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Presenter: Commander, Multinational Division-North and 1st Armored Brigade Brig. Gen. Tony Thomas

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DoD News Briefing with Brig. Gen. Thomas from Iraq

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

MODERATOR: Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the DOD briefing room this beautiful Monday morning here in Washington, D.C.

And we have with us today Brigadier General Tony Thomas, who's the deputy commander of Multinational Division-North and the 1st Armored Division. General Thomas and his troops are responsible for the ongoing security operations in northern Iraq, and he is joining us today to update you on those efforts. And this is the first time General Thomas has been with us, and he's coming to us from Operating Base Speicher just outside of Tikrit. So with that, let's turn it over to General Thomas. Go ahead, sir.

GEN. THOMAS: Good evening from COB Speicher, or good morning, East Coast Time. I'm Brigadier General Tony Thomas, the deputy commanding general for Multinational Division-North, otherwise known as Task Force Iron, or 1st Armored Division, as it was referred to.

I'm going to provide you with a very brief situational update at the outset here, and pause for as many follow-on questions as time allows.

Many of you have been briefed by my boss, Major General Hertling, previously. But just for the purposes of starting from the same sheet of music, let me review our area of operations and some of the recent highlights.

Multinational Division-North is responsible for the seven northern provinces of Iraq, an area roughly the size of Georgia, and including over two-fifths of the population of Iraq, or roughly 12 million people. It consists of the provinces of Nineveh, Kirkuk, Salahuddin, Diyala and the three provinces of the Kurdish Regional Government of Dohuk, Erbil and Sulimaniyah. Under our division's organizational structure, I am responsible for Nineveh, Kirkuk and the Kurdish region and am based out of Mosul, where I've lived for the past six months.

Since our assumption of the battlespace, Task Force Iron has been focused on three lines of operation: security, governance and economics. From the security standpoint, we have been absolutely enemy-focused; that is to say, going where the enemy is or was, and eliminating the sanctuaries that they enjoyed in the past.

Our campaign to date has entailed an initial focus on the Za'ab triangle, an -- the area between Nineveh, Kirkuk and Salahuddin, a noted insurgent safe haven and transit zone, where we were able to blend a synchronized

effort of coalition and Iraqi security force kinetic efforts with the establishment of a major CLC, or concerned local citizen structure, to drastically change the formerly anti-coalition nature of that area.

This was followed by decisive and continuing clearing operations in the Diyala province to seal the backdoor to Baghdad in the wake of very successful security operations there.

Most recently, we've been able to shift the priority effort to Mosul to address the long-standing security challenges there and to stifle any attempt by the insurgency to rally around that historic center of gravity. Recently, in conjunction with our partnered Iraqi forces, we've been able to establish joint security sites and combat outposts in the heart of Mosul, which is the first critical step in ensuring or in providing consistent security for the people of the city, specifically securing them where they sleep. Our intent is to drive the insurgents from the city and return it to the lawful Iraqi security apparatus while we pursue them, the enemy, wherever else they may be in Nineveh province or in our area of operations.

This will be a steady, methodical coalition and Iraqi security force campaign to eliminate the enemy from Mosul -- challenging, but not another Fallujah-like episode.

While kinetic operations will last for at least a few more months, we are already planning for a robust reconstruction effort to ensure a sustainable security situation. We'll link our actions with the provincial government and an increasingly capable central government. Working with our provincial reconstruction team, we will carry out projects designed to better the day-to-day lives of Mosul citizens, improve local governance and economics, and take steps to help Mosul and all of Nineveh achieve its full potential. The recent passage of the 2008 Iraqi budget will only help to underpin these efforts.

The government of Iraq has also taken steps to enhance our ability to address the enemy situation in Mosul by recently establishing the Nineveh operations command, a three-star headquarters under a Sunni Arab by the name of Lieutenant General Riyadh, a former division commander in Baghdad. This unique headquarters provides critical unity of command to the diverse army, police, and border police structure which has been problematic in the past.

There has been some discussion of the value or need for a CLC, concerned local citizens, SOI, sons of Iraq, or sawha (sp) -- three names for the same thing -- type movement in Mosul. We believe this to be impractical at this time for a couple of reasons. The first being that -- one of the key principles of the CLC approach is the employment of indigenous ad hoc security forces where there are insufficient Iraqi security forces. This isn't the case in Mosul and the greater Nineveh province, where we have partnered with two Iraqi army divisions, about 20,000 personnel total, and an additional 20,000 Iraqi police and an Iraqi border force of 3,500 men.

Another reason for the select application of CLCs in Nineveh is the diverse ethnic composition of the province. Unlike Anbar, Nineveh is composed of Sunni, Shi'a, Christians, Yazidis, Shabak, Arabs, Turkoman and Kurds and dozens of tribes. Favoritism towards any one of these tribes or elements might serve the unintended consequences of disrupting the delicate balance that has existed for decades.

