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Assistant Division Commander (Operations) 25th Infantry Division Brig. Gen.
John Bednarek

DoD News Briefing with Brig. Gen. Bednarek from Iraq

BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): General, this is Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon. Can you hear me okay?

GEN. BEDNAREK: Yeah, Bryan, I can. Thanks.

MR. WHITMAN: Good afternoon. And thank you. And on short notice we appreciate having the opportunity to talk to you.

This is our third press briefing, I guess, of the day. Welcome back to the Press Corps here.

This afternoon we do have Brigadier General John Bednarek, who is the assistant division commander for Multinational Division North. He's also the assistant division commander for operations for the 25th Infantry Division. He is speaking to us today from Contingency Operating Base Speicher outside of Tikrit. But given the level of interest in their area of operations over the last couple of days, we thought it would be of particular interest to you and an opportunity for the commander to give you some perspective into some of the operations that have been taking place there.

So General, again, we appreciate this on short notice. And what I'd like to do is just kind of turn it over to you so that you can give us a brief overview before we start getting into a few questions.

GEN. BEDNAREK: Hello, Bryan. Thanks. It's my pleasure to be with you. I understand this is, as you highlighted, the third press briefing for you and those in the assembled audience there, so I hope you have not reached your culminating point.

But let me highlight a couple things. First off is some areas of concerns. You know, certainly there is a lot of skepticism of lack of perceived progress in Iraq, potential waning congressional support; do we or do we not have tangible results of what is going on here.

But let me start off by telling you some good things that are happening, which unfortunately is often lost with all of the violence, particularly what has occurred three days ago in Tall Afar, ongoing violence in some of the

other areas here in Multinational Division North, that often overshadows a lot of the good things that are behind the scenes but yet need to be known by the American people, known by you so you can assist us in the highlighting the positive results and actions of the great soldiers, Marines, sailors, airmen here in Iraq.

You know, here in Multinational Division North, you may have heard parts of these where our Iraqi security forces continue, and more and more, to take the lead for operations. We have four Iraqi army divisions here in Multinational Division North. All four of those are Iraqi army lead. Three of those four have transitioned to Iraqi ground force command. What that means is, is that there is an Iraqi general officer responsible for oversight training and operations of those three or four police forces. Provincial directors of police at all of the provinces here in Multinational Division North are experiencing fairly good results in recruiting, retention, training and operations of the police.

Specifically here in Multinational Division North, we also have the border areas with Syria and Iran. The department of border enforcement is responsible for two of the ports of entry and multiple border forts across the North. In total, we have over 132,000 Iraqi security forces involved in the security construct for our area of responsibility.

And make no mistake -- this is not all roses and lilacs. Certainly, there is a lot of issues and a lot of challenges, but the Iraqis are stepping up to the plate. More and more, they're running independent operations on their own, without coalition involvement, without coalition support.

And in some cases, they will go out on their own, accomplish a mission or a task, find some insurgency, find a cache. And they'll come back and tell us later on. We didn't even know that they were out there executing that mission. That's a powerful statement, and that's huge. And those types of operations was not occurring just six to nine months ago.

Provincial governance: Again, in all of the provinces, provincial reconstruction teams are engaged, involved. One of our provinces recently passed their provincial budget execution for 2007. Again, superb new story for that province and that governor and the deputy governor within that province, to make a difference for the future. These are tangible results that the Iraqi people are seeing, that their government is working, albeit very, very slow, still a lot of bureaucracy that they've got to work through, and they are working through it.

Let me turn a little bit to Tall Afar, because I know that is currently in the news: Three days ago, an absolutely horrific terrorist action there in Tall Afar.

But here's a good news story with that. We have an adversary tough, demanding and adaptive that is absolutely reaching out and trying to do something that will drive a wedge into the people against their elected officials and against their security forces that are trying to make a difference. This adversary is desperate, particularly there in Tall Afar, as you know, heralded just a year ago is a relatively stable and model city by our commander in chief, and it has been relatively calm up in Tall Afar and across Nineveh province.

