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**Presenter: Commander, Multinational Force-West Maj. Gen. Walter Gaskin      July 20, 2007 12:00 PM EDT**

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**DoD News Briefing with Maj. Gen. Gaskin from Iraq**

BRYAN WHITMAN (Pentagon spokesman): Good morning and welcome. And good afternoon to General Gaskin.

This is Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon, General. I know that we are having some technical difficulties, but we're going to try to muscle through this because we don't want to lose this opportunity with you.

This is General Walter E. Gaskin that you see on the monitor here. He is the commanding general of Multinational Force-West. And he is speaking -- this is his second brief, actually. I think we had him here in the briefing room a couple of months ago. And today he is in the Baghdad area talking to us. He does have an overview that he'd like to provide to you before we get into the questions.

So, General, why don't I turn it over to you and let you begin.

GEN. GASKIN: Well, thank you all. I'm pleased to be able to speak with you again. I'd like to give you an update on security within the province and some key issues and, finally, address what I see as our way ahead.

When we spoke last March, I told you that I was optimistic for the future of Al Anbar. Now, three months later, and with almost six months in command of Multinational Force-West, I can report that the future of the province looks promising. There's still a lot of work left to do in Al Anbar. Al Qaeda in Iraq is still trying to make its presence felt, but I believe we have turned the corner. "Turned the corner" -- you, no doubt, have heard that expression used before, along with others like, "cautiously optimistic." Today I would like to share just one of the indicators that led me to believe that we truly turned the corner in Al Anbar.

To illustrate this point, I have a slide which depicts more than three years' worth of data we've accumulated.

When our analysts examined the data on enemy incidents, such as IEDs, small-arms fire, indirect fire attacks, they noted there's some interesting trends with the seasonal temperature variation. I think these trends will help illustrate just how significant the recent gains have been in Al Anbar.

The top graph with the slide shows the average daily number of enemy incidents in Al Anbar from November of 2003 to June 2007. The second graph show the daily high and low temperatures in Al Anbar over

that same period of time. As the vertical hour shows, we have traditionally been a cycle -- or seen a cycle of violence that begins around January and rises to the peak in October. This cycle has repeated in each of the past three years. Using the historical trends as a guide, we might have expected to see a rise in the total incidents beginning this past January. The highlighted area on the top graph shows that we are in fact seeing a steady decline in enemy incidents.

This is a stark departure from historic norms. To me, this is one of the metrics that can show significant progress being made in securing the province. (Audio break) -- that something significant has changed from previous years. We have broken the cycle of violence. The most striking and often commented on change in the province is with the security situation. Our strategy has been to expel al Qaeda and other insurgent groups from the population centers. I know you've heard of all -- of this concept of clear, hold and build; that's essentially what we are doing throughout the province -- clearing, holding and building.

What's as important is we are not just doing this by ourselves; we are fully partnered with approximately 34,000 Iraqi security forces. They are made up of police, soldiers, highway patrolmen and border enforcement officers. Although the number of volunteers for -- (audio break) -- police and army are growing, I am much more concerned with the Iraqi security forces' capabilities. Iraqi forces are currently planning and -- (audio break) -- with the coalition forces, training teams and in some cases entirely independent of MNF-West forces. All Iraqi police and Iraqi army are partnered with U.S. battalions. We have transition teams helping to guide and mentor the Iraqi forces.

We owe the lion's share of the progress we've experienced to the hard work, dedication, and in some cases, bravery of the Iraqi forces.

We now have the Iraqi police in every major city in the province. The combat-tested Iraqi 1st Division plans and operates independently in their own battlespace. The 7th Iraqi Army Division, the most junior of the divisions in Iraq, is progressing at a rate that no one could have predicted.

The capacity for the Iraqi forces to control and maintain security within the minimal assistance from the coalition forces is a goal which we are working toward. The Iraqi police, the Iraqi army and the coalition forces in Anbar stand together. To help us reach that goal, the surge forces assigned to my area of operations are providing -- (audio break) -- crucial element of our progress.