In the one area of less diverse demographics and insufficient Iraqi forces, in the southern reaches of Nineveh, along the Tigris, around Sharqat, we have seen fit to employ approximately 2,000 Sons of Iraq as a temporary solution to the security challenge, and one which we hope to transition in the near future to the permanent and sanctioned Iraqi security forces. In fact, we are authorized to grow both the Iraqi army and police by several thousand members over this coming year across Multinational Division-North and hope that many of the SOI individuals will apply to be full-time Iraqi security force assets.

Demonstrating the very diverse but related nature of our battlespace, the pivotal province of Kirkuk is actually a leading example of this next phase of the campaign: the transition of CLCs to Iraqi security forces and the emphasis on the economic and governance lines of operations to complement the hard-fought security gains.

Therein lies the biggest challenge in the way ahead for MND- North. We believe that we are pursuing a disrupted but still dangerous enemy, and will continue to do so. However, to ensure lasting security in our area, just like every other area of Iraq, we need to not only transition to Iraqi-led and sustained security operations, but also, and perhaps more challenging, provide employment for the Iraqi citizens who might otherwise choose to fight us as the only

option to sustain themselves and their families.

That concludes my opening comments. I'd like to pause now for any questions you might have.

MODERATOR: Okay. We appreciate that, sir.

And I just want to remind the Pentagon press corps that General Thomas can't see you, and as you can see, we're -- there's a sandstorm over there, so every once and a while we lose video. And I told him that if there's a certain question that you want repeated so that it is on camera at the time, then he'll do that for you, in case that's the case. But if not, we'll drive through and hopefully this will go all right.

So let's open it up for questions. David?

Q This is David Morgan with Reuters news agency. I wanted to ask, General, during the Turkish incursion into Kurdistan and actually since then, now that those forces have been withdrawn, has there been any reaction that you're aware of among the populace in your jurisdiction? And has any of that reaction risen to the level of posing any sort of security threat?

GEN. THOMAS: There has been a reaction in our area, and as I mentioned, I'm responsible, within the MND-North, for interaction with the Kurdish Regional Government.

I will tell you there was concern on the part of the Kurds about the Turkish operations. They are not unprecedented; they've occurred before, obviously. And the Kurds were concerned at this time that they were of a different nature. They were a little more robust than the past, and they also possibly involve Turks who are already stationed inside northern Iraq. And that's gone on since the late '90s.

The good news, I would tell you, however, though, is there was very strong dialogue between the Kurdish government and their government of Iraq, the government which they're part of, and it seemed to level the information required for one to deal with this situation. Obviously the PKK has been identified by everyone as a terrorist unit or terrorist entity rather, and it was real essential, as I mentioned, that all parties were talking as aggressively as possible. And I think that was effective this time.

Q So was there any sort of reaction that would have risen to the level of posing a security threat? Was there any increase in violence or threat of violence?

GEN. THOMAS: No, the only potential clash was between Kurdish peshmerga forces and Turkish forces. But again, these areas of operation have been clearly defined by prior precedent, by this occurrence every year for the past many years, and so there's enough of a stand-off there. The unfortunate individuals that are caught in the middle are those who may be allied with the PKK or who are innocent villagers in that area, and there was some concern about them getting caught in the midst of violent actions between the Turks and the PKK. But that seems to have been minimized in this case as well.

But there were -- we did not get near any flashpoint for security concerns in the KRG relative to this Turkish incursion.

Over.

MODERATOR: Jeff.

Q General, Jeff Schogol with Stars and Stripes. Can you talk about how much of Mosul is under coalition control and how much remains to be cleared?

GEN. THOMAS: That's really hard to quantify. For instance, we can go anywhere we want to in Mosul. Some areas are more hostile than others. What we're doing now -- and it's the huge difference -- is, during my first month or two there, we did not have sufficient forces to hold the city and even -- other than various outposts that the Iraqi police and army were stationed in. We've been much more aggressive over the last couple months in establishing both joint

security sites and combat outposts, literally in the heart of the enemy sanctuary, denying them the opportunity to seed it with IEDs overnight and take up firing positions, and literally taking the fight to the enemy.

So again, we can go anywhere we want to in Mosul, some areas, and we're now forcing the enemy, boxing them in, if you will, into areas, that they otherwise had free play in the city. So we've seized the initiative, and we're slowly but surely eliminating their toehold in the city.

So I don't know if that answers your question, but the bottom line is I'm very comfortable that we have the upper hand and the initiative in the city right now, and it continues to get better every day, in conjunction with the Iraqi security forces.

