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Presenter: Commanding General, Multinational Force West Maj. Gen. John Kelly March 10, 2008 9:00 AM EDT

DoD News Briefing with Maj. Gen. Kelly from Iraq

BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Yeah, let's go for it. It is 9:00. Let me thank you all for returning this week and see if we got General Kelly, if he can hear me okay. General Kelly, it's Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon. How are you?

GEN. KELLY: I got you, Bryan.

MR. WHITMAN: Good. Well, again, welcome. And General, thank you for joining us late in your day.

This is Major General John Kelly, who is the commanding general of Multinational Force West. This is the first opportunity that we've had to talk to General Kelly in this format since he's taken over as the MNF-West commander last month. Today he comes to us from Baghdad, though, and as is our format, he's going to give you a kind of a brief overview of what he sees in his area of responsibility and what his forces are doing, and then take some of your questions.

So, General, thank you for taking the time this afternoon -- this evening to spend with us, and let me turn it over to you to get started.

GEN. KELLY: Okay, Bryan. Always a pleasure to do this. As you mentioned, I'm in Baghdad right now. I try to avoid Baghdad as much as I can. I'm up from Camp Fallujah down in the Al Anbar province, which is but a couple of hours it took us to get here today over the road.

I just want to highlight a couple of things that I spend most of my time on. I've been back here right at a month. This is my third tour. To say the least, things have changed from my previous two tours. But the things I spend most of my time on and wanted to highlight are the Iraqi security forces and then some of the development issues that we work pretty hard.

I wanted to start out, in terms of the ISF, with talking about the Iraqi army. We have two divisions here in the -- down in the Al Anbar province, the 1st and 7th. As it turns out, my predecessors have done absolutely superb work with them. They are probably the two best divisions. I probably sound like a proud parent here, but they are two very, very good divisions, relative to the overall Iraqi army.

We made a tremendous investment to make them as good as they are. That is, the training teams that we have with them, Army and Marine, are very large, larger than what were required originally. We made them that way so that the training teams could live with the Iraqi units 24/7, fight with them, eat with them, shower with them.

It's an around-the-clock event for them. And we had to make them, as I say, bigger, so that they could have proper security internal.

We've also invested heavily in the quality of the individuals that we've put on the training teams. These are all first-round draft choices and, as you might imagine, they're not PFCs and lance corporals. They're majors and captains and even lieutenant colonels, in some degree -- in some cases colonels, gunnery sergeants and sergeants. But the investment has been certainly worthwhile.

We also partner. There's almost nothing that goes on anymore that we do, that we're not partnered, that is to say accompanied, by a like-size Iraqi army unit. But there's an awful lot going on recently of Iraqi army only. And when I say Iraqi army only, they're not out there with a Marine or a U.S. Army unit, but they're doing it on their own. But once again, the MiTT teams, the training teams are with them.

Right now shifted really to a large degree from the issue of operations and training them, that regard, because they've picked it up pretty well and they're doing well and we can get into that later in the Q&A if you want. But logistics -- we've started to reinforce the training teams with some first-class logistics people to help these Iraqi units just kind of organize logistics so they can support themselves in the field or on deployment.

Switching now to the Iraqi police and the province, we have authorization for 24,000. We're upwards of about 23,000 right now, and that includes 2,200 in the provisional security forces. They're a little bit like the county police between -- they operate between the cities out in the kind of the suburbs, if you will. But all of that adds up to roughly 24,000. We're hoping to go to 30,000, because the police have really come on strong and have given us an advantage out here.

And like the MiTTs I described a few minutes ago, the training teams with the soldiers with the Iraqi army, we've done exactly the same thing with the so-called BTTs, or the PTTs; that is the police training teams. They live and eat with them 24/7. They live in the stations with them all over the -- all over Iraq.

Finally, the border patrol. Of course, the Al Anbar province is bordered by Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Syria. We have three points of entry permanently opened: two that go into Syria, one that goes into Jordan and then a fourth down in the Saudi Arabian border that's only open to accommodate the pilgrims that go through for the hajj about a month a year. And we've also got a relatively small number, I think, relative to the other MNDs -- the Sons and Daughters of Iraq. Sons of Iraq, about 4,000, they operate mostly in the eastern part of the province.

