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Presenter: Commander, 1st Brigade, 10th Mountain Division Col. David Paschal

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DoD News Briefing with Col. Paschal from Iraq

(Note: Colonel Paschal appears via teleconference from Iraq.)

COL. GARY KECK (director, Department of Defense Press Office): Well, good morning, everyone. Welcome to the Pentagon. My name's Colonel Gary Keck, and I'm the director of the Press Office. And it's our privilege today to have with us briefing from Iraq Colonel David Paschal, commander of the 1st Brigade, 10th Mountain Division. Colonel Paschal's brigade arrived in Iraq in September 2007 and operates as part of Multinational Division-North, with primary duties in Kirkuk and the surrounding area.

He's coming to us today from Contingency Operating Base Speicher near Tikrit. And this is his first time in this format, so let me make sure he can hear me all right. David, can you hear me?

COL. PASCHAL: I can hear you fine, loud and clear.

COL. KECK: Thank you much.

So as with -- as is our tradition, we're going to start with opening comments from Colonel Paschal and then we'll go into Q&A. So with that, let's turn it over to you, David.

COL. PASCHAL: Well, thank you and good morning and "Climb to Glory" there in the Pentagon. It's truly a privilege for me to be here today in an attempt to -- I want to highlight the accomplishments of the great young men and women who are assigned to the Warrior Brigade Combat Team.

We are responsible for the Kirkuk province, which is roughly the size of the state of Rhode Island, just under about 250 square kilometers. It's got a multiethnic population of about a million and a half people that's composed mainly of Kurdish, Turkmen and an Arab population.

I'm very proud of the huge strides that we've been able to achieve since assuming the mission from the 3rd Brigade of the 25th ID in early October. Since our arrival, we've been able to reduce enemy activity by over 70 percent across the province. And I really attribute that to four main things. The first is the precision targeting that we've able to execute against insurgent leadership; the growing capabilities and capacity of the Iraqi security forces, both police and army; the establishment of a Sons of Iraq or concerned local citizens program; and last but not least, the phenomenal partnership that we've been able to establish with the Provincial Reconstruction Team.

If you could bring up that first slide, what I'd like to do is highlight that top bar graph that shows the steady decline in enemy significant activity since our arrival. The height of the insurgency within our province, which was one time referred to as the "al Anbar of the north" reached a peak in August of last year, and since our arrival has showed a steady downward cline.

I mentioned the precision targeting. Since our arrival, we've either killed or captured 20 of our top 10 high-value targets and have actually had to reset the deck multiple times since our arrival. In addition to that, we've either detained or captured 63 persons of interest, which are either lower-level brigade targets or battalion- level targets from across the province.

The capability of the Iraqi security forces continues to improve on a daily basis. In fact, our counterpart brigade, the 15th Brigade of the 4th Iraqi Army (Division), is conducting independent intelligence-driven operations, and in fact has conducted multiple joint operations with the fledgling Iraqi air force.

The Iraqi police are responsible primarily for the city of Kirkuk and have a memorandum of understanding that allows the Iraqi army to operate outside the city of Kirkuk while the police are still responsible for security within the inner city, which has a population of just over 800,000 people.

We talked a little bit about the sons of Iraq and this Thursday we're going to graduate 400 Arab policemen who were part of our Sons of Iraq program from the Arab areas. And they have just completed an eight-week training program and will be reassigned to the outer districts on the western side of our province.

If I could draw your attention to that lower right -- correction, that lower left graph, it shows what happens when the people take responsibility for their own areas, securing their own cities and villages and reject terrorism. What you see are two-week charts in Hawija district, which was once our most contentious area. Since the establishment of the Sons of Iraq in early December, my battalion that's down there in conjunction with the SOIs has decreased enemy significant activities by over 80 percent.