Q If I could have a quick follow-up. In October, General Mixon said that the Iraqi central government, in his words, was foot dragging in hiring new police officers. Are you encountering a similar problem in which the Iraqi government is reluctant to hire new security forces, especially if they are Sunni?

GEN. THOMAS: No, I've not seen a reluctance. I just see, unfortunately, they're emulating some of the worst things in our government, and that's bureaucracy. We are authorized to hire both additional army and police forces, and we are attacking that opportunity as aggressively as we are pursuing the enemy. There is a vetting process for certain individuals, those that are coming from the CLC program, for instance, that is a little more -- that puts them under a little more scrutiny than previously. But we are pushing names and candidates through the system as quickly as they'll allow.

The real limiting factor for us right now is not so much getting those names approved, is the training base to train these individuals and get them out on the streets, and we're looking to address that as well. We've got a regional training academy proposal on the table right now to start that in Diyala, and we're also looking to expand the training base for the various provincial training schools and academies so that we accommodate the growth in police and army individuals and soldiers. So we are growing it as fast as we can; it's just not as fast as we'd like only because of the bureaucracy and that limiting factor of training.

Q Sir, Fred Baker, American Forces Press Service. You talk about the size of the Iraqi security forces in your area. Can you talk a little bit about their capabilities, how many of the operations are ISF-driven versus coalition-force driven, and your confidence in their ability to hold those areas?

GEN. THOMAS: That's a great question.

It's actually something we track pretty closely. We talk a lot about joint or combined operations, but I don't think, I don't know that in the past that we measured them as closely or as definitively as we're trying to now.

I would tell you that three months ago, four months ago, we were more exclusively coalition--led and Iraqis supporting. We're slowly tipping that -- (audio break) -- number of soldiers from the coalition, the Iraqis that are on any particular operation, and then going to the eventual and preferred method of Iraqi-led, coalition supporting.

I would daresay we're probably at about the 80-20 measure right now of coalition to Iraqi-led and corresponding -- coalition to Iraqi- led operations. But you see that growing every day, and it's in line with the capability that the Iraqis are demonstrating.

The other factor that's helped us in the North is, we've started to get our forces, Iraqi forces, back from Baghdad where they went to complement the American forces, the coalition forces, that went down there. So we have greater Iraqi capability in terms of sheer numbers and we're applying them out a little more aggressively as well.

Q General, it's Mike Mount with CNN.

Can you quantify a little bit for us the percentage of foreign fighters and Iraqi insurgents in Mosul, and kind of give us a sense of how your operations are going; where they're being pushed out of or being pushed to? And is that concerning to other AORs in Iraq? Are they just being pushed back down to where they came from originally?

GEN. THOMAS: That's a great question.

I would daresay might be victims of our own success here. I will tell you that we think we're disrupting the enemy, dispersing them. The net effect has been that they are so disrupted this time, and so dispersed, that our real challenge now is to find where they are with any sort of center of gravity.

They're still flocking, to use that term, to Mosul. It's been a historic center of gravity. We see that evident, in both interrogation reports and other intelligence, that they really intend to hold on there is some way, shape or form.

And they have for years.

There is absolutely a foreign flavor to it, and we've been very effectively lately on attriting a Saudi -- (audio break). You probably saw that in the news, that we killed a key Saudi leader who had been responsible for killing five of our coalition -- (audio break) -- earlier in the year. But we see them pretty definitively in the mix in Mosul as well.

Where they are -- (audio break) -- south of the city -- (audio break) -- swath of many villages down along -- (audio break) -- and they're also (inching out ?) into the desert, in the Jazirah desert, out toward Biaj as well. There again lies the challenge: as we push them out from the city -- (audio break) -- areas where we aren't necessarily en masse, and where we don't necessarily have the ISR, the platforms that might otherwise pick them up. So we're having to adapt our assets a little bit to that challenge.

Good-news story is we're forcing them out of the city. We're disrupting their focus and their effort there, and while they're -- (audio break) -- we're continuing to apply pressure on them as they fall back on their alternate positions.

MODERATOR: Sir, during that answer, we had quite a bit of disruption on this end, and I know probably Mike wants to you repeat a couple of key things there. So I'm going to ask him to tell you the essential things he'd like you to maybe repeat, and hopefully we have good audio and visual.

Q Sir, if you could just repeat a little bit about the Saudi factor there -- I think I got the gist of what you were saying before, but could you also quantify -- kind of give us some percentages or numbers on foreign fighters and Iraqi insurgents in Mosul?

GEN. THOMAS: Yeah, I -- (audio break) -- addressing the percentage aspect. And I would say there's about a 10 percent, 10 to 15 percent flavor in terms of foreign fighter influence in Mosul. I'm hesitant to do the numbers, because that plays our hand a little bit. Suffice to say we've got sufficient combat power to address the numbers of foreign fighters we see that complement the Iraqi component of this -- of the insurgent effort in Mosul -- (audio break) -- to the -- we see it pretty clearly.