So it highlights and shows that we've got an adversary that are trying to do a significant act of horror against a people that are trying to live, prosper and make a difference and responsible for their own city. And in that particular event -- and I know I'll get some questions here -- but the mayor, Mayor Najim, the provincial director of police, Governor Kashmula there in Nineveh province, and the Iraqi army division commander, Major General Khorseed, stood together along with tribal sheikhs to calm the people, to let them know that, "Hey, we are here, we are visible, we're going to make a difference."

And in fact, I'd highlight that just like we would do in the United States when we would have an issue, whether it is hurricane assistance, et cetera, we would come up with a lot of humanitarian assistance where we would help the citizens. That's exactly what's happened up in Tall Afar where they have made a difference. In fact, they've told us, as we tried to roll out a blanket, support, assistance, costs, et cetera, meals to assist the Iraqi

people up there in need, and they told us, "Hey, this is our problem. This is our issue. We're going to solve it. We are together and united against a common adversary, and we're going to make a difference."

So we are standing in support of them as they take the lead and they make this happen there to solve this challenge up in Nineveh province. Absolutely huge. And we have not seen that across the country in an MND-North, but that's growing and growing more and more every day. And those are good news stories that you can help us and tell the American people of the good things that are going in Multinational Division North.

Standing by for your questions.

MR. WHITMAN: Sir, we've got a few here. Let's start with Lolita today.

Q Hi. It's Lolita Baldor with the Associated Press. General, I'm wondering -- despite the fact that the Iraqis, you're saying, are stepping up and trying to deal with this recent uptick in violence there, has the Baghdad operation taken so many forces that you think perhaps at this point you may need more coalition forces in your region to deal with this violence, to tamp it down, at least, before it really takes hold or takes hold any more than it is now?

GEN. BEDNAREK: Yeah, we have asked our commander, Lieutenant General Odierno, Multinational Corps Iraq, for additional forces. And we have received those recently. So here in Multinational Division North, we have been provided additional forces to assist us in accomplishing our mission.

Q Can you tell us how many that is? And do you need any more, other than what you've already gotten?

GEN. BEDNAREK: Right now we are stable in accomplishing the tasks that we have of training the Iraqi security forces and fighting the insurgency. Certainly, as all prudent planners do in any organization, we look for other opportunities to maximize what we had.

But remember the statistic I mentioned to you of the Iraqi security forces. Part of the strategy is we continue to train, man and equip those forces, that they will be able to step up, fight side by side and accomplish a lot of those tasks that the coalition heretofore has been primarily involved with.

Q But just to -- again, can you say how many extra forces did you get? And how many coalition forces are there currently in Tall Afar?

GEN. BEDNAREK: We received an additional battalion. You're probably aware that a Stryker battalion came here to Multinational Division North, and they are engaged with us. And that is the total -- that added to the total that we had here of our coalition in Task Force Lightning.

Q Sir, this is Kristin Roberts with Reuters. I think that the reprisal killings involving the police officers a few days ago raised some significant questions about the level of professionalism and sectarianism within the Iraqi police forces. Can you tell me how reflective that incident is of the level of sectarianism within the police forces there and, on a related note, how it might compare to the level of professionalism versus sectarianism in the Iraqi army forces in your area?

GEN. BEDNAREK: The Iraqi police that were involved in what we think are the reprisal killings there in Tall Afar -- absolutely tragic.

They have launched, and I'm talking they meaning -- the government of Iraq has directed a full investigation of that. Major General Wafik, the provincial director of police, has taken charge of that and reporting to the ministry of justice.

So they again have stepped up to that. They realize it was wrong. They know they're going to take action to solve it and fix it.

But to specifically get to your question of is that reflective of all of the police as we see it in Multinational Division North, the answer is no. We've got strong leaders that are standing up to the plate. All of them certainly are not the strongest leaders and professionals, but we continue to coach, teach and mentor and train them as they get better as time progresses.

Q Sir, this is Pam Hess with United Press International.

We understand that 18 police were arrested in connection with this. Do you have any insight into what their motivations were? Were they, are they associated with some organized militia? Or was this overly aggressive response to the bombing?

And can you also talk about the general level of U.S. forces there? When did the Stryker battalion join the battalion that's in Tall Afar? And one of the -- the 3rd ACR, an entire regiment, used to be in Tall Afar. They went down to a battalion. Is this an indication that they pulled out that number too quickly?

