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Presenter: Commander, Multinational Corps-Iraq Army Lt. Gen. Ray Odierno

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DoD News Briefing with Lt. Gen. Odierno from the Pentagon Briefing Room, Arlington, Va.

Briefing Slides: <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/briefingslide.aspx?briefingslideid=317>

(Note: General Odierno appears via video teleconference from Iraq.)

BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Good morning, General Odierno. This is Bryan Whitman. Can you hear us all right?

GEN. ODIERNO: I can. I can hear you fine.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you again, General. And for anybody out there that might not know who this is, it is Lieutenant General Ray Odierno. He is the commanding general of Multinational Corps- Iraq. And this is his seventh time in this format, talking to us. And General, we really do appreciate you taking the time as often as you do to give us an operational update, particularly from your perspective as the Multinational Corps-Iraq. And today he is speaking to us from Camp Victory. And with that, General, let's get right into it and allow you to give us an update.

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, thank you very much. I do -- first, good morning, ladies and gentlemen. As always, it's a pleasure to be with you today.

I do want to first give you an update on where I see us at. I'll go back a little bit in history, then talk a little bit about what we will do in the future, and then I'll open it up for questions.

But first I would like to present -- just give you a quick operational update. It has been nearly a year since III Corps arrived in theater and took command of Multinational Corps-Iraq. When we arrived last year, Iraq was a nation immersed in a cycle of terror and sectarian killings. As the violence continued to build, a shift in strategy was deemed necessary to protect the Iraqi people from extremist influences threatening to tear apart at the seams.

Additional forces were subsequently surged into the country, allowing for a surge in simultaneous and sustained offensive operations, in partnership with the Iraqi security forces.

Furthermore, it allowed us to operate in areas that had not yet seen a sustained coalition presence and to retain our hard-fought gains.

Our ability to put pressure on al Qaeda and other extremists and deny them safe havens and sanctuaries increased significantly. This was done with the goal of protecting the population and in concert with political and economic initiatives to buy time and space for the government of Iraq.

Now, over four months later, since the full surge was implemented on the 15th of June, I believe we have achieved some momentum. Although it is not yet irreversible momentum, this positive momentum has set the conditions for political accommodation, economic development and basic services to progress, and we are beginning to see some signs of normalcy returning to the Iraqi people.

Slide, please.

The surge allowed us to increase our combat brigades from 15 to 20 between January and June, as well as the establishment of joint security stations and combat outposts where the Iraqi people live. Although some units have completed their 15-month deployments and rotated, we still have 20 brigade combat teams in theater, as shown on this chart.

As a result, we have continued and expanded our operations, especially Operation Phantom Thunder, a corps-level offensive operation that began on 15 June, consisting of synchronized simultaneous operations at the brigade and division level to clear al Qaeda and extremists in, near and around Baghdad. Partnered Iraqi security forces were and remain involved in all aspects of these operations to defeat irreconcilable groups and protect the population.

As cities and towns were liberated from the grip of terror, and with AQI forced to disperse and shift from contested urban areas to footholds in the peripheries and rural locations, we initiated Operation Phantom Strike in early August. Phantom Strike continues and consists of intelligence-driven targeted raids that have intensified the pursuit of extremists across all of Iraq. It is focused on hunting down remaining extremist leaders, denying enemy staging areas and countering their preferred lethal accelerant of choice, the IED and the truck bomb and car bombs.

Due to Phantom Thunder and Phantom Strike, we have been able to eliminate key safe havens, liberate portions of the population and hamper the enemy's ability to conduct coordinated attacks. We have experienced a consistent and steady trend of increased security over the last four months, and I believe continued aggressive operations by both Iraqi and coalition forces are the most effective way to extend our gains and continue to protect the citizens of Iraq.

Slide, please. As depicted on this slide, over the past four months, attacks and security incidents have continued to decline. This trend represents the longest continuous decline in attacks on record and illustrates how our operations have improved security since the surge was emplaced. Of note, this four-month decline includes Ramadan, a time during the previous three years when enemy activity has traditionally spiked.

Also total attack levels are back below their levels since the first Samarra mosque bombing in February 2006 -- an event that ignited a wave of sectarian violence. For this same week last year, Al Anbar province experiences 303 attacks. That number has been reduced to less than 30 this past week. Within Baghdad, the weekly reduction from October 2006 to October 2007 was down from 143 attacks in 2006 to under 100 attacks in 2007. Although we are encouraged by these positive trends, we are not satisfied with them and we'll continue to work to reduce them even further.

Next slide, please. This chart depicts IED explosions across all of Iraq. Improvised explosive devices

remain the enemy's preferred method for raining violence and terror upon Iraq. On this chart are depicted incidents of actual IED detonations inside of Iraq.

As you can see, IED explosions have been on a constant and steady downward trend for the past four months. They are also at their lowest level since October of 2004, when they were on an upward trend. One final note on this chart -- in 2004, 2005 and 2006, IED explosions peaked during Ramadan. However that effect was noticeably absent in 2007.