But more importantly, as you move to the chart to your right, the confidence of the civilian population, as we begin to establish security, and the information and actionable intelligence that they provide has grown exponentially. And that actionable intelligence is in the form of the turn in of caches, location of enemy IEDs and, in many cases, instances of insurgent or terrorist leaders throughout the province. So as you see the decline in enemy activity, the perception of feeling of security grows, the willingness of the population to tell us about the enemy and their activities and really reject terrorism.

So once we've achieved the security, what's the way ahead and how do we seal the deal? And we view that with our critical partnership with the Provincial Reconstruction Team that's led by Mr. Howard Keegan, my counterpart, a State Department rep, and in partnership with the Kirkuk province. The security has provided them the opportunity to aggressively continue with the reconstruction effort and begin addressing the needs of the population throughout the entire province.

One vignette I'd share with you was about two weeks ago when I was at a local district council meeting when the district council leader came up to me and said previously the security was so bad, he couldn't get any of the reconstruction or construction to come out and bid on any of his progress (sic\projects). With the improved security that he has right now, he actually has 10 contractors bidding on single projects, which is what we want to see.

So without any further ado, I'll be happy to entertain any questions that you might have.

COL. KECK: Okay. Thank you much, David.

And I would remind you again that since he can't see you, please let him know who he's talking to when you ask your questions. So let's begin. AI?

Q Hi, Colonel. It's Al Pessin from Voice of America. I'm looking at your top chart on the slide that you showed us, and it shows a pretty steady decline there from August until March, but then an uptick in April. And it looks

like the bar for May, which is not labeled, is already close to the full April amount even though we're not quite in the middle of the month. We've seen this in other parts of Iraq, as well.

Do you consider this a significant change of trend, or is it just a temporary blip?

COL. PASCHAL: Well, I really believe that's a temporary blip. And as you're looking at the number of significant activities, that averages between 110 to about 120 or 130 on a monthly basis. It's important to note that that chart also includes found and turned in either caches or explosive -- improvised explosive devices.

So it's really just a slight uptick in my mind. And really, part of that is because we are reaching out to other parts of the province that we haven't previously operated in. So I'm very confident that you'll eventually see a continued decline in enemy activity throughout the Kirkuk province.

As I stated earlier, I think it's critical that we find economic opportunities and employment opportunities for these young males who really want to just support their families, rejoin legitimate Iraqi society.

Q Yeah, Colonel, this is Kernan Chaisson with Forecast International. First, have you received any of the new MRAP vehicles coming over? And if so, how are they performing -- not so much protection-wise, but sort of maintenance, operations, that sort of thing?

COL. PASCHAL: I'm sorry, could you repeat your name again, sir? I didn't hear that part.

Q It's Kernan Chaisson. I'm with Forecast International.

COL. PASCHAL: Yeah, we've just about completed fielding the MRAP vehicles. The soldiers are very excited about the performance of those vehicles and the protection that it provides. We have some minor problems with maintenance, but I don't think that's unusual for the -- as you employ new vehicles. But each of our maintenance techs and young soldiers have attended maintenance training as part of the new equipment training and fielding process. And we are maintaining an overall operational readiness rate of just about 94 percent since the inception of these vehicles.

Q Sir, this is Jim Garamone with American Forces Press Service. What about the oil industry in Kirkuk? How's that -- is that working? Is that shipping oil?

COL. PASCHAL: I'm sorry. I couldn't understand your question, sir.

Q That's all right. How's the oil industry in Kirkuk? Is it actually up and running?

COL. PASCHAL: Yeah. I tell you, that's been one of our huge successes. Since our arrival, there has not been an interdiction on the oil pipeline.

In fact, we have exceeded all pre-level -- pre-war level export. In fact, just last month the northern oil company exported 13-1/2 million barrels of oil, which has been a phenomenal increase in its capacity.

Q Colonel, it's Al Pessin again. Is there going to be any impact to the end of the surge in your area? Will you be gaining battlespace or shifting the battlefield geometry in your area as a result of the end of the surge?