GEN. BEDNAREK: Well, you asked me about six questions there. I'll try to remember each one of them.

Let me talk a little bit to the 18 police -- First off, absolutely wrong, failure on the police in what occurred. An investigation is underway, and that will run its course by Iraqi rule of law through the ministry of justice.

That's a good news story. You know, clearly that they were overzealous in these reprisal killings, absolutely a failure in the police and the police forces, but they're taking action and they're stepping up to that in their own internal investigation. We believe this was sectarian violence. We don't know that in detail yet, but the investigation will bear that out.

Across the rest of the police forces there in Diyala, very strong and very large -- the provincial director of police has all of Mosul, of course, Tall Afar, and across Nineveh province. They run missions every day. It is an adaptive police force and taking on a lot of activities to ensure that the people there in Mosul and Tall Afar are secure.

Major General Wafik personally, as the director of police, is a strong, competent leader, clearly got his work cut out for him, as indicated by this challenge and incident there in Tall Afar.

As far as the forces in Mosul and your reference to the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment pullout and replacement of brigade formations, that was several years ago. There have been several other formations since then. But our assessment is that we -- as we continue to partner with Iraqi forces, continue to train and stand them up to where they can take the lead on their own in that province is what makes the difference.

I mentioned up front in my statement that there are two full Iraqi army divisions there, the 2nd and 3rd. Major General Khorseed and Brigadier General Mutah have those divisions with a overall competent police force; again, not 100 percent professional and trained to the standard that we will grow them to, but overall, from Iraqi army lead and continuing to progress, we're seeing good results.

STAFF: I think you got all of those questions, actually.

Ann.

Q Could you talk about whether you think there will be more senior leaders held accountable for what the police did? Because in the past there has been Baghdad interference in actually the assigning of the police leadership in Tall Afar, you know, that the coalition has had to grapple with, so there's been questions about the leadership itself.

GEN. BEDNAREK: It's hard to say. The investigation and time will tell as we highlight for the Nineveh province, but also the government of Iraq. But here again is the good news. The government of Iraq is involved and engaged and they're providing support; specifically in Nineveh province, Governor Kashmula directly engaged and involved.

And yesterday in Tall Afar, the mayor, Mayor Najim, the director of police, tribal sheikhs and leaders and the governor and the Iraqi army division commander standing side by side against a fairly sizeable crowd of Iraqis there in Tall Afar around the government center, calming the people, talking to them, akin to a press briefing, if you will, from our parlance but highlighting to them and showing that they are the leaders; they're in charge. They are taking action to assist the people and helping them out to get across and get through this crisis in Tall Afar to bring security and stability back to this city from which it once was.

You're seeing Iraqis stand up and make a difference. You're seeing people that are taking a stand against a tough, demanding adversary, and that's very positive.

Q Can I just follow up to ask specifically what additional coalition efforts are in Tall Afar right now? You said in support of them -- I mean, in terms of forces or other kinds of support, what is the U.S. doing?

GEN. BEDNAREK: Support for the forces in Tall Afar -- we do have a brigade that is in Mosul. And one of our formations specifically has responsibility for Tall Afar. They provide training. They provide assistance. They're providing help to Iraqi security forces, both police and army, and also the border forces that are not too far away, along the Syrian border.

But here's again another good-news story about what is happening in Tall Afar. The humanitarian assistance that I spoke about earlier -- we, as the coalition, a hundred percent immediate response in providing all those normal things to a significant disaster in a horrific terrorist act that you are aware of -- food, shelter, clothing, blankets, medical supplies, et cetera.

But the key note is that the Iraqis said, "Hey, we've got it. We can do this. This is our problem. We're stepping up. We want you there if we need you, but this is our problem, and we've got the solution, and we're going to make it happen" -- to include such things as you would want to see happening, of engineer support, clearing out the rubble, making sure that the normalcy to regular life there in Tall Afar -- the marketplace, the citizens going about their day-to-day lives -- to bring a sense of calm, decency, security to the people as quickly as they can -- again, a powerful thing to witness.

MR. WHITMAN: Let's go to Nick and then to Mic.