The arrival of the 13<sup>th</sup> Marine Expeditionary Unit last month completed the flow of surge forces in Al Anbar. This has allowed us to maintain persistent presence in an area that had long been suspected of being a trouble spot. That area is almost directly north of Fallujah. And also there are -- multiple avenues approach into the Western Belt of Baghdad.

The Marines and sailors the 13th MEU have denied the enemy transit routes to and from the capital and keeps the enemy from using areas to rest and refit. Almost daily, the MEU reports finding weapons cached and more importantly facilities where insurgents manufacture homemade explosives, IEDs and car bombs. The addition of the MEU has been a tremendous asset to MNF-West.

I'm also excited by the finding and fielding of the new Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles, known as MRAPs. We have about 200 of those MRAPs in Al Anbar and we are providing a real lifesavers. Our route clearance teams have vital missions of finding and eliminating deadly roadside bombs. The addition of the MRAP vehicle has allowed us to increase the number of route clearance teams, which are now all outfitted with the MRAP.

To reduce the fielding time, the MRAP vehicles are being flown directly into airbase in Anbar days after they leave the factory. This cuts down time of delivery by more than a month. As the Marine Air-Ground Task Force commander, I -- (audio break) -- with these vehicles and the rate at which we're fielding them. Our plan is

to push these vehicles to my subordinate commanders, giving them another tool to -- (audio break) -- missions and keep their troops safe.

I anticipate having about a thousand of these vehicles within -- by the end of this year.

As -- (audio break) -- for the future, I see both opportunities and challenges that lie ahead. Building the logistical capacity of the Iraqi self-security forces proved to be a challenging task, but not an insurmountable one. We need to stay focused on combatting the terrorist threat that remains very real and very dangerous. But we must begin by training both the Iraqi police and the Iraqi army in sustaining themselves -- (audio break) -- with the Iraqi systems and decreasing their reliance on coalition forces. The ability of the Iraqi army and Iraqi police to equip and resupply their force is the next crucial step in our development. This step will involve continued communications between both the Iraqi army division commanders and the provincial police chief and his counterpart in Baghdad.

Six months ago, many said it was impossible to fix the pay problem in the Iraqi army and the police force, but now it's happening. The same has also been said of the Iraqi army's ability to transport themselves. Well, on the 11th, the 7th Iraqi Army Division took control of their motor transport regiment. The pay issues and the ability to transport their forces isn't headline news, but I see them as milestones and examples of remarkable progress that Iraqi security forces are building, and the army and police forces as well, engaging in combat operations together. This is an unprecedented achievement and one in which these brave sons of Anbar deserve a tremendous amount of credit.

Another initiative we are working toward is reducing the military presence within the cities themselves. I believe that the perfect security force to provide civility in towns and villages is the Iraqi police. I am sensitive to the fact that no one wants large-scale army force, be it U.S. or Iraqi, in the population centers any longer than they need to be once the security has been established. We are already setting conditions for the police control of Fallujah during Operation Alljah, which is ongoing. In this operation we are going neighborhood to neighborhood establishing local police precincts.

This operation is being met with outstanding support by the local citizens. This operation will serve as a useful model as we move to stabilize other cities and as we pursue stability in all our towns and villages, and the Iraqi army will be provided additional support to the police in the towns as they are needed.

The Iraqi army units will remain close, but their presence should not be obtrusive. This step will further enhance both the political and the economic opportunities for the citizens of Anbar. The greatest potential lies within the further development of political institutions and economic initiatives, the involvement of the Anbar sheikhs and tribal leaders, and the security services is well- documented and often discussed.

But another equally important step in the continued development of governance within Al Anbar is both the provincial and at the municipal levels, and in Ramadi, director generals at the provincial levels are now meeting on a weekly basis. The government center has long been a symbol of besieged government, is being refurbished. Years of damage from relentless assault is being repaired. The lines of governmental communication between Ramadi and Baghdad are well- established. Though the relationship between the provincial and central government is not perfect, it is strong and constantly improving. City and provincial leaders are working to provide the basic services for the Anbar citizens.