Next slide, please. As you can see on this chart, Iraqi civilian deaths have also declined in recent months. This has a great deal to do with the overall drop in violence but also has a lot to do with Iraqis coming together as a nation and not dividing along ethnic and sectarian lines. Sectarianism is still present but it has diminished, and we are seeing more evidence of the populace identifying themselves not as Sunni or Shi'a but as Iraqi. One of the key tasks we set for ourselves was to protect the population. And while we welcome the reduction in civilian casualties, it is still too high and still must be further decreased.

Next slide. This slide depicts coalition forces killed in action over the past 12 months, and nothing is more important to any of us than the lives of our courageous servicemen and servicewomen.

Even one coalition death is too many, but we are experiencing a five- month decline in combat deaths. While this is encouraging, we will not be satisfied until we drive this to zero. Our combat deaths in October were the lowest monthly total since February 2004 and the sixth lowest since the beginning of the war.

Earlier this year, as we went into enemy strongholds where we had not been before, and as we moved into neighborhoods among the population, this caused a rise in combat deaths, which peaked in May. However, as we eliminated these enemy safe havens and gained the trust of the Iraqi people, we were able to develop good relationships and garner information. With the civilian populace feeling more secure and cooperating with both Iraqi security forces and coalition forces, this has enabled to keep the enemy off balance and our casualty trends began to decline. It is a trend that we are absolutely committed to continuing. We will not ever forget those that have made the ultimate sacrifice, and our prayers remain with them and their families.

Next slide, please.

This depicts the number of coalition wounded in action. The number of wounded warriors has also fallen for four consecutive months and continues to have an encouraging trend. A large number of these wounded are non-seriously injured and return to duty, but some are seriously wounded and face long, arduous and painful recoveries.

When you speak with these magnificent warriors, one would expect them to ask, "What happened?" or "How did it happen?" However, what I most often hear from them is, "When can I go back and join my battle buddies?" Their motivation, optimism and spirit are true inspiration to all of us here, a shining example of their courage but also one that continues to drive us to be successful here in Iraq.

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As we assess the security gains made over the past four months, I attribute the progress to three prominent dynamics. First, the surge allowed us to eliminate extremist safe havens and sanctuaries, just as importantly to maintain our gains. Second, the ongoing quantitative and qualitative improvement of the Iraqi security forces are translating to ever-increasing tactical successes. Lastly, there's a clear rejection of al Qaeda and other extremists by large segments of the population, this coupled with the bottom-up awakening movement by both Sunni and Shi'a who want a chance to reconcile with the government of Iraq.

Let me briefly discuss the Iraqi security forces. Just this morning, we transferred operational control of the

7th Iraqi Army Division to the Iraqi Ground Forces Command. This is the last of the original ten Iraqi army divisions to fall under Iraqi control and marks another step towards self-reliance. Since the beginning of this year, the Iraqis have stood up operational commands in Baghdad, Samarra, Karbala, Diyala and Basra, which has progressively enhanced their command and control capabilities as well as security in these strategic locations.

I applaud these initiatives and their desire to assume more responsibility for Iraq's security. Not only have the capabilities of the Iraqi security forces grown, their competence and confidence continues to improve on a daily basis. Early this week, a group of influential Sunni and Shi'a sheikhs were kidnapped by extremists as they were returning to Diyala province from a reconciliation meeting with the government of Iraq. These extremists are bent on derailing ongoing reconciliation efforts because they see it as a threat to the criminality, extortion and corruption they use for their personal gain.

Acting on actual intelligence, Major General Riyadh of the 9th Iraqi Mechanized Division and the Rusafa Command in Baghdad led a late-night raid that freed the sheikhs and eliminated several extremists responsible for the kidnappings. Such a complex operation and quick reaction would have hardly been thinkable a year ago. While not on the same scale, I can relate daily examples of bravery and professionalism all across the Iraqi security forces. The point to remember is that the Iraqi security forces are building the trust and confidence of the Iraqi people and are dedicated to defending their safety as well as their country.

There are still issues to overcome, like equipping logistics and leader shortages, but they are being addressed by the Iraqi security force leadership. There is also evidence of some Iraqi security force units with sectarian undercurrents. We are working with the Iraqi leadership to remove those individuals who are not interested in doing what's best for Iraq, but only themselves or certain militias.

Despite these challenges, I am encouraged by the government of Iraq and Iraqi security force leadership successes and their responses in developing solutions, and I believe the Iraqi security forces are making continuous tangible improvements.

I would also like to touch on the significant impact of local engagement and reconciliation efforts are having on security. I can cite numerous statistics that show that security is improving. However, the real indicator of improved security for me is how Iraqi people feel, and whenever I travel around Iraq on a daily basis, Iraqis tell me how much safer they feel in their neighborhoods. This perception is real and has been greatly enhanced by volunteers coming forward to work with us and by the general public giving us information about terrorists and criminals.