Q General, it's Nick Simeone at Fox News. You mentioned the progress that the police especially have been making. But at what point do you think the police will start seeing themselves as primarily professional police and not a band of Shi'ites?

GEN. BEDNAREK: Some see themselves as a professional organization right now. There are clearly those that need more help in seeing themselves and understanding that pure vision of what the prime minister and a majority of the senior leaders see, need and highlight as one Iraq, security for Iraq's people. That is not shared by all; I agree. And everybody would tell you that and acknowledge that.

But more and more the Iraqi senior leaders are stepping up and knowing that that is the way ahead, not to

be focused on Shi'a, Sunni, Turkoman, Kurdish, Christian, et cetera, but one Iraq is the vision for the government.

Q We've heard that so many times before. I guess what I'm asking you is, at what point do you see critical mass coming where you have enough Shi'ite policemen who consider themselves professional police and don't revert to sectarianism when there's a crunch, and especially given the surge in Baghdad and what happens after U.S. forces leave there?

GEN. BEDNAREK: I'd highlight again that a lot of what you just asked ties to not only the senior leadership but also the senior leadership involvement of recruiting and having that right ethnic balance in their police forces, and not just in Nineveh province but the other provinces in Multinational Division North. This is something that we assist the Iraqis as best we can in coaching and watching to ensure that that right ethnicity in the balance -- Shi'a/Sunni -- in the police forces based on the province that they're in is sufficient enough to where there is a system of checks and rechecks to ensure that dignity and respect for the Iraqis is maintained.

Q General, Jim Miklaszewski with NBC News. Where were U.S. military forces at the time that these alleged reprisal killings were being carried out by the police there in Tall Afar? Were there any organized forces in the area? Were there any MiTT teams embedded with these police forces at the time?

GEN. BEDNAREK: There were coalition forces nearby. And our military transition teams and also police transition teams were also nearby. Those are routinely in the headquarters and some are out on patrols with the Iraqi security forces. At the specific time of these alleged reprisal killings by the police -- that will come out in the investigation of the location of MiTT teams in the province.

Q As far as you know, the U.S. military forces weren't aware of the reprisal killings as they were going on and were unable to take any steps? Or were there any efforts to intervene by coalition forces to halt the reprisal killings?

GEN. BEDNAREK: We were not aware of the reprisal killings until the following day.

Q Just one other follow-up to Nick's question. What happened in Tall Afar? Since it was, as you said, held up pretty much as a model of what the U.S. hoped Iraq could become, doesn't it also reflect a much wider concern that any time, as former Secretary Rumsfeld would say, the U.S. took the hand off the bicycle seat, that the Iraqis will revert to their sectarian instincts and carry out these kinds of reprisals? And isn't that, in effect, what the U.S. is focused on in this surge in Baghdad?

At some time the U.S. forces are going to have to leave.

What's to prevent the kind of sectarian backlash that we're seeing now in what was the model city, Tall Afar?

GEN. BEDNAREK: The answer to that is strong leadership, and that's what will make this work. You're exactly right. We cannot be everywhere all the time. That is not the intent, nor is it the way ahead.

We continue to work very, very hard and very closely with many of those leaders that I cited by name earlier. Does that mean that we are, as you highlighted, quote, "ready to let go of the bicycle seat now?" The answer is no. Perhaps the better question or where you will get to is, at what point in time -- what is the benchmark, if you will, to where we will be able to let go of those bicycle seats and handlebars?

And our assessment up in Nineveh province that that will be sooner rather than later -- we're working real hard with our Iraqi leaders and the counterparts to preclude this from happening. We're not going to get rid of all of the violence, nor is that the intent, but rather to stand them up to where a security environment exists for the Iraqi people. And we see that as sooner rather than later.

Q Sir, Jim Garamone with American Forces Press Service.

How soon do you expect provincial Iraqi control in your area?

GEN. BEDNAREK: In Nineveh province, in fact, we have already nominated that province to go to provincial Iraqi control next month. That will go through a vetting process with the government of Iraq, and a decision will be made. But recall that is across the province. Tall Afar is just one city, although a very important city, in that province. It spans fairly sizable terrain, as you are well aware. The other provinces in MND North are on similar timelines, but slightly projected out into the months ahead.