In al Qaim, Hit and -- the coalition forces have closed their civil military operation centers, and those duties are being executed by the city officials themselves. The Anbari tribal leaders represent a history and strength of western Iraq and want very strongly to play an integral part in the nation's future at the municipal and provincial levels and eventually at the national level. Their involvement in both the government and business will further serve to enhance these institutions. Premier sheikhs, long forced to live as expatriates for fear of assassination, are beginning to return to the province after years of living abroad. Their return marks a new

beginning in the security and stability of the region. They bring with them wise leadership and concern for their people.

They are also key businessmen and their return -- (audio break) -- growth and economic, employment, business opportunities.

So in closing, let me say this. I see cause for optimism, reason for hope, and an interest now to see what you have on your minds, as well as there are for questions. I'm glad to take any questions you may have.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you for the overview, General, and we will get started with Kristin.

Q General, this is Kristin Roberts with Reuters. I have two questions for you. First, when you spoke to us in March, you mentioned that there had been 400 attacks on troops in your area since the beginning of the year. I'm hoping you can update us with some specific statistics since that period and paint for us a trend line there.

Secondly, you've painted for us what is a striking optimistic picture and positive picture of the progress seen in Iraqi security forces in your area and that differs greatly from what we're hearing about, particularly the Iraqi police, in other areas of the country. Could you please draw that out a little bit and tell us what you think is the driving factor behind the progress and specifically the police in your area, measure for us the sectarian influence in the police in your area, and tell us how much of that is related to the progress seen in Anbar toward political reconciliation?

Thank you.

GEN. GASKIN: Okay. The first question. If you talk about incidents, I'll give you an example. From 13 through 19 July of 2006, there were 428 incidents in Anbar, and July 12th through the 18th of 2007 there were 98 incidents. The incidents are defined as small arms fire, indirect fire, RPGs attack, and IED finds and IED attacks. So there is quite a difference, as I talked about earlier, about the level of violence and the ability for us to find IEDs.

And a lot of this has to do with the second part of your question, is that the Iraqi police and what they bring to the stability and as far as lowering the level of violence.

The Iraqi police are indigenous. They come from the communities for which they are hired. They represent and they know who belongs in that community and they are like any typical policeman within a precinct, even in the United States. They bring comfort to the people. The people feel protected by them. And as you're well aware, al Qaeda was very brutal and very -- (audio break) -- murder and intimidation.

So within that population centers, and I talk about eight of them, from Fallujah, Ramadi, Hit, Haditha, al Qaim, Rutba, Baghdad, those areas all have Iraqi police that we train at the police academy. We give additional work for those who work and as far as detective work. But again, they all belong to the community for which they grew up. And we got these because the sheikhs and the tribal leaders realize that it's in their best interest if the really want to fight al Qaeda, and they all have demonstrated they do, that they provide the sons of Anbar to join the police force and to operate within the rule of law.

All of these policemen are vetted; all of them go to academy. Or if they're in the cases of the provincial security forces, we give them about 80 hours and we hope eventually to use them as a recruiting pool. To demonstrate that the Iraqi, as far as the tribal leadership, are very interested in stability in the area, they have given up and told their sons to come and join the police force. Frankly because of that, I have more volunteers, more recruits than we have the capacity to train.

Q General, this is Courtney Kube from NBC News.

We heard recently that the 13th MEU will be extended by 30 days in Anbar. Do you anticipate any other extensions in your area of operations? And do you feel that right now you have enough troops to maintain all this progress that you've been telling us about this morning?

GEN. GASKIN: Well, as you know, I won't talk about any additional extensions that we have. I do know that it's been announced publicly that we will have the 13th MEU extended to assist us.

The second part of your question, yes, I do. What the surge forces gave us the opportunity is now that we have the indigenous Iraqis in the form of policemen protecting their cities, I'm able to work with the Iraqi army and the coalition forces operating while al Qaeda's been pushed out too. Al Qaeda's been pushed out into the outerlying hinderland in the areas where they normally go to refit, train and build their stash sites and cache sites in order to attack into the cities. What the additional force gives us, especially in the case of the 13th MEU, is to go out into those areas and actually attack them, which is able to get them before they can reorganize and train.