Concerned local citizens across Iraq are taking back their communities. They are providing valuable information to the coalition and Iraqi security forces seizing caches and even detaining extremists to defend their homes. Due largely to tips from concerned local citizens, the amount of illegal arms, ammunition and explosives recovered from caches just over the past 15 days is staggering: over 37,000 pounds of explosives, a thousand gallons of nitric acid used to make homemade explosives, over 2,000 artillery rounds and over 500 rockets, 136 assembled explosively formed penetrator IEDs, along with 359 copper discs used to make more EFPs, and hundreds of rifles, grenades, anti-tank weapons and suicide vests.

A movement that began largely in Sunni areas is also beginning to become more prevalent in predominantly Shi'a areas as well. Bound together by a desire for peace and prosperity, the Iraqi people are overcoming differences to provide a better future for their children. There are now over 60,000 Iraqis who are volunteering to provide security in their neighborhoods. The Iraqi national reconciliation committee is working closely with the tribes, as well as the Ministries of Interior and Defense to absorb some of these volunteers into the Iraqi security forces.

They're also looking to develop a program to employ these volunteers to work on the rebuilding of Iraq, the paving of roads, the reconstructions of schools and hospitals and the maintenance of basic services. We still

have much work to do in this area, but the planning has begun. This is having an effect not only on the levels of violence, but also on relations between members of different sects, between the Iraqi people as well as the government, and between Iraqis and the coalition.

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Now let me talk a little bit about the way ahead. What we have learned is that continued protection of the population is essential to progress. It is also imperative that we continue training and advising the Iraqi security forces. As ISF capabilities increase and as conditions allow, we will slowly begin to transition coalition forces to tactical overwatch in 2008. It will be extremely deliberate and it will be done at different rates in different locations. This is an incremental approach with overlapping phases in terms of time and space.

Simultaneously we'll continue to hunt down those not interested in reconciling with the government of Iraq, targeting AQI and Shi'a criminals with our Iraqi security force partners. We will continue to work closely with the government of Iraq and we will emphasize and synchronize essential services, economic growth and jobs creation.

There must also be a focus on building capacity at the local provincial levels and ensuring their linkages up through the central government. The Iraqi people rightfully expect a government that cares about them and their families, and ultimately this is the responsibility of the government of Iraq and the Iraqi security forces.

Although we are witnessing positive trends, we are not yet at the level that we can be satisfied with. And while we have some momentum, it is not yet irreversible and we cannot afford to regress and give up our gains. Over the last year, I've noticed a profound shift. It is my sense that the people of Iraq are tired of discord, tired of external interference and tired of people pursuing selfish interests at the expense of the common good.

Across Iraq, people are volunteering to protect their own communities, working alongside Iraqi and coalition security forces, and they are rejecting extremist and malign foreign influence. New leaders are emerging in the provinces, and Iraqis are taking greater responsibility for their own lives.

I have great admiration for the way Iraqis cope with adversity, for their spirit and for their optimism.

I am encouraged by what I see. I have confidence in the Iraqi people to make the right choices. I have confidence that the Iraqi people continue to stand against terror. I also know that the terrorists in Iraq today will try again to influence the future of Iraq, but we will continue to work every day with the Iraqi people to hope that this does not happen.

With that, I'll now -- I'll be now happy to take your questions.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thanks for that overview, general. And we do have several questions here. So let's get started. Go ahead, Pauline.

Q Sir, it's Pauline Jelinek of the Associated Press. Can you give us some idea, three months after Phantom Strike, how you view the state of the al Qaeda organization in Iraq -- you know, numbers or any changes you've seen in the way that they operate or their ability to operate, just more detail.

GEN. ODIERNO: Sure. I would just say that it's clear that they no longer have significant sanctuaries and logistics capabilities to support numerous simultaneous attacks against large portions of the population.

However, they still maintain some capability to conduct vicious attacks across parts of Iraq against the civilians. The leadership has been -- top levels of the leadership have been taken, either killed or captured. Some of them have been replaced, but those who replace them are not as good as those who were there before. And

we continue to see a slow degradation in al Qaeda's capability here in Iraq.

Q (Off mike) -- attribute that to your efforts, the Phantom Strike? And I think you mentioned the population rejecting them. Are those the main -- two main factors?

GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah, I would say yes, absolutely. There's obviously our offensive operations to strike against these extremist groups, but the real change has been that the populace rejects al Qaeda. That makes it more difficult for them to -- they no longer have the passive support of the community. They've been rejected by their actions, and the people do not want to support them. In fact, what we find for the most part is that people will do anything to keep them out of their area, and they want to work closely with us to ensure that remains.

MR. WHITMAN: Courtney, go ahead.

Q Hi, general. This is Courtney Kube from NBC News. You mentioned among the causes of the progress that you're seeing is the surge, that it's allowed you to maintain the gains. Are you all concerned that as it starts to draw down next month, you'll lose some of those gains and perhaps cause you not to be able to move into tactical overwatch position in '08?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, first off, as we went through the -- this, my recommendation to General Petraeus was in fact to reduce from 20 to 15 brigades over the next several months, and I did that because I believe that we will be able to continue to move forward with the progress.

