we go out and we work projects, we work governance and this has been an extremely successful operation. One of the things we really focused on is linkages, making sure that local governments are representative of the people, and then they're ranked through higher governments so that we can process, prioritize and resource the people that need things. And we've seen some success in that lately.

A town of Kidda (sp) that I told you about with our Marne round- up operation, now we have a hundred families that have returned there, and just the day before yesterday we had 20 families that received 5 million dinar per family from the Iraqi government to help them sustain themselves until we can get their houses repaired and infrastructure fixed in their area.

So that's a good example. We're constantly engaged in civil affairs operations because the security window is open now, and we're maintaining that and we're seizing the window of opportunity to work the governance and economic pieces of this.

Q Colonel, I'm Carl Osgood. I write for Executive Intelligence Review. You probably know that Muqtada al-Sadr announced today that he was extending his cease-fire another six months, cease- fire of the Mahdi Army. I'm wondering, how does that -- how do you see that in terms of your outlook for the security situation?

COL. JAMES: I see his announcement as very positive to the security situation. You know, in our AO we have 468,750 Shi'a, based on the last census, so we have a large Shi'a population in AO Vanguard.

Now, not all of those are particularly close followers of Muqtada -- correction, Sayyid Muqtada al-Sadr, but in the conditions that exist with this, this is a very positive situation because al-Sadr understands that a peace and establishing peace in the future is the way to success in Iraq, not violence. And with the senior position that he holds, that will influence an enormous amount of the Shi'a population in AO Vanguard, and we see that as being a very positive step in securing the security situation that we have now so that we can continue to exploit other things.

Q Can I follow up?

COL. KECK: Go ahead.

Q Just to follow up on that, some of Sadr's people have complained over the last couple of months that they've gotten nothing in return for the cease-fire. What is your interaction with the -- or do you have any --with any of his people or with the Mahdi Army?

COL. JAMES: You know, what we deal with is Iraqis. And we have Iraqis that are of Sunni background to the north, and Iraqis that are of Shi'a background in the Musayyib and Sedda area. And we continue to work with them. We work projects just as hard there as we do in the northern portion, where the Sunnis are. So we just look at it in the lens of Iraqis, and we've been pretty successful with that.

And I can only really focus on AO Vanguard when it relates to that, but I do see a very positive trend here in the future related to this cease-fire and the fact that he went forward and established this wanting peace as the direction. And we've seen that since I've been here, and I believe we'll see it continue in the future.

Just one more point on that is there are some factions of his followers that don't necessarily agree with extension of the cease-fire, and we continue to track those very closely. And as we have to, the Iraqi security forces will deal with them and we will partner with them in that effort.

Q Sir, it's Meredith MacKenzie with Talk Radio News. You mentioned there were some equipment problems or shortages in the Iraqi security forces in your area. Can you expand on what exactly is missing and what could be done to improve it?

COL. JAMES: Absolutely.

Most of -- the majority of the equipping issues with the Iraqi army that we work with in our AO deals with vehicles and logistics-type items. And so what we have done is, we've identified all these. We've scrubbed them with our MiTT teams, and we have lists of these, and we push them up through the MOD, and with the police, the MOI, to try to get these assets to those that need them bad.

And we're starting to see positive momentum. We've gotten weapons recently for both the police and the Iraqi army, and we're starting to get some vehicles as well. But as you build the force, there's always equipping issues when you start trying to build these battalions. And so we continue to work those hard.

And I think that our biggest play in this is getting the visibility of it to the right places, so that it can be resourced. And I've seen positive momentum in that area.

Q Can I just follow up? Just to clarify, sir, there's a lot of alphabet soup in that answer. Is that coming from the United States or the coalition forces or the Iraqi government that's supplying these weapons?

COL. JAMES: It's a combination. We're working through the MOD and the MOI for the majority. We're also working through MNSTC-I, and working through MNSTC-I, we're getting some of these resources for the Iraqis to assist with them, because they do have some humvees, and we continue to try work the humvee issue with them.

But we also try to work other things. For example, the structures for their company CPs and barracks for their soldiers -- we are getting those through the Iraqi system. We're having them prioritize, and they're pulling those through their manufacturers, and we're helping them establish them in areas where they're conducting company-level operations. That's very positive as well.

COL. KECK: Just one more. Go ahead, Mike.

Q Sir, it's Mike Mount again, with CNN. If I could ask another equipping issue -- but this time with U.S. forces, it was alleged last night in one of the political debates that U.S. forces are going to battle in some cases short of troops because they're being divided among two different wars, and short of ammunition, short of weapons. Have you seen any of this in your units or heard of any of this going on in any units around Iraq, also where troops have had to confiscate or have taken enemy weapons because they've been short of weapons?

COL. JAMES: Mike, absolutely not.

Our organization is fully resourced, fully trained, and executing magnificent operations every day, and they never cease to amaze me, what they can do. And they do that in partnership with the Iraqi security forces.

And I think one of the key things to emphasize here is this partnership between us and the Iraqi security forces, because our soldiers understand every day that they're setting the example for their counterpart Iraqi security force. And so we continue to work that very hard, and good order and discipline and doing the right thing is constant across the board. And so we enjoy sharing that with our Iraqi partners, and they're following the same way.

So it's been a great relationship, and I haven't seen any shortage of anything. We're looking really good.

COL. KECK: Colonel James, we appreciate your time with us this morning. We would like to provide you with the last opportunity to give us any closing comments or thoughts that you may have.

COL. JAMES: Well, thanks, Gary, and thanks to all of you for those questions. You know, I always jump at the opportunity to talk about what's going on over here, because it's extremely positive. And I want to make sure that the world sees it, especially with our magnificent soldiers.

First off, I'd just like to make the comment that 2008 -- we've referenced and we've done this with our Iraqi security forces -- is the year of opportunity. It all goes back to this window of security being opened, and being able to exploit that window of opportunity, through governance and economics and building the capacity of the Iraqi security forces. And this has all been enabled because of the surge and because of other things.

But the three things that I see as very important is, the opportunity exists because of very competent Iraqi security forces, both Iraqi army and Iraqi police. We have a population in our AO that is hungry for freedom, and you can see that in their eyes as they stand point as part of the Son of Iraq. Or you see a family member, be it a mother or a daughter, walking to market. You can see all the activity.

Right now we're in the middle of the Arba'een festival time period, and you can see their women and children walking down these highways to that celebration. And there's a great example of how security is holding, and what the population thinks about the security situation.

I also want to put in a plug for the local governments. We've structured those very well, or the Iraqis have structured their governments very well, at the local level now.

And they're seeing the priorities of the people, and they're starting to push them up. And we're building this local capacity, and we're really starting to see that take off.

And then the last one that I wanted to talk about was our magnificent soldiers, the coalition force that's full of competent warriors that execute across the spectrum of conflict, be it lethal to non-lethal, and doing it simultaneously and with good order and discipline, and doing it with the Iraqi security force partners.

And the last thing I'd like to comment on is the families. The families make enormous sacrifices every day. They're back home, they're keeping the homefront; they're supporting their soldiers as they're forward deployed, protecting our nation and preserving peace for all. And I just want to thank you all again for the questions and look forward to doing this again some time. Thank you very much.

COL KECK: Thank you again, Tom. And hopefully, we'll see you again soon.

COL JAMES: Okay, thanks, Gary.

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