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**Presenter: Commander of Multinational Division-North and 1st Armored Division, Maj. Gen. Mark Hertling**

**August 11,  
2008**

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**DoD News Briefing with Maj.Gen. Hertling from the Pentagon**

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

BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Well, good morning and welcome.

Let me just make sure that General Hertling can hear us okay. It's Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon. Can you hear me, General?

GEN. HERTLING: I can, Bryan. Can you hear me okay?

MR. WHITMAN: Yeah, we hear you very good in the briefing room.

Well, thank you again for joining us, General Hertling. This is General -- Major General Mark Hertling, who is the commander of Multinational Division-North, as well as the 1st Armored Division. He's become well-known to us in this format. This is his fifth time that he has briefed us since assuming his responsibility -- responsibilities in October in Iraq. And I think the last time was just about two months ago, in June.

Today he is speaking from Contingency Operating Base Speicher, which is just outside of Tikrit. And as he has done in the past, he's going to give us a brief operational update in terms of what the division's been doing and then take some of your questions. So, General, again, thank you for spending some time with us this afternoon.

GEN. HERTLING: Okay. Well, thanks, Bryan. And I would like to read some opening statement, and maybe that'll get some of the folks in the briefing warmed up a little bit.

Good morning to you all. Good afternoon here from beautiful COB Speicher. Thanks for coming.

Last time, as Bryan said, I talked to this group was 9th of June, and that was about a month after we started operations in Ninewa and Mosul, Operation Umm al-Rabiain, or Mother of Two Springs.

Since that time there have been several interesting developments in the northern -- four northern provinces,

and I'd like to summarize some of those and do it by province before taking your questions.

Iraqi security forces and coalition force operations in the most northern province of Ninewa, a place which many of you know is about the size of the state of Maryland, continue.

Since Operation Umm al-Rabiain or Mother of Two Springs started on the 15th of May, we've seen a sharp decline, not only in attacks but in foreign fighters traversing the western Ninewa deserts. And we have captured or killed dozens of mid- and high-level AQI operatives in the province and in the city of Mosul itself. With the Iraqi army, we've also disrupted the flow of foreign terrorists from Syria, as I said, through that western Jazirah Desert.

I visited Mosul yesterday and walked the streets of that city with my good friend Lieutenant General Riyadh, who is the Ninewa Operations Command commander, real good friend of mine, as well as Governor Kashmula. It is still a city recovering from years of harsh combat, but the population is feeling more secure every day. We talked to many of the people on the streets on both sides of the city, and they are becoming increasingly concerned not so much about security but about infrastructure repair and their number one topic of jobs.

While security is improved, we are still involved in a tough fight against hardcore al Qaeda and other extremists in this city and this province. They've resorted to using car bombs. In fact, al Qaeda has called it -- the fight for Mosul -- the battle of the car bomb. And they have been seen to randomly kill innocent -- (inaudible). They are also using murder and intimidation to an increasing degree in Mosul, because those are crimes that can be done quite simply without being detected. So with our Iraqi friends, we are going after the cells that conduct all three of those types of operations with a vengeance.

In the south of our area, since we last talked to you, we are now supporting another operation, an Iraqi security force-led operation called Operation Basha'er al-Khair in Diyala province, which is an area the size of the state of New Jersey. I know many of you have covered past operations like Arrowhead Ripper in Baqubah back in -- last summer, or Operation Iron Harvest, which we conducted in January and February of this year. So you may be asking yourself why the Iraqis are conducting another operation in that particular province.

Well, I'll tell you why. The cities of Diyala and the large cities throughout the northern provinces are increasingly more secure because of Iraqis turning against al Qaeda and other extremists. The Iraqi police and army are becoming more capable. The extremists are being pushed into the rural areas because of this. They're active, so -- AQI is active, that is, so to secure the people of Iraq, we must continue to pursue the enemy -- and that's, in fact, the name of our operation, Iron Pursuit -- and we must capture or kill the hard-core terrorists that are residing now out in the hinterlands.