For a long time, the individuals that we work with, particularly around Fallujah, did not want to have women in their police force, but then came to us and asked us to help them organize some women into what they termed Daughters of Iraq to help with the security, the searching of Iraqi women as they go in and out of checkpoints. We always did this, of course, before with our own female Marines and soldiers, but the Daughters of Iraq have even given us a little bit more advantage in that regard.

On the development side, we work hand in hand every day, day in and day out, with the PRTs, mostly State Department people, some contractors, as we try to nudge along the economic development.

There's a lot of good news, but as you can imagine, there's some things that are kind of taking a little bit more time, and certainly the Iraqis wish -- their number one desire, of course, is for electricity. That's been constant. We get electricity out of the Haditha Dam, as well as just an awful lot of diesel-type generators spread

around the province. Clean water, that's probably a relatively good news story, more so than electricity is right now, and in jobs and agriculture.

Some of the things that are about to break through here is the K-3 refinery up around Haditha. We're just about to start to bring that online. The railroad lines are starting to open up, and we've got a fair number of women's programs that are developed, you know, kind of in a votech way to bring women into the economy as well, particularly the widows and women who are not married.

I think I'll end there, and just go ahead and take your questions.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you for that overview, and we do have a few questions here. So let's get started with Pauline.

Q General, it's Pauline Jelinek of the Associated Press. Could you describe how much influence or clout al Qaeda still has in Anbar, and whether you could -- do you see the possibility of them reasserting themselves as they're pushed out of Nineveh and elsewhere?

GEN. KELLY: Bryan, could you just summarize that question? I had an awful lot of vibration coming through.

MR. WHITMAN: I certainly can. The question pertained to your assessment of al Qaeda influence in al Anbar right now.

GEN. KELLY: Well, I think the best way to characterize it, I think, is that they're down but they're not out. When I came in about a month ago and took over, the briefings I received was that the al Qaeda units or individuals that were here had been beaten to some -- to the degree, at least, that they had either gone to ground or just simply left the province and went to other parts of the country. What we're seeing -- down but not knocked out. What we're seeing is, there is still some occasional violence that we attribute to -- in the province that we attribute to al Qaeda.

But, you know, the good news story is, and it is very key in an insurgency, they don't last very long in anything approaching a built-up area, even a village, without us being notified by the locals. I could give you any number of examples, even since I've been here, where the local folks have come to us, either through tips lines or just in the general day-to-day contact we have with them, and told us about people who are either hiding out or if they're down in the reeds near the river or something unusual is going on over here. Then we set up a watch, obviously, and take it down.

And so they're still around, and of course they watch very closely what we do and have the luxury of acting only when they think they can get away with something, where we always, of course, have to be a hundred percent effective. But they're still around, but not to any degree like they were when -- certainly when I left here.

Q (Off mike) -- possibility that they could -- or would reassert themselves as they are pushed out of other provinces in the north, Nineveh and others?

GEN. KELLY: Hey, Bryan, you're going to have to help me out again. I'm getting -- I can hear you pretty well, but I can't hear the question.

MR. WHITMAN: Okay. We'll work on the mikes back here.

But the second, the follow-up on that was about the possibility of their resurgence as they're pushed out of other places in Iraq, like Ninawa province and things like that, your assessment of that possibility.

GEN. KELLY: They'll move to where they can survive. So my assessment is that they will come back to where they think -- certainly if they're driven out of other parts of the country, which I think the folks up north are doing -- (audio break) -- on the run, our sense is they'll come back to where they know best.

There's a fair number that came out of the Al Anbar province and fought us pretty hard here. So if they're on the run, they'll, you know, the expectation will be that they'll come back here.

Just the other day, I was talking to a couple of males, that we had picked up south of Fallujah, both of them wearing suicide vests when we caught them. Both of them told me they had been fighting us here. They were local, down south of Fallujah types.

They had moved as fighters up to Mosul. And then when the pressure was on up there, they came back here. And they were kind of a little bit on the war-weary side and decided rather than take up arms again against us, they would just go the suicide vest route.

So they move about. And again they can pick and choose when they decide to come after us. So if they move back in, obviously we're prepared for them.

The good news story, the very, very good news story, is the people point them out typically frankly to the police. And then the police round them up or take them down. And the police are not hesitant at all to go after these guys.

And even if a gunfight breaks out, they are not hesitant to call in additional police forces, not us. And oftentimes we find out after the fact that they've had an engagement. We stand by ready to help of course, but they don't seem to need it right now.