Based on the progress we have made against the enemy, based on the continued improvement of the Iraqi security forces, and continued on the support of the population we are now receiving, I feel that we will be able to continue to hold on to the gains that we have. Again the drawdown will be deliberate and slow over the next several months, which allows us to continue to conduct operations as we move forward. And I feel confident that we'll be able to maintain the gains that we've sustained so far.

(Cross talk.)

Q General, it's Al Pessin from Voice of America.

What about the political side? Have the Iraqi politicians done enough to take advantage of the time and space that the surge provided so that again as the surge draws down, you maintain that aspect of the stability?

GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah, what we've seen is, I think, they still need to do more. They still obviously have some legislation they have to pass. But frankly to me, the most important thing is to really become involved in providing the basic services to the Iraqi people which, in my mind, would make a huge difference. Prime Minister Maliki has come out here and discussed how he believes that the next year will be the year of providing services to the people, so the words are right. I challenge them now to really action on those words.

The thing that is encouraged to me also is what we're seeing at the local level. We are seeing much more capability at local leadership levels, at town levels, at community levels, at the provincial level, and their ability now to coordinate with the central government and to begin to help and provide services to the people of Iraq. So that is a bit encouraging.

But to answer your question, I think there's still much more work they have to do. We are working with them, for them to move forward with this. Again they are planning and they are saying the right things, and that's good. We now need to see a bit of action on the ground.

Q Are you referring -- when you say you need to see, are you referring in part to the integration of the security forces? As you know, General Mixon talked about foot-dragging last week.

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, yeah, I mean, I have a little different take than General Mixon does. And frankly I understand why he said that, because they're frustrated. But I would just say, about 45 days ago, Prime Minister Maliki went up there and said, we are going to increase the number of police in Anbar by 6,000. And that's a great thing, that they are now going to budget for that.

So what happened is we went on a recruiting campaign. We've identified these. They vetted them at the local level and they have submitted them up higher.

I think it's reasonable to assume that the government wants to do some vetting of these people themselves, to make sure that they are appropriate to go into the Iraqi security forces. We are involved in that process with them. Would I like to see it move ahead faster? Absolutely, I would absolutely like to see it move ahead faster, and we are working with them to make sure they are more responsive to the -- for provinces in this.

But we also have to allow them to develop their process, because this is a long-term solution. We hope this to be a long-term solution, and we want to get the right people into the police force -- the people that the government is comfortable with. I would say we obviously watch to make sure there are no sectarian biases as we go through the hiring, and that's why they've allowed us to be involved in the process. And we watch that very closely and so far, I think, I'm fairly confident that it will be okay.

Again it is not as fast as we would like it, but a process is in place. There was no process two months ago to do this. We now have a process in place, and there's a reconciliation council that these names are submitted through, that they now review it. We are part of that reconciliation council with them. It is then submitted to the MOI, and we now -- we work through the MOI. Again would we like to see the bureaucracy work faster? Absolutely. We will continue to work with them to improve that so we can get these people hired as quickly as possible, because that is the key to the future security inside of Iraq.

MR. WHITMAN: All right, let's go to Jim, and then we'll come back to Peter.

Q General, this is Jim Mannion from Agence France-Presse.

I was wondering, to what extent does the transition to Iraqi security control hinge on bringing the, you know, these local volunteers and so on into the security forces, and whether delays in that is something that could wind up delaying the drawdown of U.S. forces.

GEN. ODIERNO: First off, it's very dependent on areas. There are some areas where today we have enough security forces. We have police that are hired, that have been trained. We have Iraqi army forces there that have been trained. And so I believe they will be able to -- we will be able to transition in those areas.

There are other areas where we don't have enough. In fact, there are some areas where two months ago, we didn't have any police. And that's where we have these concerned local citizens.

So in those areas we will be slower to transition out U.S. forces, and we have put that inside of our plan.

So those will be the last places that we remove U.S. forces from, and those are the areas that are -- tend to be the mixed areas and also the areas that might have been controlled by al Qaeda, so there wasn't any police forces there -- or by other extremists. So that's part of our plan. We'll keep coalition forces there for a longer period of time. So I think that gives us the time to develop these concerned local citizens, these specific areas, and give us more time to get them ready to assume control within these areas.

Q General, Peter Spiegel from the Los Angeles Times. I wanted to go back to your opening comments

about the four-month decline in violence and talk about the reasons behind that. The Sunni community in Anbar has been very well documented, but I think less widely understood is decline in violence among the Shi'a militia, and there's a couple of reasons that have been offered at least to me for the reasons behind that. One is this agreement between Ahmadinejad and Prime Minister Maliki. I wonder if you've seen any evidence that that has lessened Iranian support for some of these militias. There's also been some suggestion that, frankly, some of these neighborhoods have already been ethnically cleansed, so there's no more Shi'a butting Sunnis. So that's a reason for the decline.

I wonder if you can just talk specifically about why you think the Shi'a violence has declined.

GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah, first, I would just say that there's several reasons there has been some decline. I think it's across several different lines, and you mentioned some of them.