An example of what we're facing in the rural areas -- I just want to give you a couple vignettes from the last few days. Last week, both Iraqi army and U.S. military units entered several rural towns where al Qaeda had intimidated farmers for the past few years. These are places where security forces had not been. There were beheadings -- we knew about those -- and murders and criminal behaviors in these towns in rural Diyala.

In the span of three days, U.S. and Iraqi troopers found 57 IEDs along a 1-kilometer stretch of road.

One of our units -- one of our cavalry units found 25 house-borne bombs. Those are houses rigged for explosions, where the roof will fall in on anyone that enters. But yesterday we found a schoolhouse that had been rigged with numerous explosive devices, which could have killed soldiers or, worse, young children. Now, luckily, Iraq is out for their summer vacation in terms of their schools, but we were significantly lucky to find this house before it exploded, and we in fact detonated it.

Many of you have reported on the female suicide vests that have occurred in Diyala. We, in fact, had another one today in Baqubah. And over the last few weeks we've captured several cell members -- we think

there are many more -- that were active in this particular tactic. And I can tell you, if asked, some interesting stories about the brave women of Diyala who are helping to counter this particular threat.

In our other two provinces, Kirkuk, which is about the size of Connecticut, and Salahuddin, which is about the size of Vermont, we are seeing many insurgents come forward to reconcile and promise their support to the central government. And in fact, this morning I was in Kirkuk City attending a Civil Service Corps ceremony that saw 500 Sons of Iraq being transferred into some very useful jobs that will support the growing building industry in Kirkuk.

There are still insurgents and terrorists who have left the major cities for the deserts and mountains of these two provinces, so we are pursuing them in these areas as well.

That's a summary of some of the many things that are going on in northern Iraq, but I'm sure you'll all have some very hard questions for me that may be going beyond these opening statements. So I won't waste any more time reading. I'll try and answer your questions.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you for that overview, and I'm sure we can muster up some tough questions. We'll start with Jeff.

Q Hi, Major General Hertling. You had mentioned that the strategy in Diyala is to pursue the enemy. AP is reporting that the Iraqi government is giving insurgents a week -- has called a week-long cease-fire in Diyala in order to give insurgents a chance to turn themselves in. How does that fit into the strategy of continuing to pursue the enemy?

GEN. HERTLING: Yeah. Well, we will continue to pursue with coalition force operations. We have heard of that tactical pause. And I think quite frankly, Jeff, that was a result of a session that was occurring on Saturday, which I attended, with the new deputy prime minister, Mr. al-Aswari (sp). He, in fact, got the governor of Diyala together, as well as the senior military leaders, as well as many of the sheikhs and provincial council members in that particular province, pulled them all together. And as we were conducting operation, he was looking not only to continue to go after the hard-core extremists and terrorists, but also to give those who are perhaps just along for the money or because they are gang members an opportunity to change their mind and perhaps not get killed or captured but instead turn themselves in.

We've seen the success of that particular strategy in other provinces. In fact, in Salahuddin, I can tell you that we've had over 2,000 former insurgents turn themselves in. Some of them have been tried in court, and in fact several of them are serving sentences now. But they came to us and said: Hey, we don't want to run, and we don't want to be killed anymore. We see the power of the vote overcoming the power of the gun, so we're turning ourselves in.

So I think -- I hope this answers your question -- I think what the Iraqi government is doing in this particular case with this cease-fire is as a result of the visit on Saturday of the deputy prime minister, to give those who don't want to fight anymore, the less hard-core, a chance to become a part of the society.

Q If I could follow up, I know Baqubah is in your area of operations. How has the loss of Georgian troops affected your operations there?

GEN. HERTLING: Yeah. That's an interesting question, because in fact, in my old job, before I took command of the division, I was in U.S. Army Europe and was helping train the Georgians.