One significant thing about this -- in a counterinsurgency, what you really want to do is separate, in this case, al Qaeda in Iraq from the people and from the populace. And once we're able to do that, which we have, they are more vulnerable out into the hinderland, out living in very rude conditions but unable to organize, come together in any organized bunch. And so that gives us an opportunity to eliminate them or either to bring about their own demise.

MR. WHITMAN: Is it a follow-up?

Q Yeah.

MR. WHITMAN: Okay.

Q General Gaskin, it's Jamie McIntyre from CNN.

I just wanted to follow up on the extension of the 13th MEU.

A lot of people in the U.S. are looking for -- to see progress in Iraq, allow -- to allow for the -- some of the surge troops in particular to come home. But you've had a lot of progress in your area, yet you've needed to hang on to these troops for another month. Explain a little bit about why you need them and what exactly the troops will be doing and why, if you're making so much progress, you're not able to reduce troops rather than extend them.

GEN. GASKIN: Well, I think you have to understand the essence of what I said about the control of the population centers. The ability to separate Iraq from the population centers didn't necessarily eliminate them, and what they have done historically is move out into these areas south of Fallujah, east of Fallujah and west of Ramadi, north of the Euphrates River, where we didn't have enough forces to go out and get them. So they were able to gather out there and use what we call ratlines to move and transition through the Euphrates Valley and on into Baghdad or into Ramadi or into the population centers.

What the surge forces have allowed us to do is go out and get them where they are. There is no place that they can hide. They can't come into the cities and use that as a cover for them to preach their ideology or intimidate the populace, because, you know, part of this insurgency is that we need to protect the populace. So by them moving out into the areas outside of the cities, we are able to eliminate them, sever them from any network they have that facilitates their movement and sever them from the cache sites or anyplace that they would use for a safe haven.

Just having those additional forces not only to go after al Qaeda -- but it gives me a chance to work with the ISF, or the Iraqi security forces, and training them and how to conduct counterinsurgency operations and how to in fact do operations, plan them with coalition forces and eventually to operate on their own.

Q (Off mike) -- answer that you need these troops to hold on to the gains that you've made?

GEN. GASKIN: I think one thing that we have seen historically -- and that's why I talk about this historic trend about the level of violence (as it's decreased ?) -- because historically we have gone and used -- and you know we've had some real major fights twice in Fallujah, once out in al Qaim, where we've actually gone in and eliminated al Qaeda, but because of the requirement to have forces other places, we have pulled out.

The key to this is having a persistent presence. We can have this persistent presence in a couple of ways.

One is that the coalition forces can remain. Or the ideal way is to have the Iraqi forces trained to provide that persistent presence. I believe that persistent presence means having the Iraqi police in the cities or population centers, and having the Iraqi army on the outskirts out doing the fighting and elimination of al Qaeda. However, they can also be a response to the Iraqi police if they're needed in the cities.

So what these forces have done is given us an umbrella, an opportunity to allow the capacity of the Iraqi forces to grow. It is one thing that I often say that we should never forget: Most armies train and go to war; what we are asking of the Iraqi forces is to train while they're at war. And they need the chance to grow in capacity. You cannot buy experience, they must live it, do it, fight it, learn it, be mentored and evaluated at their capabilities. And what the additional forces do is allow us to do that work partnering with them, having transition teams with them, and actually live with them and they with us. So that relationship gives them the confidence, it gives them the abilities to learn. And we get a chance to see just how capable they are. And that's why I'm absolutely optimistic about that because I've seen them in action.

MR. WHITMAN: Let's go to Al.

Q General, it's Al Pessin from Voice of America. With all the progress that you've enumerated in Anbar, and that we've heard also from other sources, about the tribal leaders getting on board, and so on, what do you foresee in the coming months? Could Anbar be the place where a drawdown of U.S. forces starts? And could that be before the end of the year, early next year? What's your expectation?

GEN. GASKIN: Well, you know, I get asked that question a lot about the -- how long it takes. First let me tell you about the tribal involvement. Everything in Iraq is tribal. We sometimes like to separate that, but it's tribal approval, it's tribal encouragement, and the tribal sheikhs are responsible for providing for their people.

