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Presenter: Commander of the 1st Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division, John Charlton

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DoD News Briefing with Col. Charlton from Iraq

(Note: Colonel Charlton appears via teleconference from Iraq. Audio breaks are from the source.)

BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): I'm waiting for the last tick of the clock, but it looks like we have Colonel Charlton on the screen. And let me just make sure he can hear me all right.

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

COL. CHARLTON: He's saying something like "the last tick of the clock" -- (inaudible).

MR. WHITMAN: (Off mike) -- at the Pentagon. Can you hear me okay?

COL. CHARLTON: I got you. You dropped off for a second, but I think I got you back.

MR. WHITMAN: (Off mike) -- have you up on the screen here in the briefing room, and let me welcome the press this morning and you, Colonel, this afternoon, and thank you for taking the time to do this. We are privileged to have with us today Colonel John Charlton, who is commander of 1st Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division. He and his brigade are finishing up their deployment in western Iraq, where he had assumed responsibility for security in that area in February of 2007. Today he is in Ramadi, and as you'll recall, I think -- can't recall exactly the last time we had you in the briefing room, Colonel, but I do know this is your second time. So welcome back, and thank you for taking this time, particularly as you come to the end of your tour there, with the perspective that you have had for the past many months.

Well, with that, let me turn it over to you, to start with a little bit of an overview, and then I'm sure we'll have some questions here for you.

COL. CHARLTON: It's great to talk to you all.

Let me make a disclaimer up front. Believe it or not, we're having thunderstorms here in Ramadi. So if you hear loud noises and things go dark, it's not enemy contact. Just want to lead off with that. It's very unusual. But -- there's loud noises outside, but it's thunder.

(SIC – due to multiple audio breaks during transmission, we are posting COL Charlton's prepared remarks, which

he provided)

Good morning. I want to thank you for allowing me to talk about the successes achieved by the First Brigade Combat Team in Iraq. We are approaching the final days of our 15 month deployment, and we have experienced many amazing things since I last spoke with you August 3rd.

As a brief review, the Raider Brigade Combat Team had units that spanned Al Anbar province with the majority of our forces and the Brigade headquarter located in the provincial capital of Ramadi. At one point, we had several battalions conducting operations in Ramadi. The Brigade Combat Team was truly a joint force consisting of from all services and has had five different Marine battalions serve in Ramadi as part of the BCT.

Central Anbar province was a devastated war zone when we arrived in January 2007. Ramadi was the most violent city per capita in the world and averaged 30 – 35 daily attacks. That number is now less than one per week. We have experienced weeks without a single incident, and Ramadi has experienced 300 days without an attack since March 31, 2007.

Al Qaeda was entrenched in Ramadi and controlled the population through their murder and intimidation campaign by killing innocent men, women and children who refused to follow their radical interpretation of Islam. We were able to overcome Al Qaeda's ideology with the guidance and support of the area tribal and religious leaders. They recognized the atrocities committed by Al Qaeda and partnered with Coalition forces to establish stability and security. The attitude of the Iraqis toward Al Qaeda in Iraq can be summarized by a local sheikh saying, "It is better to die a free man than live under the thumb of Al Qaeda." With their help and the Anbar people's rejection of Al Qaeda, they now live peacefully with security and stability.

A year ago, the Iraqi security forces were in their infancy with less than 2,000 police, and the two Iraqi army brigades in my area were operating at 50% strength. We helped recruit and train the police, increasing their ranks to 9,400 police in central Anbar, and our partnered Iraqi army brigades are operating more than 100% strength. We built joint security stations, police stations, expeditionary forward operating bases and a city-wide security perimeter that enables the police to provide security.