One is, first, in the beginning of the year, with the government of Iraq, we went after significantly the leaders of the special groups, criminals, that were really behind much of the violence, and we were able to take many of these leaders off the streets. And I think that had an impact on these groups. I think that made them reconsider. I also believe that made them decide that they have to do some reorganization and rethink really what they want for Iraq, and I think they're going through that now.

There's been a cease-fire announced by Sadr. We applaud that. But we have seen some indications in some areas where in fact this has been held to, and that's encouraging. That's also enabled us to open some talks with people from the movement of Sadr, and that's encouraging. We have not had that before. We'll see where that goes. We go through with all of these things very slowly, and we'll continue to work that deliberately.

In terms of Iran, it's hard to tell whether that has slowed down or not. As I said earlier, we found a huge EFP cache just a week ago, one of the largest we've ever found here. Now our initial assessment is that might be around January time frame, maybe before this agreement, so it's unclear yet to me whether they have slowed down bringing in weapons and supporting the insurgency or not. I'll still wait and see. But we still have found some caches. Lately we've found three or four significant rocket caches as well as rocket launchers that were fairly new. Again, but we don't know when those came into the country exactly, so we'll wait and see and determine if in fact that's had an effect.

I will say that although we still have, in my mind, way too many explosively formed projectiles, in the last three months that has been on a downward trend, but it's still at a very -- it's still at a high level. It was around 53 this past month.

Q Could I just ask -- that last point about the ethnic cleansing, you know, that there's some argument that this has become Bosnia and -- that the violence is going down because finally the Serbs and the Muslims are in different places. Do any of your data show that Sunni and Shi'a are now in their own little enclaves and, therefore, not killing each other?

GEN. ODIERNO: Yes. No, I mean there's been shifts. Listen, there's been shifts in the population in Baghdad. That happened, and I would argue that's happened over the last couple years. But I would tell you I've not seen any significant shifts that have changed it from January, when we got here, to now. There might have been some minor shifts, but very little.

What we are seeing, though, is we are starting to see some cooperation between these groups. There's still a couple areas that I'm concerned about, and one is Suniyah, which is in West Rashid. And there's been some articles written about that, and that's one area where there is still Sunni-Shi'a tension, and I think it's mainly because -- it's not because of Sunni and Shi'a that live there, it's because of al Qaeda and Shi'a extremist special groups who are fighting in these areas which is causing this conflict. And so we are obviously spending some significant time in these areas.

There's an area called Jihad, which is in West Rashid, which is a mixed area. Last week, or two weeks ago now, they just signed a reconciliation agreement. Violence has dropped 95 percent in this area. We have Sunni and Shi'a working together to continue this improvement in violence. We have now had the ministers went down there last week. They are now working to provide them more services. So it's kind of like you've made yourself secure, you're working together with the local government, with the Iraqi security forces, with the coalition; we are now going to help you with services, and you'll be the first to helping improve the services. So that's now started.

So those are the kind of signs we're seeing that are not quite in line with what you've suggested.

Now, that said, there are still -- there are some areas that used to be mixed that aren't anymore, but again, I would argue that happened a while ago. And what we don't want to do right now is start -- it's too early to talk about a large resettlement.

We -- what we will do is bring in displaced persons back to empty houses, and the Iraqis are working very hard on a way to do this.

But in the other areas, that will have to wait. And that will have to be a political solution over time.

But again, it's not -- it has not been significant over the last 10, 11 months, in my eyes.

MR. WHITMAN: Let's go all the --

Q Follow --

MR. WHITMAN: Wanted to follow up, huh? Go ahead, and then we'll go back to Barbara.

Q General, Bill McMichael, Military Times newspapers. You said 53 EFPs in the last month. Is that 53 found that had not been detonated or 53 that had been detonated?

And you said in the last three months there's been a noticeable decline in EFPs. Is that, again, in detonated EFPs or found caches of EFPs?

GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah, when I quote a number, that's both those that exploded and those that were found. Hold on a second. I'll give you the exact numbers here. (Pause.)

In October there was 53 EFPs, 30 explosions and 23 that were found before they were exploded. In September there was 52, and in August there were 78, and in July there was 99. July was the apex of EFP.

So we've seen a steady decline. September was about the same as October. So I'm still -- I'm not sure what that means, because that goes back -- that's still above levels that we had in January, February and March. So there's still been an increase. So I'm still watching that extremely closely. And again, we've found some large caches of EFPs here in the last few days, and so we continue to watch that extremely close.

Q But general, you're saying it's difficult to determine what the current in-flow is of EFPs into the country or EFP parts into the country?

GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah, I think I -- the issue is -- what we don't know is how many of them -- how many -- how long they've been here. So they might have slowed the rate of sending EFPs in. I just can't tell you right now, because it's too soon. I think in a couple more months we'll be able to give you a better idea of that.

MR. WHITMAN: Barbara, go ahead, and then we'll come back to Andrew.