Hope that answers it.

MR. WHITMAN: Let's go over to Tom.

Q General, Tom Bowman with NPR.

I wonder if you could talk a little bit more about the concerned local citizens. There appears to be a great frustration that not enough of them are being absorbed into the Iraqi security forces. Give us a sense: How many in Anbar are being brought into the ISF?

And also, I understand that both the Pentagon and the State Department are working on programs to sort of create a Civilian Conservation Corps kind of thing for those concerned citizens that aren't brought into the ISF.

GEN. KELLY: I know that was Tom from NPR, and that's about all I got. So Bryan, if you could.

MR. WHITMAN: I'm happy to help here. And I'll see if I can get them all. It has to do with the concerned local citizens and whether or not -- how concerned are you about not all of them being absorbed into the security forces, and in your particular area, what is the level of success? How many are getting into the Iraqi security forces? And if you have any ideas about how you might handle those that are not going to get into the ISF or security forces, army or police, and this idea of a Civilian Conservation Corps, perhaps.

GEN. KELLY: Again, a great question. I think in our case we have fewer numbers of them to deal with, issue one. Issue two, if we do get the authorization to grow from 24,000 to 30,000 police, all of these guys are vetted, so they would be certainly a pool from which we would draw. But, you know, you can't have all the young men in the army and in the security forces, so what we're looking to do and are doing already is expanding the vocational-technical training to the degree that we can and try to siphon or funnel some of them off into, you

know, the trades or something like that.

But I'm not concerned about absorbing them right now, because they're out there. I mean, I go out and about quite a bit. I travel mostly on the road at night, during the day, and you come up on these little checkpoints in the middle of nowhere down, you know, 12 miles of a dirt road at 2:30 in the morning, and there they are, sitting, you know, on post, a little chit-chat with them, maybe trade a bottle of water, and off we go.

And again, the key issue to all of this is the overwhelming number of casualties in Al Anbar province are no longer coalition forces; they are the Sons of Iraq, they are the provisional forces, they're the army and the Iraqi police. So they're out there and right now seem certainly reliable to us. We watch them, naturally. They are drawn from the population that at one point was fighting us, so we have to be careful in that regard.

But I've had no indication right now that there is a kind of a security problem. And they're all pretty patient to await their turn, either going into the police or, as I say, if we can give them another option in terms of into the trades or something like that.

MR. WHITMAN: Jon?

Q Yeah, Jon Karl with ABC News. How many coalition forces are now in MNF-W? And what is the primary threat you're seeing? Give us an idea for numbers of attacks and where those are coming from. And I would just also ask: Why are you in Baghdad?

GEN. KELLY: Well, we have a lot of coalition forces in the province. Wouldn't want to go into the details, but roughly in the neighborhood of 25,000 to 30,000 U.S., all service personnel, majority Marines. We have -- again, when I think of what I'm dealing with day in and day out in terms of my security forces, I also include those two Iraqi divisions and the 24,000 police. I don't technically command the divisions, of course, nor do I command the police, but with the training teams that are down there in the police stations and with the battalions, brigades and the division, we certainly heavily coordinate everything that we do. And we've got, you know, great communication going. I'm out and about, as I mentioned before, a lot. I drop in unexpectedly to the police stations to see my people, who are the training teams. So when I talk -- when you talk coalition forces here, I think you really have to probably say we've got about -- coalition force is roughly 30,000, but I think -- you can't discount the other 45,000 that we work with every day here and really are in the lead. And that is the Iraqi army and the Iraqi police.

Levels of violence -- stunning to me how low they are. I mean, absolutely, when I left here three years ago, you could not go into the cities here, Fallujah, Ramadi, places like that, without a rifle company of Marines, and it was a gunfight going in, gunfight coming out. You couldn't drive from Ramadi to Fallujah, which I did almost every day back then, and not see four or five IEDs or the end result of four or five IEDs on that 40 miles of road. I mean, it is nothing like that now.

Dangerous still -- again, al Qaeda and other -- you know, the criminal element can stand and wait as long as they want, and look for that big opportunity to kill us or to harm us, but it just isn't there nearly in the numbers.

I mean, I've been here a month and haven't heard much in the way of gunfire, even, except on Thursday nights, when the weddings take place.