Fifteen months ago, Ramadi's infrastructure was completely destroyed due to the heavy fighting. Entire city blocks were nothing more than collapsed buildings, piles of rubble, ruptured water pipes, raw sewage and trash. Many observers said Ramadi reminded them of pictures of Europe in World War Two. Once we established security, we were able to devote our attention to reconstruction and economic development. We have completed 1600 reconstruction and day-labor projects that have transformed Ramadi from a war zone into a thriving community. We made outstanding progress by focusing development in several areas. We built a small business center to award future reconstruction projects, facilitated micro-grants for small business owners, identified economic zones throughout the city to help ignite economic growth, helped the Iraqis open a ceramics factory and created fishing and farming co-operatives that modernized and improved agriculture in central Al Anbar. We recently re-opened the main route through Ramadi to civilian traffic, which had been closed since 2004 due to fighting, and will increase inter-province commerce. The improvements in reconstruction and economics will assist in employment, provide clean water and electricity for homes, enable city markets to prosper, create open competitive bidding on contracts and provide hope for Iraqi citizens seeking peace.

Last year, the Ramadi mayor was the only functioning member of the municipal government. He now has a full staff and runs a competent city council that meets regularly with minimal oversight. There are 13 neighborhood councils representing their communities. Rule of law and the judicial system are now operational with several criminal and civil trials conducted and convictions rendered.

The defeat of Al Qaeda has allowed the citizens of Ramadi to reclaim their great city. City markets, schools, playgrounds, soccer fields and businesses are all alive and thriving. The Iraqis held a 5K fun run through downtown Ramadi in September 2007, along a route that was once the deadliest street in Iraq. They celebrated

their liberation from Al Qaeda with two parades. There is a flourishing women's civic center and a city museum, making Ramadi the only city in Iraq beside Baghdad to have a museum. All of this happened in the last 12 months by working closely with our Iraqi partners.

As we move forward and prepare to return to Fort Stewart, I can say that the Raider brigade contributed immensely to defeating Al Qaeda and stabilizing central Anbar province. We have witnessed Anbar transform from one of the most dangerous provinces in Iraq to one of the safest. In the opinion of many people, this has been one of the most remarkable chapters of the US military's operations here in Iraq.

The successes I have described are a direct result of the dedication and hard work of our Soldiers and the members of each service who worked along side of us. I am extremely proud of everything our men and women accomplished. They have truly put their hearts and souls into this mission. They operated for 15 months in tough, austere conditions and everyday accomplished amazing things. (SIC – end of prepared remarks)

Thank you. I'll take your questions now, if there are any.

MR. WHITMAN: Colonel, we have been experiencing some technical difficulties. We got probably about three-quarters of your overview, so what we might ask is, we'll work with your folks and see if we can't -- looks like you had some notes there, perhaps a manuscript, and if you did, we can get that and we'll pass it out to folks here. But we did get about three-quarters of what you were saying, but the thunderstorms are affecting the signal. But we're going to try to push on and get through some questions here, and if it gets too bad, we'll try to maybe reschedule. But let's go ahead and get started.

Q Colonel, this is Bob Burns with AP. As Bryan mentioned, we didn't hear all of what you said, but I believe you made some reference to the local political scene and activity in Ramadi and the rest of your area. I'm wondering, given the uncertainty now about provincial elections this year, what's your assessment of what impact it would have if in fact there are no provincial elections in October, as once thought?

COL. CHARLTON: Well, I think that the -- the people that we talk to here in Anbar are looking forward to the elections. They realize that their lack of participation in 2005 hurt them in the long run, and there's been many issues associated with that. So they're very much looking forward to these elections. And when I talk to the sheikhs, they still believe that those elections will happen in October or in that time frame. So they're anticipating it very much.

Now, if they were not to happen, there would certainly be some disappointment. The one thing that I've observed, though, in the months that I've been here is that the Iraqis are very patient people. They understand the challenges that face the government, and they lead a tough life in many instances. But I do notice that they're very patient.

So there would be some -- there would be some disappointment. There would probably be some -- you know, potentially some demonstrations, certainly would be that the people of Ramadi would continue to ask for the elections to occur. I don't think there would be any violence. I don't see that occurring. But there would certainly be some disappointment.

MR. WHITMAN: Let me try something new. We're just going to go this way and to the second row and back this way. And if you want to pass, that's fine. (Off mike.)