Q General Odierno, Barbara Starr from CNN. I'm very struck by this sort of very limited and much -- sort of softer rhetoric about the Maliki government. For months and months we have been hearing both military commanders, such as yourself, and the Bush administration very publicly, very heavily criticize the Maliki government, pressing for legislation, pressing for reconciliation. That seems to all just have gone away now. I'm wondering if there is a fundamental shift in U.S. strategy to basically forego the Maliki government at this point and simply focus more on communities around the country and just circumvent them.

And my second question is just could you define what you mean by tactical overwatch, so I'm very clear on that?

GEN. ODIERNO: Sure. First off, I would just say I don't know of a change in strategy. I wouldn't say there's a change.

What we have seen, though, is in August they came together, the group of four plus one -- they came together. They made a statement. Since they've done that, they have, I think, continued to try to work towards those goals. We see that. There are attempts for them to do reconciliation. They've made some very good steps forward, in my mind, honest steps, and steps that we've seen to be genuine.

Now, they're not working the way we want them to yet, but they seem to be genuine steps. So I think that's important to us; that they are in fact, we think, potentially reaching out to potentially reconcile.

Now, I also believe that the bottom-up approach that we've done does put a little pressure on them to perform. And I think that's -- that's healthy, in my mind. I think that's healthy in any government, to get input from the bottom. And so I think it's a combination of both of those things.

They do realize that they need to work on services, and that's important, and they've stated that. So I think that's a positive.

They have made some good decisions in establishing some operational commands that I mentioned, in moving some Iraqi security forces around -- for example, moving some forces down to Basra in order to help that situation, which has quieted down very well down in Basra. So there's been some encouraging signs. And so I think it's all those things. I doesn't mean that we don't need more out of them, we don't think they can do better. But what we do believe is, they are making some progress.

In terms of tactical overwatch, tactical overwatch -- what that really means is, we'll turn areas of Iraq over to Iraq. In fact, I would -- let me give you the example of Mosul today. Mosul has been turned over to the Iraqi army and the Iraqi police. We have coalition force battalion that operates outside of Mosul. They still coordinate. They still advise. They still provide support to Iraqi security forces, but the Iraqis plan and lead the operations inside of Mosul. When they ask us to, we will support them. If they get in trouble, we will support them.

So we're still there to support them, but they are clearly in charge, they are running the day-to-day operations, and we are there to support. We will also during that time continue to target al Qaeda and other extremists, from our position. So that's kind of how I would I explain tactical overwatch.

Q General Odierno, can I just clarify that? In the year 2008, to what extent will U.S. forces basically be in a different mission? In other words, how much simply tactical overwatch, how much just going after al Qaeda and other insurgent groups?

And can you really separate the two missions?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, first, it's about -- I can. The first part is about local security. You know, first you've got to provide -- protect the population and provide security to the local people. So you have a local security issue, which is done by the police and in some cases now, until the police become strong enough, done by the army. And then there is a intelligence-driven targeting operation that goes against extreme elements that would be done in coordination with Iraqi security forces. So I do see that you can separate those, but they will be linked in some cases, but for the most part you can separate those.

You know, the other day when I was doing a press conference over here somebody asked me this question, and I'm not going to put a percentage on it. I did then, I'm not going to now. The bottom line is I think we will -- you will see us begin to move to tactical overwatch, but we are again in some places already, as I just said, like in Mosul; we are in Basra; we are with Karbala; we are in Najaf; we are in Diwaniyah; we are -- I think you'll see us start to move to tactical overwatch in Anbar province over the next several months. I think we'll move to tactical overwatch in some neighborhoods in Baghdad over the next several months, and that will progress through 2008, but it's conditions-based, it's not time-based.

Going down to 15 brigades was an assessment done by us that believes these are the places we can go to tactical overwatch in the next six months, and those are the areas I just described to you. After that, it'll be based on conditions, and then based on those conditions, we will determine whether we can reduce our forces further than that. And then we can continue to give more responsibility to the Iraqi security forces. As I look at it today, I think we will be able to do that, but we'll have to wait and see.

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead, Jeff.

Q Jeff Schogol, Stars and Stripes. You were talking about the decline in the number of coalition casualties, both killed and wounded, in action. Can you talk about what do you need to sustain this trend, and what could possibly threaten this trend?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, again, you know, we never know what might happen to increase the trend, but I think -- the bottom is it's continuing to pressure the extremists, whether it be Iranian extremists or al Qaeda. If we continue to pressure them and not allow them -- chase them all around the country, don't allow them to develop logistics capabilities, don't allow them to develop safe havens and sanctuaries, continue to take down their leadership, I believe what we're going to see is the Iraqis will continue down the road of reconciliation.

If they continue down that road of reconciliation, that will then deny these groups many parts of Iraq. Once we get to that part, I think we'll get to irreversible momentum. We are not there yet, but we are driving in that direction. And so I think that's what we are trying to get to, and that will enable us to maintain a low rate of casualties.

Again, you know, from day to day, we don't know. In fact, I'll be honest with you. The last two days of October were tough days, and those are included in my numbers, by the way. We had extremely low casualties, and yesterday and the day before, we lost three soldiers each. And so you just don't know. They were single -- one or two, three events that occurred. So you don't ever know about casualties.