We had about a company of the Georgian brigade with us. One of our units, one of -- in fact, it was a 1st Armored Division unit that had come up from the central part of Iraq, came to work in our area in Diyala. They brought about a company of Georgians with them, and they are in fact returning back to their area, so they can fly

back home.

We've adapted. Quite frankly, these were good soldiers, but we've been able to adapt at the battlespace to account for their loss. It hasn't affected us as much because it was only about 80 or so that were in our area of operations, but it will affect MND-Central and my good buddy Major General Mike Oates.

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead.

Q It's Kimberly with CBS. Can you walk us through the makeup, as near as you can figure, of AQI, any other insurgents you're facing right now, foreign fighters versus domestic? Are you facing any militia activity as well, and what kind of -- you said car bombs; do you also have EFPs?

GEN. HERTLING: I'll answer that first one -- I'll answer that last question first. We have not seen very many EFPs. We have over the last several months. We have not over the last several weeks. And I'm sorry; I didn't hear who was answering or asking the question. Who was that, again?

Q It's Kimberly from CBS.

GEN. HERTLING: Hi, Kimberly.

Yes, in fact, Kimberly, what I'll tell you is, we think, as we've looked at the enemy in the foreign northern provinces, we've -- we have about seven different enemies, seven different fights. Many of them are calling themselves al Qaeda. I would almost tell you that in the north, we have more foreign fighters associated with al Qaeda in Ninewa province, in Mosul itself. We are seeing reflections of several different foreign fighters coming in through the Syrian desert, and those are the ones we've been targeting very hard, the Shari'a cells, the emirs of Mosul, some of the areas in the western desert.

When you go to Diyala, they will call themselves AQI, or the Islamic State of Iraq. But they're more the homegrown extremists, and in fact many of the parts of ISI or AQI are truly gang members. And that's why I say this reconciliation -- or the Iraqis use the word "musalaha" -- is going after them to try and win them over, maybe show them the error of their ways.

In the areas in the central provinces, we've got really a mixed bag of Jaish al-Islami, Ansar al-Sunna, Naqshbandi, some new groups that are forming because the old groups are either breaking down or being literally sought and pursued, and they are trying to combine to keep viable. So we really have several organizations that are affecting the Iraqi people.

But the good news is, the Iraqis see them all as terrorists. They will call them all al Qaeda, although there are some differentiation between the different groups. But I've told my bosses that I think I've got about seven different organizations that I'm fighting in the north, and it depends on where you want to go to talk about which one is the most prevalent. That's -- (audio break) -- I know, and I'm sorry for that.

Q Just a quick follow. Have border procedures, tightening up the border -- has that helped lower the foreign composition, or can you tell?

GEN. HERTLING: In terms of the actual -- in the north, our border -- the Ninewa border with Syria is about 300-plus kilometers long. It is still very porous. We are trying to help that and work some things with the Department of Border Enforcement, the DBE. But it is a very long border, and again, it's another one of those areas that we have to work through.

The southern border in Diyala has about a 200-kilometer stretch with Iran, another border with an internal Kurdish Regional Government partner, the province of Sulimaniyah.

So those areas -- and there's a major port there, Muntheria, that is a very well -- it's a port that's working very well. The northern port of Rabiya needs a lot of work, and the Iraqi government is addressing that.

But I think a combination of work by the Iraqi army, the border patrol and our coalition forces, and some intelligence drivers, has helped us stem the tide of foreign fighter flow in the north. And we're just now beginning to go after the flow of some cross-border operations in the south.

Q General, it's David Wood from the Baltimore Sun.

Could you bring us up to date on the Sons of Iraq in your sector -- how many you've got on your payroll; how successful you've been in helping them move into the ISF? And are you telling them that this program is going to come to an end pretty soon and they ought to look for jobs as they can find them?