I'm pretty confident of that, that we see both the total composition of the enemy element there as well as the foreign flavor. It is absolutely the tip of the spear for the al Qaeda influence into Iraq. There's clear strategic lines back through their structure, back to -- you know, to where the insurgency started from. So again, it reinforces that they've -- the importance they've put on Mosul as a March objective, if you will.

Q General, it's Meridith MacKenzie, Talk Radio News Service. What kind of security reaction or the reaction of the people in your area of operations have you seen as a result of the recent visit by President Ahmadinejad of Iran to Iraq? Or has that been mostly concentrated in Baghdad? Could you just expand on sort of what your experience was, given the visit?

GEN. THOMAS: Have not seen any indications of that up north here. It might resonate a little bit in the areas where we have Shi'a, specifically in Diyala, but it's either too soon or it just won't matter to those folks, as it's just a bigger political play. I think many people are aware of it, but it just didn't resonate that strongly.

Q Sir, this is Fred Baker again. When you talk about reconstruction, can you give me some examples of those projects? And also talk about the funding. Are those local commanders' funds, or is that Iraqi money that's funneling down through the government?

GEN. THOMAS: Yeah, the reconstruction -- as you might imagine, and if you've been to Mosul lately, it has

borne the brunt of several years of combat, much like parts of Baghdad did and parts of Anbar. The reconstruction effort literally is the full monty. It's repaving roads, recapping them from IEDs, renovating or in some cases installing sewage systems, and again providing the critical infrastructures, water and whatnot, to the people.

The good news, as far as the funding on this -- and I think you all have been tracking on this -- is the government of Iraq is awash in money right now. I even know that from one of my other capacities in terms of monitoring our -- one -- other portfolio items in terms of monitoring the oil infrastructure here in northern Iraq. Yet again last month we pushed almost 11 million barrels of fuel, of crude, from Kirkuk up through Turkey. That equates to a billion dollars of additional funding into the Iraqi economy, which is there to be spent on the provinces and there to be spent on some of the requirements.

I do think you see now, with the 2008 budget coming out, a tendency, an inclination now of the Iraqi government to start spending that money on their people and on their provinces.

And we're truthfully a little more hesitant to apply U.S. taxpayer dollars when there are, in fact, Iraqi dollars to be spent for their own projects. So it's a good change in the paradigm here.

Q Hey, General, this is Courtney Kube from NBC News.

I just want to try one more time on the Ahmadinejad question. His visit was announced, you know, several weeks ago, and I just want to be sure. You're saying that the sheikhs and the local leaders that you met with -- there was never any concern expressed by any of them in advance of the visit. Or even maybe concern isn't even the correct word, but there was never any talk about it with the sheikhs that you've met with.

And then also, as long as we're talking about Iran, can you update us on the EFP situation in your area? Are you finding more? Have there been any evidence that there's more parts coming in from Iran in the last several months?

GEN. THOMAS: Yes.

I'll reiterate: There was little to no discussion. And I interact with a lot of the sheikhs and a lot of the Sunni leaders in MND-North. Other than humorously their perspective that Iran is always the source of badness to them, because they're Sunni Arabs, they didn't see anything good or bad in Ahmadinejad coming across.

They thought it was purely a political ploy, and it didn't really have much impact. If anything, I think, they think it shows a linkage to the government of Iraq that they're not too keen about. But it's uncomfortable to them and nothing more.

As far as EFPs, we have not seen any evidence of a push of EFPs. We've had a sprinkling across MND-North over the past six months that I've been here, but no strain of steady importation of, or supplying of, Iraqi-made -- (audio break) -- EFP. If anything, there's been some crude local product efforts, but nothing of note.

MODERATOR: Okay, sir, we are getting quite a bit of breakup. So I think probably it would be best to go ahead and end the Q&A and turn it over to you for any final comments you may have, or information that you now think might be useful for us.

So we'll give it back to you, sir.

GEN. THOMAS: No, I appreciate the opportunity to talk to the -- (audio break). Again -- (audio break) -- we've really accomplished a great deal in terms of taking advantage of the gains in Baghdad. We've received additional resourcing which was critical here in the -- (audio break) -- effort and -- (inaudible) -- force effort -- (audio break) -- those assets, both coalition and Iraqi forces -- (audio break) -- on the enemy. And now the real challenge, as I mentioned, is to follow through -- (audio break) -- governance that will ensure that lasting security for this area, and it is all very feasible and very much within our grasp. And so we're striving for that.

But that's all I had this morning. Thank you for the opportunity to talk to you.

MODERATOR: Thank you again, sir. Hopefully we hear from you again down the road.

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