But what I'm confident about is the progress we're making, I think, is real. And I think that will translate in several different ways, as long as we continue to conduct the operations that we are.

Q And as a quick follow-up, can we get a copy of the slides that you showed today?

MR. WHITMAN: (Off mike.)

GEN. ODIERNO: Yes.

MR. WHITMAN: (Off mike) – We'll take care of that here; your folks had sent them to us, and we'll do that. Go ahead, Andrew.

Q General, it's Andrew Gray from Reuters here. Can you say how much further you think you can drive down the violence through military operations or how much at this stage is it now due -- is it now going to be done through political development, the basic services, you've talked about? How much further can combat operations really play a role at this point?

GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah, I think you -- that's a great point, by the way. And I agree with your statement. The issue is, I think, that there are some people here who will not reconcile. And those are the ones we'll have to continue to conduct military operations against. But if we can provide services on a consistent basis, that will bring about much more reduction in violence than military operations -- and so I agree with that -- as well as continued movement towards reconciliation. So I think those are the keys. I think those could be the tipping point if we can get those things moving.

There will still be those here -- unfortunately, you still have al Qaeda here. You still have some Shi'a extremists who are working against the government and working against peace that we'll have to continue to target. But that would significantly reduce the military -- the need for military operations. And again, if that happens, and we start to see more reconciliation, better services and the level of violence comes down, Iraqi security forces are continuing to improve, that would then allow us to continue to reduce our structure over here. And that's what -- the assessment that we will continue to do over the next several months.

MR. WHITMAN: Jim and then to Tony.

Q Sir, on that last point -- this is Jim Garamone from American Forces Press Service. On that last point, how are you doing on providing services? There've been four months in and around Baghdad now. How, for example -- how much electricity, for example, does the city of Baghdad get?

GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah. What I would say is -- I would say that we have improved a couple things. The number -- the output per day, megawattage, is going up. Demand is also going up, which is a sign of security, by the way. So what I would say is we haven't seen much difference. But the megawatts are going up. The refineries are producing more oil now. More oil is being exported than it was at the beginning of the year. That's important. Those are important signs. We are seeing improvements in water. We had a couple places last week in Taji, it's the first time that they were able to water their fields in four years.

And so we are seeing slow progress along those lines.

But this infrastructure is in bad shape and it's going to take time for it to be completely fixed, and it's going to take action by the government of Iraq as well as us. And we are getting there. There are plans in place. There are projects. It is going to take time. But the other thing that's encouraging is that projects are being completed now. The violence against contractors is not as great, so that's also helping.

So again, we still have a long ways to go in terms of providing services, but what the Iraqi people want to see is people out there trying to get it done, and they're starting to see that and I think that's important.

Q Sir, hi. Tony Capaccio with Bloomberg News. There is a debate in Washington going on right now about war funding and whether Congress will or will not put in the -- approve the '08 war supplemental. It's very abstract from Washington, but from the top commander's level in the field, what impact would a delay in the funding -- approving the war funding for '08 have on your operations, if any?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, I mean, we have a continuing resolution, so as long as we have the continuing

resolution, we are able to fund our operations at the same rate that we funded them last year. So, so far it has not affected us.

And the rest of that question I think I'll leave to the Pentagon because there might be some implications on OSD and the Army, but I would rather have them comment on those.

Q A quickie, then. What potential does a Turkish incursion into northern Iraq have on destabilizing the country and undercutting a lot of the momentum that you've laid out rather detailed today?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, again, clearly it's not just Turkish incursion but, of course, obviously the PKK and the Turkish hostages. All of that is a concern to all of us. And we are, obviously, every day in intense discussion with our Iraqi partners on the situation in northern Iraq. We know that EUCOM is closely working with our NATO ally Turkey on this situation and sharing information. And all parties, we believe, want a peaceful resolution.

We're going to continue to work towards this because of the importance, not only to our partner Turkey but also to our Iraqi partner.

We all are strongly encouraging the PKK to release their Turkish hostages and abide by the cease-fire that they announced. Again this is important for the government of Iraq and this is also important for the government of Turkey. And we're working with them both to try to solve this problem.

Q (Off mike.) Do the military operations up there pose a threat in terms of destabilizing either -- if not the North, great parts of the country, and undercutting the momentum you've laid out?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, again, I'm not going to look into a crystal ball here. There's a lot of things that could happen to destabilize things. What we're trying to do is defuse the situation, work with all the parties involved, and we will continue to do that. And it's a very -- and we -- a full court press, again, working with our Iraqi partners. And I know that European Command has a full court press working with Turkey, and we will continue to do that.

Q Follow-ups on this?

MR. WHITMAN: Okay, AI, go ahead.

Q General, it's AI Pessin again.

On that point, does your full court press include military action of any sort? Or is it just in these intense discussions you mentioned?

GEN. ODIERNO: And again we are now -- we were just discussing -- we will continue to have discussions with Iraq and Turkey. And again I'm not going to comment on anything we might do in the future. But I would just say, we're trying to -- this should be solved diplomatically. We all know that and we're all pushing for a diplomatic solutions to this problem.