It is stunning to me where we are on this, but it's not over yet in terms of the -- well, just in terms of violence and the -- I think it's telling who they're going after, too. Again, since I've been here, the suicide vests have kind of come on a little bit, 10 or 12 of them in the last or month or so, but it is interesting who they're going after. They're not going after coalition forces, as in Americans. They're going after sheikhs, effective police officials or some of the civil leadership, like mayors. They seem to be -- I take that as that's where they see their biggest threat is right now.

We also have indications that they may change their tactics here a little bit and do some of the bigger events that capture the attention of the world through the media. So it's remarkable how the levels of violence are down, as measured by IEDs and just gunfire out there. But by the same token we have to be vigilant, because it's not won quite yet.

Q And why in Baghdad?

MR. WHITMAN: (Off mike) -- Baghdad today, General.

GEN. KELLY: Yeah?

MR. WHITMAN: Jonathan is curious as to why you may be in Baghdad today.

GEN. KELLY: Say again?

MR. WHITMAN: Jonathan is curious as to why you might be in Baghdad today.

GEN. KELLY: The only reason I'm in Baghdad today is to come up here and talk to you all in this beautiful studio that I'm sitting in. Otherwise I would be out back down in Al Anbar province doing what -- you know, whatever I'd be doing today.

MR. WHITMAN: Very good. Let's go to Jeff.

Q General, did you say that you've got indications that al Qaeda might be changing tactics and going to spectacular attacks?

GEN. KELLY: What we've seen -- what I said was that we have some indicators that they may be planning on executing kind of a large media-type event. I don't follow in close, close detail, necessarily, what goes on outside of the province, but I do know that recently they had a couple of large bomb events, I guess over the weekend, in Baghdad, and I'm guessing something like that.

The problem you have a lot of times, in terms of the indications and the intelligence you receive, is, you don't know exactly where they might be talking about. For all I know, they could be talking about, you know, events of this nature in other parts of the province.

But the -- you know, again, the good news is, we don't believe they're at liberty to build some of these large bomb-type devices inside the province. They have to kind of import them in. And the longer they travel, with all of the Iraqi army and the Iraqi police checkpoints that are virtually everywhere, they're -- the likelihood that they'll be discovered is pretty high.

But I don't think it's an overall change in tactics. I have a very myopic view of the world here, and that's the Al Anbar province. So what they do here is not necessarily indicative of what they might do somewhere else. And by the same token, what they do somewhere else is not always what they might do here.

Q To follow up, this IO campaign -- is it tied to anything such as the five-year anniversary of the war or an upcoming religious holiday?

GEN. KELLY: Bryan, help me out there, will you?

MR. WHITMAN: With respect to this potential change in tactics, is it tied to perhaps the anniversary? Is there any indication that it's associated with anything in particular?

GEN. KELLY: All right. No, I -- you know, I don't -- it is the fifth anniversary. I don't -- you know, I've got a fair amount of time here, and of course, as I said, it was my third time back. We tend to -- and I can remember this before -- we tend to tie -- dates and, you know, anniversaries tend to be a bigger deal, I think, to us than it is to them. They operate on their own time schedule, and they are -- you know, they try something, and perhaps if it doesn't work, they try something else. If they try something that works, they'll stay with it for a while, until we can counter it.

So no, I don't think there's anything tied to an anniversary or anything like that. I don't think they -- they're not as hung up on these kind of things as we seem to be sometimes.

MR. WHITMAN: Andrew, go ahead.

Q General, this is Andrew Gray from Reuters. I wonder if you could tell us when do you expect Anbar to go to provincial Iraqi control in terms of security. And when would you expect to start drawing down Marines in Anbar?

GEN. KELLY: Something about provincial Iraqi control, Bryan?

MR. WHITMAN: It's when you might expect Anbar to go to -- be handed over to Iraqi provincial control and what that might then lead -- in terms of drawdowns in your sector.

GEN. KELLY: Yeah. We've got a tremendous working relationship -- I mean tremendous -- with the provincial leadership, Governor Mamoun and his folks down in the provincial capital in Ramadi, as well as virtually every mayor and police chief, you know, in the district, all the way out to al Qaim and out towards the -- Trebil, or Rutbah, Rawah.

I mean, just couldn't be better in terms of the relationship.

And again, it comes an awful lot from the tremendous work the PRTs are doing, along with the military forces who are embedded into that, the police training teams and all.