Q Sir, it's Kristin Roberts with Reuters again.

I'm hoping that you can clarify two points that you've gone over. The first: The 18 police involved in this alleged reprisal killing incident, did they have militia ties? And the second: When did the Stryker brigade arrive?

GEN. BEDNAREK: The first one, on the militia ties, the investigation will bring that out in detail, and that's our expectation, working closely with the government of Iraq to assist them in that process.

On the Stryker, there's not a Stryker brigade. And if I mentioned that size of force, that was incorrect. Strykers were provided to MND North, and that Stryker battalion is in Diyala province, not in Nineveh province.

Q Oh, when, though, when, when, when did it go to Diyala?

GEN. BEDNAREK: The Strykers went to Diyala approximately three weeks ago.

Q Pam Hess. You characterize Tall Afar as a place of relative calm, I guess, prior to this attack. Could you characterize -- put numbers on that for us, how Tall Afar compares to the rest of Nineveh province?

GEN. BEDNAREK: Tall Afar is -- it has been relatively calm before this incident. I've been there multiple times in dialogue and discussions not only with the mayor, but in the marketplace and driving through the city. In comparison to other parts of Mosul, it depends on where you are to be very honest with you. To the west of that in Rabiya at the port of entry on the Syrian border, also relatively calm, and in fact, another success story with that port of entry on the border at Rabiya with Iraq and Syria has increased its assessment this month specifically to be ready to turn over to border police, the customs officials out there, to, again, minimize coalition presence out there. And other parts of Nineveh province are not too far behind.

Q Sir, could you talk about the population in Tall Afar? I believe before a lot of operations occurred there in, like, 2005, there were about 200,000 people, but recently we heard there were about 80,000; meaning the town is significantly smaller. What's going on with the population? And are people -- do people feel confident that they're moving into Tall Afar? And how does the recent event impact that?

GEN. BEDNAREK: Yeah, time will tell on what the impact of the recent event as far as the Iraqi people moving in or out of Tall Afar. Your statistics are accurate based on prior demographics. There has been a slight decrease from the 220,000 just about 24 months ago. The specific numbers and their ethnic breakout I could not give you at this point.

Suffice it to say, though, that those that are living in Tall Afar, it has been relatively calm up until this horrific event by a very tough and demanding adversary. Our expectation, however, particularly given the strong show of the Nineveh officials, tribal sheikhs to calm the people there in Tall Afar, that was absolutely huge yesterday of what occurred with their elected leaders and tribal elders there in Tall Afar.

And the people see that, and that's exactly what they need to hear: that their officials are with them, trying to make a difference, and providing an Iraqi solution to a tough problem.

MR. WHITMAN: Would you like to follow up?

Q Well, can I just follow up, actually, on -- you mentioned Diyala. How are things going in Diyala with the recent operations there? Because there had been an increase in violence as a result of people moving out of Baghdad and other causes.

GEN. BEDNAREK: Diyala is our toughest area here in Multinational Division North -- clear lines of sectarian violence by particular city within the province. Baqubah, which is the provincial capital there in Diyala, remains a tough, hard area. We are working extremely hard, again, with the Iraqi security forces there, both the police and the 5th Iraqi Army Division commander, Major General Shakur, and his staff there.

I mentioned the Stryker battalion has recently arrived there in Diyala, put immediately into work there in the Baqubah area to bring stability to that location.

We have also included additional outreach to tribal sheikhs and those that are responsible to assist and leverage their influence with those people in Diyala.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, General, we know it's getting very late there, actually, and we want to be respectful of that. We know it's been a long day for you.

Before I bring it to a close, is there anything else you'd like to say before we end this?

GEN. BEDNAREK: Well, I've got time for a couple more questions, if somebody out there has another redirect. I know you don't get an opportunity to talk directly to us as often as you perhaps like to. And in fact it's our responsibility to ensure that you're getting the right information, so you can report to the American people.

This is tough. This is hard work. But we need your support in letting our countrymen understand the complexities, the difficulties, but also the support that we need.

So let me allow you to continue to ask questions for a few more minutes, if you have time and the airwave.