GEN. HERTLING: Yeah, I can, David. Thanks. That's a -- I can tell you to the number how many we have, but I'll just give you generalities. We started a few months ago with about 32,000 Sons of Iraq. We're down just under 29,000 today because we have been very active either in -- to getting them into the Iraqi security forces, primarily the police, but some into the army. And there's an interesting differentiation there. Most of them want to go into the police force because they can stay close to home. Some of them want to join the army.

There have been other programs established. In fact, the opening ceremony I was at this morning saw about 500 Sons of Iraq in Kirkuk province -- (audio break) -- into the civil service corps, which will train young men to be carpenters, electricians, farmers and things like that, all being paid for by the Iraqi government. So we're gradually transferring the responsibility to the Iraqi government, both from a security standpoint but also of getting them jobs and in some cases even giving them education.

We have an internal task force goal in the north of cutting that by about 40 percent by October. So we hope to be down somewhere around 16,000 or 18,000 by October that are still on U.S. payroll, with a continual effort to get those into other jobs and other commitments. And it's working relatively well to get them down that way.

There was another question I was going to answer. It is -- oh, have we told them that this is happening? Yes, we have. In some cases, they choose not to believe it. They're putting this off, because some of these young men have done a very good, patriotic job of defending their country and would like to enter the security forces or other jobs, but right now the jobs just aren't available in those numbers. But we hope to have them available and have these individuals either trained or educated to join the security forces or get after jobs.

Q (Off mike) -- say that jobs aren't available, you're talking about both within the army and police and in the private sector? GEN. HERTLING: Well, it's not so much that there isn't a requirement for people to be working, but it's the fact that some of them aren't trained for the types of jobs that they will do.

There is a problem with some of these Sons of Iraq in terms of literacy. We're helping the Iraqi minister of education to form literacy programs, to in fact train some of them so they would be eligible to join the security forces. Some of them quite frankly don't have the literacy rates that we would like them to have or the government of Iraq would like them to have.

They also don't have some of the training, like being a bricklayer or a carpenter or an electrician. So that's where some of these joint training and education programs are coming in to help them along that way. And those things are being funded, again, by the government of Iraq. We're helping that along a little bit using Iraqi CERP money.

MR. WHITMAN: Courtney, go ahead.

Q Hi, General. This is Courtney Kube from NBC News. You mentioned earlier you had about 80 Georgian troops in your area that have since left. Could you give us a better idea of what sorts of troops they were, what kind of missions they had? And then also, you mention that the withdrawal of the Georgian troops would affect MND- Central. Despite the fact that's not your area, could you give us a little better idea of what you meant by that, what specific impact do you see that having?

GEN. HERTLING: Yeah. Well, talking to Mike Oates the other night -- first I'll answer your first question. The 80 troops that we have in this area, much like the rest of the Georgian brigade, are primarily infantrymen. That's what they trained on, in Tbilisi, or the training area outside Tbilisi. So the entire brigade is an infantry brigade.

It's not as big as one of our infantry brigades, but it's pretty capable. One of their companies was with the unit that came up to help us in the Diyala operations. They were split apart from their brigade. In fact, they are split across several brigades, so General Oates, quite frankly, is pulling them all together right now to get them redeployed back to Tbilisi.

You know, I don't want to talk more about it, because I don't know -- quite frankly, I don't know how he was using them in the Multinational Division Center area. That might be a question to ask him, or maybe General Austin. But I do know they were contributing to security operations down there just as they were up here.

Q Sir, this is Jim Garamone from American Forces Press Service. The Kirkuk area, I guess, remains a possible flashpoint. As the Iraqi elections come up, what does this mean to you?

GEN. HERTLING: Yeah. Kirkuk, as you probably saw -- I guess it was about 10 days ago now -- had some violence during a very peaceful demonstration of the election law and hoping to get it passed and maybe taking a look at pulling the (region's law out ?). I don't want to go into the politics of it. But a few -- about 10 days ago, I think it was, they had a suicide vest occur and then some shooting take place at the peaceful demonstration, where several people were killed and many more were wounded.