Q Hi, Colonel. This is Courtney Kube from NBC News. And you may have said this in your opening statement, but I think it was part that we missed. On the Iraqi security forces in your area, can you sort of update us on their logistical capability and their overall equipping? Do they have the equipment that they need? Are there any that are in the lead? Can you give us some numbers?

COL. CHARLTON: You're talking the Iraqi security forces?

Q Yes.

COL. CHARLTON: Yeah. Okay. Again -- and I apologize. We'll make sure you get a manuscript of my comments. We had the thunderstorm going right overhead when I was reading that thing. So Murphy's alive and well here in Camp Ramadi.

But we started with about 2,000 police when we first got here, and that's for the whole central portion of Al Anbar. That number has grown to about 9,400 now. And we've helped the Iraqis organize their forces -- their police forces into precincts and districts, so that has really paid off because the Iraqi police leadership now has a structure that they can work within. They do face challenges on equipment. They're still very short on communications; you know, whether it's hand-held radio or a base station for one of the police stations. They face some shortages in vehicles. They need additional maintenance for those vehicles. They're getting much better on equipment as far as uniforms and body armor. There's no large shortages in there. And weapons; they're good on weapons. They have enough rifles and pistols to do what they need to do.

The biggest issue is that all of that is a struggle, to get that equipment. We have to work very closely with the Iraqis. The system to get funding, to get resources from Baghdad is still a work in development. There are some challenges in what should be routine logistics functions for the Iraqi police. So it's something that's been a challenge for the past year-plus for us and I know it will continue to be a challenge, but it has gotten better.

It has gotten much better.

So, you know, I'm looking at this from the standpoint of the entire country of Iraq. What's happened here in Anbar has happened across Iraq. The growth of the police has been exceptional. But with that comes those logistic challenges, because now the ministry of interior has to manage these growing forces and equip them and provide logistics. And that's been very hard for them, but I do see it getting better.

For example -- (audio break) -- the police now are providing their own fuel. So the ministry of interior is providing fuel to the Iraqi police forces here. That's a huge step because previously for the past year or so, we were providing them their fuel. So they now have their own fuel contract, and that's a great step forward.

So, you know, the long and short of it is we still have challenges getting resources from Baghdad, through the ministry channels. It's improving. There's still a long ways to go, but they've made great strides in the last year.

Q Just one follow-up, Colonel.

Are any of these challenges, do you believe, sectarian in nature? Or is it more just an overall bureaucratic problem?

COL. CHARLTON: You know, we would, I would tell you that a lot of Iraqis out here in Anbar would say that it's -- (audio break) -- pessimist look at it, but I really don't think that's the case. I think it's just overcoming the bureaucracy -- (audio break) -- nationwide system that provides the police the logistics they need.

And again we've made progress. So that's why I say I don't think it's a sectarian issue. If we weren't getting it period, I would say that, you know, there may be something else behind this. But the systems are improving, not as fast as we want them to but they are improving.

(Cross talk.)

Q Colonel, it's Luis Martinez of ABC News.

Since the security situation's so much improved in your sector, how important is economic development? Has there been any economic development there, so you can get the jobs that will keep people permanently off the streets?

COL. CHARLTON: Right.

Well, that's a huge part of fighting a counterinsurgency, is that you have to help stimulate economic growth because of just what you said. You want to have some alternatives for people out there. You know, if someone has a steady job and they're providing for their family, they're going to be less likely to join the ranks of the terrorists. So we've been working very hard on that.

(Audio break) -- city was in ruins. There was just rubble everywhere -- (audio break) -- we created kind of a New Deal program for the Iraqis here -- (audio break) -- they started spending money. And shops started to open -- (audio break).

We've also helped the Iraqis build two business centers. And these business centers are important, because they have the ability to go to those business centers and get microgrants or microloans. So these shop owners -- (audio break) -- there's been literally hundreds of these grants and loans given out, which has really helped kind of take that middle tier of economic development and propel it forward.

We have a ceramics factory here in Ramadi that recently opened on a low-production scale, which has already provided a couple of hundred jobs. And we're going to continue that program.