MR. WHITMAN: Sure. No, we appreciate that. And you might be careful with what you ask, though; I don't think Pam Hess ever runs out of questions.

But we'll see if we can string three in a row there, Pam.

Q I can. Pam Hess again. Could you tell us the demographic make-up now of Tall Afar, what the population is now, and also the demographic make-up of their police force? I was there in 2005, and at the time, it was almost entirely Shi'ite, and also at the time, 120 of them were under investigation by the MOI for similar activities. And I'm wondering if that has changed.

GEN. BEDNAREK: Yeah, Pam that's a good question. And as I mentioned earlier, I think the statistics were about right. From when you were here before there's certainly a less of a population. I believe, Pam, when you were here in 2005 a little over 200,000 total for a population there in Tall Afar. That has decreased slightly, but it is clearly not that large of a Shi'a population there in Tall Afar. It is a little bit more balanced and mixed there as it is now.

From the Iraqi police that you highlighted that were under investigation by the MOI, that investigation from 2005, I do not know and was not part of that, so I will not speculate.

Suffice it to say that, as we've talked earlier, the 18 police that were involved in the sectarian violence as a direct result of this horrific suicide vehicle-borne IED in Tall Afar marketplace, that will be investigated through the MOI and the Ministry of Justice partnering on that to ensure that those responsible are not only brought to justice, but also taking a look at what needs to be done to shore up other security measures, checkpoints, locations, responsibilities, communications, et cetera.

And part of that ties, Pam, to the good news story there, is that perhaps once in 2005 what would have been a direct coalition involvement to assist, energize, focus, provide guidance and mentorship to that security challenge it is now 100 percent Iraqi lead in taking ownership of the problem, identifying what needs to be done, establishing a way ahead and milestones to execute and then making it happen.

STAFF: Go ahead, Pam.

Q I'm trying to figure out how many police there are in Tall Afar and what percentage of them are Shi'ites and what percentage are Sunnis. Is it an entirely Shi'ite police department or is it a mixed department?

GEN. BEDNAREK: Yeah, Pam, it is mixed in Tall Afar. I do not have the specific number of Iraqi police in the Tall Afar qadha or the district police stations there. Easy to find out, I just do not know what that is off the top of my head for the Tall Afar district. Major General Wafik, who is the provincial director of police for Nineveh over all, watches that pretty close, and in fact, there has been a recent recruiting drive to increase those police numbers in the aggregate there in Tall Afar and specifically had requested to ensure that that balance and the mix, as you highlighted, from the ethnic diversity to ensure that an appropriate number of Sunni police are added to the police force.

MODERATOR: Lolita.

Q Lolita Baldor with AP again.

You mentioned that there has been a nomination that the province get provincial control next month. Considering the recent upsurge in sectarian violence there, and particularly the problems within the police department, does that recommendation still hold? Or do you think -- is there any thought that it maybe will take more time?

GEN. BEDNAREK: Well, that will be up to the governor of Nineveh province, Governor Kashmoula. And again, positive story, and this is progress, that needs your help in footstomping. I mean, they are making decisions of their future with their security. They know what they have; they also know what they need; they know their shortfalls. They would like to be in charge of their future. And in Nineveh province, our belief and our assessment is that they are closer to taking control of their future than they were just several months ago. Again, this is a good news story and positive for provincial Iraqi control in Nineveh province.

(Cross talk.)

MODERATOR: Gentlemen, we do want to thank you, though, and especially for taking all of our questions today. And we appreciate that and hope to have you back in this forum again soon.

GEN. BEDNAREK: Well, again, thanks for the opportunity to talk to all of you.

And Pam, look forward to you coming back over here for your next visit, whenever that is. We'll host you here in MND North as an embed, and we'll put you out there with one of the police formations and let you go out

on patrol with them and see the progress for yourself. And that's kind of important for all of us, that you see the progress that's going on. You know that the Iraqis are making a difference; you know they're stepping up to the plate to take charge of their own future and their own security for their own people in the long term.

And that's the footstomp that I'd like to leave you with. From all of us in Tropic Lightning and Task Force Lightning Multinational Division North, thanks for having us on this evening.

MODERATOR: Thank you.

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