The tribes were brutalized and intimidated by al Qaeda, and the tribes realize that the best thing that they can do for their own welfare, future and well-being is to help and assist with us and joining with us in eliminating al Qaeda. In turn, they have authorized, encouraged and actually sent the young Anbaris to join the military to rid itself and provide protection.

But most of the time now in recent weeks, in the last month or so, in discussing things with tribal leadership, they are talking past security. They are believing that we have eliminated al Qaeda, and they would like to be involved in the economic development and the governance of Anbar. This governance of Anbar is somewhat different. Historically, things have been top-down, and in a democracy, these requests, both at the city, the municipal level and provincial level is a work in progress.

They also realize that they made a mistake in the boycotting of the elections in 2005, because that governance at the provincial level is their connection with their national government. And I have seen, both from the Fallujah sheikhs, the Ramadi sheikhs and the western sheikhs as basically how they're divided, and

awakening from them as far as getting involved in the political process, getting involved in city councils, municipal councils, getting involved in the budgets that will bring the things that they need as far as services, as far as electricity, food, water, rubble removal in the case of Ramadi -- but that political involvement, that connection that the province will have with its national government, they realize, is the future. And they realize that that isn't about Sunni or Shi'a; that is about being Iraqi, and that's how they will address it as they prepare themselves to do that.

How long will this take? This is a very difficult question.

My personal opinion is since we started this military and this governance from the bottom due to de-Ba'athification and the disbanding of the army, it takes time to gain experience. I see that experience happening every day, but I don't see it happening overnight. I believe it's another couple of years in order to get them to do that, and that's not a political answer, that's a military answer and what it takes to train the young men and get the leadership that they need to be able to do what army does: protect its borders and provide for the sovereignty of its nation, to provide assistance to -- (audio break) -- .

So that -- although we are making progress, I will always caution and always say that you cannot buy nor can you fast forward experience. It has to be worked out, and I think there are making remarkable progress.

Q That you would need something like the level of coalition forces in Anbar for another two years to allow that process to play out?

GEN. GASKIN: I think that the process of playing out means that you will watch them evolve to the state that they are self-sufficient. I think if you are talking about how soon can the size of the force change, I think that's something that we're going to have to discuss, and I think we will see the draw down. But I'm thinking that as we train with the Iraqi forces, as we evaluate their progress, it will take time, especially in a small unit leaders area, for them to be able to do the things that we want them to do, that they were capable of doing in 2003.

I know that that is not an answer that we often hear about how long. I'm only giving you the thing of, if we don't develop the capacity for the Iraqi forces to defend themselves, maintain their borders, fight counterinsurgency, they will have a very serious problem that might require a lot more time to do. Counterinsurgency is a long-term proposition. The ability to fight counterinsurgency requires time and building-block approach for learning, and I think they are making remarkable steps.

But again, I say you can't buy experience and you can't fast force experience, and that's what they lack right now. They don't lack the hard, they don't lack the will. They've got that. They are getting what they need in equipment. They just need the time to train and learn how to employ at the level that we expect an army or a police force or a border force to do.

MR. WHITMAN: I know that we're right at the end of our time, but let me see if I can't sneak one more in.

Go ahead, Tom.

Q General, it's Tom Bowman with NPR. I was in Anbar back in February and there was a lot of hope with the alliance with the sheikhs. But there was a great deal of concern that the reconstruction money isn't coming out from Baghdad, which, of course, antagonized the sheikhs who refer to the central government as a bunch of Persians.

Talk about the money coming out from Baghdad. Is that happening? How much? And does the military, U. S. military, maybe have to fill in some of the gaps there with CERP funds?

GEN. GASKIN: Yes, I think we have seen remarkable progress with the Iraqis' ability to, first, understand the budgetary process, be able to get the rapid reconstruction funds, ability to get the governance working; as for

Governor Mamoun, for his provincial council to prioritize projects, to connect that with the ministries through the director-generals. That's a very complicated process. The government is a very difficult process.