Interesting enough, the -- we're very close to PIC here. The -- I wasn't really handed any kind of a timeline. All of these kind of things are event-driven. We do have a -- we do have kind of a checklist of things that both the governor -- and he plays a huge role in this, and should -- that the governor has his side of the checklist. I have my side of the checklist. We comment on each other's bits and pieces, and as an example, you know, whether the police can assume certain roles because of the equipment they have or may not have.

One of the things they ask a lot about is -- they want a forensic laboratory, the police do, particularly at the provincial level, so that they can do their job and autopsies and do just the forensics of police work. They don't have one yet. They really want one, and we're in discussions as to whether you can, you know, really be the police, an effective police force, without a forensic laboratory. I have a lot of police advisers here, and of course we can get the laboratory work done in other places if we need to.

But it's really a collaborative effort, and we are very, very close here in the province as we sort out just a couple of things, equipment-type issues in the province, as well as just the -- and this is key -- the relationship between the province -- and this is governor stuff -- between the province and the national government. I think, as I view this relationship right now, you have a very -- you know, their background, their experience has been socialism, you know, very tightly controlled central government and everything is kind of just -- all of the rules, regulations, diktats go down into the provinces. I think the provinces prefer -- the governors prefer to have an awful lot of input. They want to identify what Al Anbar province needs and then provide that to the government and the ministries. And we're working it out with them.

One of the things on both sides of that equation, they're learning how to be a central government and they're learning how to be provincial governors and officials in a world that is very, very alien to them. So we're very close to PIC. I don't see any problems with PIC in the near future. But again, I only give a recommendation on PIC, as does the governor, and that goes up two separate chains. But we, the governor and I, talk an awful lot about this checklist.

MR. WHITMAN: The second half of that was whether or not you'd want to venture into talking about possible drawdowns associated with PIC.

GEN. KELLY: Drawdowns in PIC. Right now, of course, we were watching -- country wide, the surge is coming off. There are forces that -- don't want to get into too many details -- there are forces in the province that I sit in. My overall numbers are going down. Various units, various capabilities are going down, but that's the normal part of the drawdown.

I've been asked repeatedly, what do you think we ought to do, keep drawing down or not? And I would just make the case that we ought to wait to see how things settle out. I mean, it's remarkable what has gone on here in the province in about the last year. And of course, all of that was done by every soldier, sailor, airman, Marine that's operated in this province, and certainly those that got injured and gave their lives. There's been a continuous process.

I would just argue, if someone -- and I haven't been asked yet by my superiors -- why don't we just wait for a few months, see how this thing settles out? And then if they came to me and asked for recommendations about drawing down, I would certainly, at that point, you know, work my staff and decide what we ought to do. But we really, as I say, are already drawing down.

And I'm now looking at closing some of the larger bases, because really what we've really done is we've really decentralized down at the very small company-sized bases to maintain the contact with the population and with the civil leaders. So these large bases -- I don't want to go into the details of that, but they take a lot of people to guard, so want to close some of them. And I have to make some recommendations up the chain to get permission to do that.

But certainly, the trend seems to be going in the right direction, in my mind.

But I think we need to wait for some period of time, after the surge comes off, to see what we've got.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, General, we have reached the end of the time that we've allocated for this. And we know that you're anxious to get back to Al Anbar, and it's a ways to go to do that. But we want to thank you for taking the time to be with us and hanging through some of the technical difficulties. I know some of our questions have been hard to hear.

But before we bring it to a close, let me turn it back to you, in case you have any closing thoughts that you'd like to make.

GEN. KELLY: Not really too much.

I would just really encourage you, if you haven't been out here in a while, to go ahead and make the trip out. We recently had -- Barbara Starr was here, Jennifer Griffin. Others come down. We get a fair amount of contact with the local Iraqi press as well.

But I would just certainly welcome you, if you haven't been out here in a while or even if you have, to come on down to the province and see what's going on. I think it's, as I say, it's pretty enlightening to see how this

thing is going in all the right directions right now. And for sure, the opportunity to talk to the local mayors and police chiefs, and get their opinion and their perspective on what's going on.

I would encourage you and I really hope to see you all out here if you can make it, and that's about all I've got. I hope it was helpful.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you for that invitation. I'm sure there's a few in this room that will take you up on that. And thank you again for your time and we hope to do this again with you some time soon.

GEN. KELLY: I look forward to it. Take care.

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