We have fishing and farming co-ops to help spur the agricultural growth in central Anbar, and we've recently started a program where we're trying to -- we have a vo-tech program, where we take some of these young men that used to work on the security -- the contract security jobs and transform them over into other types of employment. So there's a big -- (audio break) -- right now in vocational training to help build the skills base of the population here in central Anbar. So we work every day on economic development.

And I'll tell you, if you drive through Ramadi right now, you'll see construction going on everywhere. And I'll drive down a -- (audio break) -- that I had been on just a week earlier, and I'll see two or three more shops opening up. Our biggest problem right now in the city is traffic. We've opened up the main route, and because the economy is booming, traffic has really started to become a problem. So it's a good problem to have, but it's amazing to watch the economic growth.

Now, I don't know what the unemployment figures are. They're still way too high. My best estimate would probably be 30 to 40 percent, so we're continuing to work on that issue. And the people of Anbar are very excited about setting conditions to allow foreign investment. We have five banks operating in Ramadi right now. When we got here there was only one, and it wasn't really in full operation. So all of the economic indicators are moving in the right direction, so we're very hopeful about that situation.

Q Colonel, Jim Michaels with USA Today. Just a question about -- you've talked a lot about the security progress as well as the exponential growth of Iraqi police and army. Could you talk a little bit about what you see as the U.S. troop presence in the future in your area of operations to the degree that they'll be required, you know, at brigade level, battalion level and whatever?

COL. CHARLTON: Okay, can you hear me?

Q Yes.

COL. CHARLTON: Okay, I -- (audio break) -- your question. It was about the U.S. troop levels relative to the Iraqi security forces. (Audio break) -- storms up ahead.

Anyway, yeah, when we first got here, there was heavy, heavy fighting in the city. We spent the first two months we were here clearing the city, street by street, house by house with the Iraqi army and Iraqi police. I had five coalition battalions in and around -- (audio break) -- which is, you know, roughly, 5(000) or 6,000 troops, coalition troops, focused on the city. Today I have two battalions in and around the city, so there's been a substantial decrease in -- (audio break) -- forces in and around the city of Ramadi. What we did -- two of the battalions that I used to have working for us were completely off- ramped. When their two were ended, they went home and they weren't replaced.

And then I took the remaining forces, down-sized them in the city, and I took forces, both Iraqi army and -- (audio break) -- forces, one of my battalions and pushed them out into the more desert areas -- (audio break) -- Ramadi. In fact, all the way up almost to Samarra -- (audio break) -- way. And the reason we did that was because the enemy had been pushed out of the city, defeated in Anbar and now were forced to operate in very remote locations far away from the Euphrates River Valley.

So we've reduced the size of our footprint in the city, and the main reason -- (audio break) -- that is because the Iraqi police -- (audio break) -- have progressed so well. And we've also been able to push our forces out to continue to pursue the terrorists in the outlying areas, in those remote areas that I've mentioned.

So we've had already a significant drawdown of coalition combat power in the provincial capital, very substantial drawdown in coalition combat power. We've also reduced the Iraqi army presence in the city. We have just a very small element there right now, and they'll be moving out in about a month. And the only thing that you'll have in the city is the Iraqi police and -- (audio break) -- advisory teams.

So we've come full circle. When we got here, we were very much in the lead in fighting the counterinsurgency, partnered with the Iraqi security forces. Now it's completely flipped. The Iraqi security forces are completely out front. I've reorganized the entire brigade. We're now basically an advisory unit and we're assisting the Iraqis in maintaining security.

Now, if I had a chart, it would show you the attack levels over the past 15 months, and what you would see is they were very high when we got here and then went down very rapidly early in 2007, in the months of March, April, May and June, because we were on a continuous offensive campaign. And then those numbers stayed down to almost zero for the last several months, which is an indication that although we've been downsizing coalition presence, security remains excellent; and it's, again, because Iraqi security forces continue to increase in their abilities.