COL. PASCHAL: Well, I tell you, we didn't have any surge forces in our area, so I don't expect to gain any more territory. But we are making some internal adjustments based on the improved security in an effort to target the insurgents and prevent them from gaining any sanctuary.

Q Well, let me follow up, then, with the improvements that you're talking about in your area. And you also mentioned briefly the Iraqi security forces. Do you foresee a time -- I mean in the foreseeable future, at sometime this year, early next year, when there could be a significant reduction in U.S. forces in that area and let the Iraqis carry more of the load?

COL. PASCHAL: Well, I tell you, we are shooting for a November or December time frame to move to provincial Iraqi control, which would put us into a strategic or an operational overwatch of Iraqi security forces. But as you know, that will be based on the capability of the Iraqi security forces to maintain the security gains that we've achieved and continue to defeat the insurgents.

I think it all ties back into the economic opportunities that we are working in conjunction with the Provincial Reconstruction Team. We have a series of programs, some of them sponsored by the government of Iraq. One of them that I'd like to highlight is a joint technical- education reintegration program, which is designed for former fighters or the Sons of Iraq or concerned local citizens forces.

What we're looking to do is transition the Sons of Iraq and the CLCs into this technical education training program, anywhere from about four to six months, where they can learn a trade or a skill, and then become employed at the completion of this training.

The other part of that is obviously the outside investors that we want to bring into the province. With the increased security, we've had some outside investors come that are interested in putting -- conducting some projects within the Kirkuk province, and then the Iraqi government is beginning to host a small loans program, anywhere from about \$2,500 to \$10,000, which open up small businesses. With the increased security, what we're starting to see is some of these that I would refer to as smaller mom and pop businesses that are coming back into play.

For example, the town of Hawija, which I mentioned was one of our most contentious areas, we're starting to see restaurants open back up, small oil change businesses. Although they employ two, three, maybe five people, when you get 200, 300, 4(00) of those, you begin to get some irreversible momentum.

Q If I could just -- one more point: Everybody, at least here on this end, is looking at where do we think maybe we could draw down some forces beyond the end of the surge. Will there be further drawdowns? And I know you can't answer that question -- that's at a higher level, and it's down the road, but do you see the potential for that in your area as you move to this overwatch function?

COL. PASCHAL: Yeah, obviously those are decisions that are going to be made by higher -- but again, I'd reintegrate -- I think it's capability driven by the Iraqi security forces. I'm very proud of what they've been able to accomplish, both the Iraqi army and the Iraqi police.

I think the capability is there, but it's going to be event-driven based on their ability to step up and deal with the violence.

COL. KECK: (Off mike.)

Q Sir, two questions. Who is the enemy in Kirkuk province? Is it al Qaeda forced out of Baghdad? Is it homegrown? Is it some other group?

And what's the ethnic makeup of the Sons of Iraq in Kirkuk? Does it follow the provincial ethnic alliance, or is it skewed to the Sunni Arabs? How does that work?

COL. PASCHAL: Well, the provincial -- or the makeup of the Sons of Iraq -- most of our violence has been in the western province, which is predominantly Sunni Arab. And that makes up a majority of our Sons of Iraq. However, in some of the other provinces, we do have a combination of Turkmen that are involved in the program.

And could you repeat the first question again, please?

Q Yes, sir. Just who is the enemy in Kirkuk province?

COL. PASCHAL: When we first arrived, the enemy was the al Qaeda in Iraq. But as I highlighted, our precision targeting -- we have virtually defeated al Qaeda in Iraq within the Kirkuk province. It's important that we continue to maintain the pressure. As I said, we've captured and killed many high-value targets, and really what we are focused on

now is the Naqshbandi insurgency, which is a local flavor, if you will. Our efforts initially targeted the AQI, and now we're beginning to transition to this homegrown Naqshbandi insurgency.

COL. KECK: Courtney?