It is a -- it's a tense area, but I'll tell you quite frankly, we -- I just escorted the minister of Defense, Mr. Abdul Qadir, up there last Sunday, and -- or Monday, I guess it was.

And he took a look around, And he had been hearing rumors from very many people that were calling up saying that Kirkuk was a flashpoint and bad things were about to happen. So he literally flew up there. And I think that's an interesting point, that the government of Iraq is now going out to their provinces to test the waters.

And when he got there and we drove him through town, he found out what all of us that work in Kirkuk saw every day, that it's a very -- it's one of our most peaceful provinces, and peaceful cities, as well. There are some things that happen up there every once in a while. There are still some extremists in the area. But quite frankly, people were in the markets. There were weddings going on in the street when he drove through with us. And he said, boy, this -- you know, all the signs were in Arab, not Kurdish, as he had been told in Baghdad. So he walked away realizing that some of the reports from people that were not there were not quite true.

It is tense. Quite frankly, it is tense, because of the debate over the elections. And that's just something that the Iraqi people will have to work out among themselves, but I have confidence that they will in a peaceful means as long as some of the people don't flare it up with false reporting.

MR. WHITMAN: Andrew.

Q General, this is Andrew Gray from Reuters. Sorry, do you want to add something?

GEN. HERTLING: An interesting vignette, if I could give you an interesting vignette on Kirkuk. I was walking to the brigade commander up there, a guy named Dave Pascal (sp), this morning. And he said, you know, there

was a reporter, and I won't name which U.S. organization he was from, who spent a day and a half looking for Kurdish forces surrounding the city of Kirkuk.

And he finally came in to Colonel Pascal and he said, "Hey, I didn't find any Kurdish forces that were surrounding the Iraqi security forces up here." And Dave said to him, "Well, why didn't you come in and ask us first, because we would have told you that that was somewhat of a myth."

So right now Kirkuk is relatively peaceful, all things considered. We're just continuing to watch the flashpoint there. I'm sorry for interrupting. Go ahead, please.

Q Yeah. This is Andrew Gray from Reuters. General, I was just wondering, of the four provinces in your area, how many of them would you say are on an acceptable level of stability? And how far do you have to go before you can turn over more substantial responsibility to Iraqi forces and reduce the number of U.S. forces there?

GEN. HERTLING: Yeah, that's a question we ask ourselves every day, quite frankly. None right now are at an acceptable level of security, in my view. And I've talked to each one of the governors of the four provinces, and they agree as well. I just was with Governor Hamood (ph) last Sunday in -- he's the governor of Salahuddin province -- and in fact we had this very discussion. And we were having a conversation about when he would like to have the province turned back over to him. And I gave him a date. He actually thought later than what I said as the date potentially to turn over Salahuddin province. And they're the ones right now with the least amount of problems with security.

They have the least number of attacks of the four provinces.

So it's interesting. I think when you talk to the politicians and the men on the street, it's sort of a mixed bag on when they want the provincial Iraqi control. And most of them may say one thing when being interviewed, but they'll say quite a different thing, because they know that the Iraqi security forces and the coalition forces are partnering very well, that there's still work to be done in terms of the economic and the government line of operations, as we call it, with the PRTs.

There is still the election to be considered. And depending on what happens in terms of the election date and how that occurs on a timeline -- all of those things, in terms of drawing down forces, as we use the term -- it's condition-based. When we draw down forces in the north is going to be based on the conditions in each province.

And I'd remind -- I'd remind you, too, that the north is the way it is because the successful Awakening movement in Anbar pushed many of the terrorists to the east and the surge operation in Baghdad pushed many of the terrorists to the north. So we have become probably -- well, not probably, we are the most volatile area in Iraq right now, but we're continuing to pursue so that isn't the case in a few months.

MR. WHITMAN: Mike?