Q Colonel, it's Gerry Gilmore with American Forces Press Service. How would you rate -- do you have some local concerned citizens groups in your area? How have they contributed to the improved security, if they have?

COL. CHARLTON: Well, we've -- that's a very good point. When we went into the city in February and cleared it, we went in there very strong. I amassed as much combat power as I could into the city with the Iraqi army and, again, house by house, street by street, cleared it. We knew that we had to establish Iraqi police presence in these neighborhoods after we cleared them. We knew that if we didn't, you know, then al Qaeda would simply move back in in a few weeks and pick up where they left off. So we had to go and recruit locally to get those forces to man these police stations. We didn't have enough police to hold the areas we'd just cleared. So we went literally around the neighborhoods and recruited police.

Now, because of the relationship we had with the tribal leaders, that was very easy. The tribal leaders, the sheikhs, went to the young men of their tribes and said, "Join the police force, defend Anbar and eliminate the

terrorists."

So we had young men lining up by the hundreds, every day, to join the police forces. But it's a fairly lengthy process to get a young man hired into the police. The orders have to be approved all the way to the Ministry of Interior in Baghdad. And it -- we found it took, you know, three, four, five months in some cases.

So what we did in the interim was we employed these young men as concerned local citizen groups, essentially auxiliary police, if you will. Initially, we did not have any means to pay them. We had to use humanitarian assistance to keep them on the job. They volunteered without pay to maintain security in their neighborhoods, and we helped them out any way we could. That eventually evolved into the CLC program or what we now call the Sons of Iraq program where we're actually able to pay them until they are hired on by the Ministry of Interior.

Now, we went through that process last summer, and I had about -- (audio break) -- auxiliary police that were holding the neighborhoods in Ramadi. And over the course of the summer, we were able to get all 4,000 of them onto the MOI payroll. So they're now 100 percent card-carrying police and they've all been through training and they're on the job. So that was a major achievement for us, to -- (audio break) -- that process full circle.

Right now we're down to just a couple of hundred, a few hundred of these CLC or Sons of Iraq groups right now that are working for us. And they're in the new areas that we've moved into. Again, we pursued al Qaeda out in some very remote areas. And we've gone into these villages -- (audio break) -- forces, and so there's just a few -- you know, a few hundred of them right now. And we're going to go through the same -- (audio break) -- of transforming them into, you know, full-fledged Iraqi police through training and through -- (audio break) -- with the Ministry of Interior.

The other thing that we're doing is we have a jobs conversion program. Right now I have one that deals in agriculture. And we actually take some of these groups and we put them through a training process, working with USAID, and we turn them into agricultural workers. And so we -- (audio break) -- other skills and other forms of employment so that we can kind of balance the police force, kind of right-size it to maintain long-term security while still maintaining good employment levels.

Q Colonel, it's -- Colonel, it's Meredith MacKenzie with Talk Radio News Service. I'm sure that as you sum up your tour there you'll be writing some kind of report evaluating conditions, and as I'm sure your aware, General Petraeus will be coming to Washington to give his report to Congress. What other conditions, besides the progress of Iraqi security forces, will you be highlighting?

And if you could, sort of give us a little summary of other conditions that decisions on troop levels will be based on.

COL. CHARLTON: Sure.

Well, you know, first of all, the security situation is good, but we're always ready. Al Qaeda really wants Ramadi back. I mean, this was their capital. They declared -- (audio break) -- Islamic State of Iraq.

And so they're continuing to try to launch attacks into Ramadi. We've had several cases where the police have successfully interdicted suicide vest bombers or car bombs. So the threat is still out there, and so we're always, you know, keeping our eyes open for that, not letting our guard down.

But I'm very hopeful about the security situation. It's continuing to move forward. And even things like we talked about already, the police logistics, is getting better.

The areas that still need improvement are in the areas of governance. We still need to work on helping to

open up the budget lines from Baghdad all the way down to the local level. In other words, get the funds flowing from the central government all the way down to the municipalities. I mean, that's a challenge that we face in our own country, and it's a big challenge here in Iraq.