Q Colonel, you mentioned to one of AI's questions that there's a -- I'm sorry. This is Courtney Kube from NBC News. You mentioned in one of AI's questions that you'd begun a technical education program for the Sons of Iraq to teach them various technical skills. I'm curious why you don't have -- or how many of them are transferring over, transitioning into the Iraqi army and Iraqi police. We've heard of other places where the Sons of Iraq have kind of been clamoring to get into the Iraqi security forces.

Are you seeing that in Kirkuk or is there a particular reason that they are not going into the Iraqi armed forces?

COL. PASCHAL: Well, hopefully I didn't imply that they aren't going into the armed forces, because our goal is to transition about 20 -- correction, 20 percent of them into the Iraqi security forces. In fact, as I mentioned, just this Thursday we're going to graduate our first 400 Sons of Iraq who have completed an eight-week training program.

I think it's important to note that the make-up of the Sons of Iraq -- we often have many educated personnel -- people that are out there standing checkpoints that are lawyers, teachers or have some level of education. So what we're all looking at is are there economic opportunities to transition all of the Sons of Iraq -- to get them to putting down weapons -- into legitimate Iraqi society and capitalize on their training.

In addition to the JTERP program, we are conducting some literacy training, which is a requirement to enter into the police or the armed forces. Once again, this literacy training is sponsored by the government of Iraqi and we expect to start our first class in the June time frame with about 1,200 of our Sons of Iraq into that training.

Q Yeah. Colonel, this Kernan Chaisson again. You talk about how the local populace is doing a lot more with turning in weapons caches and that sort of thing. Has that changed the way you use, like, UAVs or other ISR assets? Or how are those two working together?

COL. PASCHAL: Well, I think what they do is they really complement each other and they work hand in hand. We have essentially reduced our op tempo. We no longer conduct those large scale cordon- and-searches that target entire villages.

And we've begun targeting the insurgent leadership with a scalpel instead of a sledgehammer. So that's been really the greatest effect that we've had.

And as this population gains confidence, some of these insurgent figures, that we've captured, I've almost referred to them as Robin Hood type figures. They've been on the run from coalition forces for upwards of three, maybe three-and-a-half years.

And what that's done is, once we've detained them, the population comes forward and says, you're right. He was a bad guy. We didn't want to tell you, for fear of retaliation, but now that he's gone, here's his cache. Here's his IEDs; here are the networks.

And as we kill or capture these insurgent leaderships, their replacements are not as effective. They're not as savvy. They don't have the OPSEC means. And the population is turning them in because they don't want to go back to the way it was. And they are happy with the security gains that we've achieved.

COL. KECK: Courtney.

Q Hi, it's Courtney from NBC again. I'm just curious. You mentioned that you've virtually defeated al Qaeda in Iraq in Kirkuk province.

Do you see any evidence or any influence by the PKK in your area, up in the northern parts of Kirkuk,

especially now that the weather is warming up? You know, it's the time where they would maybe be coming back to the base camps there.

COL. PASCHAL: Yeah. There's no evidence of the PKK in Kirkuk. And there's quite a bit of terrain between us and the borders to the north. So we've seen no impact of them in our area of operations.

COL. KECK: Okay. Well, it looks like we have satisfied all the questions that we have here. So with that, David, we'll turn it back over to you for any closing comments you have.

COL. PASCHAL: Once again thank you for your time.

I'm very proud of what the brigade combat team has accomplished. It's not anything that I've done. As I mentioned earlier, it's the great young men and women who go out every day and take the fight to the enemy.

And what we've been able to do is, since we've had such success in the security gains, we begin to work on our other lines of operation that include governance, essential services and economic development.

We're very proud of what we've accomplished.

And we'd be happy to host any of you at any time in the near future up into Kirkuk province to see what we believe right looks like.

Thank you.

COL. KECK: Thank you again for the update on activities in your area. And we hope to talk to you again down the road when we get an opportunity.

Thank you for coming, folks.

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