But what we've seen in all of those major cities that we talked about is a city council, a municipal council, and we have the provincial council that has been meeting. As you know, the provincial council was meeting in Baghdad, and we could not find any of the provincial director-generals or the director-generals at the lower municipal levels. They are now back and they are now working. The process that they have to go through to request funds, establish a budget and prioritize is coming.

What I do, and what I've been given funds from to do as far as CERP funds is to jump-start a lot of these processes. I'll give you an example. In the city of Ramadi there is a ceramics factory, a very good factory capable of hiring over 500 people. That means that they needed electrical power. In order to get power off the national grid, it was sporadic. I have used CERP funds to put in a permanent generator, and hopefully by October that factory will be up and running and that will be able to hire some Iraqis. There are contracts that we are working.

Also there is the embedded provincial reconstruction teams that are inside each one of the subordinate units, the brigade and at the regimental combat team level, that have experts in microfinancing that have helped them in loans, in areas that are business practices, that will help them in agricultural practices, that will be a start of doing as far as vocational training. All of these things show past the violence, that's past the things that the sheikhs have been asking for, and they are seeing progress.

Governor Mamoun is a part of what we call a helicopter governor. We put him on a helicopter, and he visits all around his cities within Anbar.

Anbar is the size of the state of North Carolina and it is one-third of the land mass of Iraq. So it's a huge area and it requires that these governmental figures get about and therefore demonstrate to the people the services for which they require. And if you look at those services -- electricity, water, sewage, oil, agricultural support, small business loans and grants, state-owned enterprises such as in Ramadi with the ceramics factory, the phosphate factory in al Qaim, the cement factory in Fallujah -- those are indications of real progress, and that's well past the violence.

We're doing contractors, who now come out. There are NGOs. There are agencies, interagencies such as USAID that are working out in these cities and interacting with the Iraqis as they want to show real stability and development in the areas of which they live.

Q Are you saying that there are not sufficient funds coming from Baghdad because of bureaucratic delays and just delays with the government?

GEN. GASKIN: Yes, I think that they are. And that's what I talked about at -- the funds both from the 2006 budget as well as the 2007 budget that works with the governor. They are budgets that the director generals have right through the ministries. We're helping them understand budget requests and how to prioritize the major projects and how to get the government through the DGs and through the ministries to provide those things that are very important to the people, whether that be highways, hospitals, schools, rebuilding, getting funds from war-torn, war reparations.

These monies are flowing, and we have seen the governor have -- basically allocated over 90 percent of his 2007 budget as he's going around. That's what I meant by helicopter governance. Because he's going around and he's sit down with the mayors and he's taken with him the chairman of the provincial, provincial chair of the province. He's sit down with the chairmen of the municipal city councils, and they've all worked out what -- how do they connect as far as budgetary funds coming out of Baghdad.

Is the process bureaucratic? Absolutely. But the -- I've seen real progress in doing that, and I've seen real

results. And I gave you some examples within those cities that there's real money that's provided both through the governor, as by -- through the director generals up through the ministries and also provided by my CERP funds, that it will jump-start and help create employment and economic development in the cities.

MR. WHITMAN: General, thank you for spending a little extra time with us and giving us a clear picture of that. We have, though, reached well past our time, so let me just turn it back to you in case you had some closing remarks that you wanted to make before we bring it to an end.

GEN. GASKIN: Two points that I want to make about the progress in Al Anbar and why I think this is much, much more than just a passing fancy.

The Iraqis, the Anbaris are tired of the violence. They want to get back to some semblance of normalcy. They want to be able to work, provide for their families, have their kids go to school, have a society that has all the services that citizens expect. They expect a rule of law, they expect a police force and they expect an army that will protect them. They expect that these services will come down from their federal government, and that's new. That's why I don't think that we could ever go back, because they have seen what the possibilities are. And they have demonstrated that they support this by voting with their feet by sending their sons to join the police and the army, and they have participated in the governmental process. So I'm optimistic, and I think that we will see Anbar just get better.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, very good, General. Thank you. We appreciate your time this evening. We know that you're very busy, and -- but this is very valuable and helpful to us, and we hope that you'll consider doing it again very soon.

GEN. GASKIN: Thank you.

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