They've passed budgets. They've passed the national budget. They received input from Anbar in terms of what the provincial budget, you know, what's required. And what we need now is for all of those funds to begin flowing in a regular manner.

Now, having said that, there's been great improvement in that area too. There are several -- there's dozens of reconstruction projects -- (audio break) -- across Anbar that were -- that are, you know, government-of-Iraq-funded -- about 23 million just in my area alone in Central Anbar. So again -- (audio break) -- progress there. But again because -- (audio break) -- not part of -- (audio break) -- the whole area of governance is something that still, you know, is something we need to work on out here.

And again, as already discussed, economic development: We're trying to bring this province back from a war zone back into, you know, a normal society with good -- (audio break). And that's a major challenge. We're going to have to continue to work that. And that will be -- (audio break) -- you know, funds, as well as, you know, the U.S. government providing assistance as well.

So I would say that conditions are great. I think that there's great hope for Anbar. They've led the way in many cases in 2007 for progress in Iraq. But we'll keep working -- (audio break) -- keep working economic development. And I think things will keep moving in the right direction.

(Cross talk.)

Q Colonel, it's Jamie McIntyre from CNN.

You talked a little bit about this, but I just want to press you a little bit more, on the concerned local citizens, the Sons of Iraq. Some people have characterized the payments to them as essentially bribes that are, you know, bribing people to stop fighting each other, and when the money dries up, the violence will return. I know you've talked about transitioning them into the Iraqi government. But how do you respond to that criticism generally that we're essentially buying off the sides at the moment to get a short-term peace?

COL. CHARLTON: Well, I mean, that's certainly a pessimistic opinion. But what my experience was out here was that when we moved into an area with the Iraqi army and cleared it of terrorists, immediately young men from those villages or from those tribal areas or from the city would come up and want to volunteer in the police. And so they were doing it truly out of -- for patriotic reasons as part of their obligation to their tribe, to their country, to their community. I mean, that's what I saw.

And like I said, when we first started these programs, these guys weren't getting paid a dime. And they were -- through the hot summer, they were standing post in their neighborhoods, protecting those neighborhoods from being re-infiltrated by al Qaeda. And I was really impressed by that. I mean, this was true patriotism at the lowest level.

And we helped them out with -- you know, with some humanitarian assistance, but they were not being paid. It wasn't until late summer that the system was developed to actually pay them. And we felt that was a moral obligation since these guys were putting their lives on the line.

At the same time, parallel to that effort we were working the hiring orders through the Ministry of Interior. And like I said, we hired 4,000. We took the system all the way through the process and got 4,000 of these guys hired on as police, and now they're permanent members of the police force here in Ramadi. So that's the system you have to take.

And I understand those criticisms, but I'll tell you, we didn't advertise, you know, that "Hey, join the police force and we'll give you money." These guys lined up by the hundreds because they were sick and tired of what al Qaeda was doing to their communities and they knew that they had to stand up and fight.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, we have reached the end of our time. And we know it's been a long day for you and we appreciate you spending the time with us, and particularly a repeat performance for us here, too. So let me turn it back to you before we bring it to a close, though, in case there's any final thoughts that you might have.

COL. CHARLTON: The only thing I'd say, and I'm sure you hear it from every commander that speaks to you, is that, you know, I'm just in awe of the dedication and the commitment of all of the troops out here in Anbar. You really have a joint force out here in Anbar; we've got Marines, we've got soldiers, sailors and airmen. And every day they really do put their hearts and soul into this mission, and America can be justifiably proud of what they've done. They have done amazing things.

And I'm very proud of the Iraqis. What I see out here from the Iraqis inspires me every day. Their desire for freedom, their desire to live normal, safe lives, provide hope for their children, is really an incredible thing to watch.

So it's been an honor to serve here in Anbar, for the United States and for the Iraqi people. And, you know, we'll certainly leave here with our heads held high, knowing that we contributed, and look forward to going home and seeing our families.

Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, we wish you and your troops a safe and speedy return home. And thank you again for spending time with us throughout your deployment there.

COL. CHARLTON: Sure. Thanks.

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