Q General, this is Mike Mount with CNN. You've actually just touched on a topic I was going to ask you about, that a number of the fighting forces have moved up to your area from two kind of very historically violent areas. And you were kind of explaining that, you know, that none of the provinces are quite ready to turn over yet. Is this something that you might require more troops to be moved to your area to be -- to kind of fight these forces, these -- you know, you said you've got seven different kind of groups up there fighting as well. What are you looking at in the future here to kind of control that area?

GEN. HERTLING: Well, Mike, over the last few months we have, in fact, received additional forces. We, in fact, received an additional battalion last week. I won't tell you where it went, but we got an additional battalion from Baghdad, U.S. battalion from Baghdad, to help with one of our fights. As a cavalry man, I'm always trying to

shift forces around to go after the enemy where he is. And that's what we're trying to do.

But the thing that I'd bring up, too, as we're shifting forces and as perhaps my commanders are giving me more forces to deal with and more priority on certain enablers like aviation or air or artillery or things that I need -- precision weapons or, in fact, in some cases intelligence -- more intelligence, which General Austin has given me, there also is the case with the Iraqi army continuing to gain in capability.

Every day, they get better and better. I am amazed at the huge strides that they have taken in the 11 months we've been here. And when compared to my last tour over here, it is a monumental change in terms of the capability of the Iraqi army.

The Iraqi police is beginning to grow as well. As the focus was on Baghdad over the last several years, the Iraqi police forces in the northern province didn't get as much attention, didn't get as much love in terms of their growth and training. We're changing that now. I'm down -- I'm short right now -- I'M short -- (repeating himself with emphasis to indicate he did not mean "I'm") -- the Iraqis are short right now about 17,000 policemen in the north. And of the ones that they do have, many of them were recruited very quickly and put right on the street. So we have to get some of those through training.

We just graduated, on Saturday, 12,000 -- or, I'm sorry, 1,200 new Iraqi policemen. We've got four new classes entering this week. So, every day we get better and better in terms of the police forces, which are complementing the army, the Iraqi army, which are currently in the cities. We're trying to get them out of the cities into the hinterlands while the police take over the security measures in the city. That has happened in some places, like Kirkuk, to a degree in Baqubah, in Muqadiyah. But what we also have to do is continue to get that in other places so the Iraqi army can be released to continue to pursue, as we're doing with them now in some of the rural areas.

MR. WHITMAN: General, we have reached the end of our allocated time here, and I do want to give the last minute or two to you for any closing remarks that you might have or anything that we might have asked you that warrants further comment on.

GEN. HERTLING: No. There were some very good questions today, Bryan. I appreciate everyone continuing to have interest in what's going on over here at this time, because I know the elections are taking quite a bit of news media and focusing on that particular area, rightfully so. Some of the political aspects of Iraq are certainly taking the interest, as well, of our politicians and the American people.

But what I'll tell you today is, I have never been as confident or as hopeful for Iraq as I am right now. It is -- today it was 127 degrees when I was out with some both Iraqi army forces and U.S. Army forces, and they were continuing to take the fight to the enemy. And then immediately I switched to a session with some politicians. I was with the governor of Diyalah on Sunday -- correction, Saturday. I was with the governor of Ninewa on Sunday. I was with the governor of Kirkuk today. And all of them are trying to get jobs for their people and make the system work.

So it is a very hopeful time in Iraq, but there are still a lot of enemy out there. And in order to get the people of Iraq completely secure, we have to just continue to go after al Qaeda and the other extremists over here.

I want to thank you for all your support back there in the Pentagon, but also thank all of our family members for continuing to give support to our soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines over here. So thank you very much.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you, General, and thank you --

GEN. HERTLING: We've got a lot of civilians here, too.

MR. WHITMAN: Thank you, General. And thank you for your time and sharing your time with us as frequently as you do to give us a perspective of what's going on up in the north. We do appreciate it, and thank you very much. And we hope to do it again soon.

GEN. HERTLING: Okay. Thank you, Bryan.

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