MR. WHITMAN: Barbara, go ahead.

Q General Odierno, what's your position at this point on a new structure for overseeing security contractors in Iraq? Do you want the U.S. military to have complete control in coordination? What elements of any structure are you willing to share with the State Department?

GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah, I'm surprised it took somebody this long to ask me this question.

What -- first of all, I had a chance to talk with both the State Department and the Defense Department teams that were sent out here. And I gave them my input which is, I think there needs to be extremely close coordination.

I think we need to make sure that their operations are coordinated, complete with us, are in line with the operations we're doing, and I think we're working towards that goal. And we provided that feedback. We've made some changes in working with the contract security forces now. We're waiting now for guidance from OSD, through CENTCOM, because there's been discussions in Washington. I am not privy to those. I know they have been working it, and we are waiting for that guidance.

And my guess is, we will have coordination better -- we will work with better coordination. We'll have a little bit more oversight than we probably did in the past. I think it's always important, when you have people working, security operations, it's important for the person in charge of the battlespace, which is the corps, to understand what they are doing, what their limits are and to be able to talk with them about what they're doing, why they're doing it. I think that's extremely important, and I think that's the solution that we'll come to at the end here.

Q Are you talking about MNF-I or your organization having veto power over contractor operations? What would the State Department -- what about the accountability issue? What would the State Department be allowed to do and oversee outside of the military? And fundamentally, again, if this is a problem, why has it taken so many years, Blackwater aside, to identify it and do something about it?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, again, I would just say that -- I would say first that I think I have to wait for what I get from the talks that have been going on between the State Department and Defense Department before I can comment on that. You know, they're working that out; we have provided them our input, and we're waiting to see. And there's several ways to be -- there's several successful ways we can do this.

Why has it taken so long? First off, you know, the number of security contractors has increased significantly. This has not been -- there was not a lot of security contractors here in 2003. There was not so many here in 2004. They've slowly began to increase over time. And the bottom line is, you know, we thought we were coordinating probably better than we were, and so we've realized we have a problem. And so it's important that we work with the State Department to fix this problem, and I think that's now what we're doing.

MR. WHITMAN: Let's go ahead and finish up contractors.

Go ahead, Peter.

Q Does the secretary of Defense -- this is Peter Spiegel again with the LA Times. As the secretary of Defense said -- I think it was last week or the week before -- that in many respects the contractors, their mission is antithetical to the mission of coalition forces, in that their use of violence is sometimes -- doesn't take into account the securing the population mission which you have.

Do you agree with that assessment? And can you put more meat on that bone? How much is it a problem that security contractors are going out there without that mission in mind?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, I think that's one of the things we have to talk about, because what I would say is obviously their mission is very different. Their mission is to protect that individual that they are securing. And that might not be in line, always, with our mission. That's why we have to have -- we have to have discussions and we have to talk about it. We have to be under -- we have to be working and coordinating their actions, because it is important -- it is important, especially when, you know, we're working very hard to gain the trust of the population. We've made some progress.

And whether it really happened or it's perceived, it becomes a problem. And I'm not judging what happened. What I'm telling you, whether it's perceived it happened or whether it really happened, it doesn't matter. It does have an effect on the entire mission. So that should be taken into consideration, obviously, and I think that's what we're trying to work our way through right now.

Q May I follow up? Obviously, we're not -- there is one incident that is out there, but as we see it in Washington sometimes, an incident like that happens, there's a whole lot of angry Iraqis. And maybe that's just because of what we see on television. I guess if I can ask from you, how significant is an incident like that -- impact your mission? Is it a minor annoyance, or is what we're getting on television accurate and that it's a big deal and a lot of Iraqis are getting very angry?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, yeah, we have not -- let me put it this way. I think the Iraqis are -- first off, their perception of innocent civilians being killed, they have anger with that. What I would tell you, though, is we have not seen it taken out on coalition forces. We continue to cooperate across the board in that very place where that happened. We are coordinating -- we continue to coordinate, like we were before, all through Iraq.

But, you know, it is something that we have to understand and consider when we conduct operations because it has raised the attention on civilian casualties, and so it's important. It's important to Iraqis. We just need to understand that. And we have, and we continue to work with them.

So I think the relationship, thankfully, has not been affected, and I think it's because of the strong ties that have been built over the last several months. But we can't continue to have things like that happen or it will ultimately have an impact on our relations with the Iraqi people.

MR. WHITMAN: We have time for one or two more. (Off mike.)

Q General, it's Louie Martinez of ABC News. If your command is responsible and in the long term for the security contractors from other agencies, how much of a workload is that going to impact on you? And will this all go through -- be funneled through the tactical operations center, or is it going to go down to the brigade level, to the company level?

Can you tell us who -- which of these military commanders is actually going to have responsibilities for this?

And if I could just follow up on your earlier comments about the ethnic cleansing that we've heard about, you mentioned, in some of the neighborhoods that were mixed in the past and that over time have become more homogenous. Is that something in your opinion that needs to happen in the short term, something that needs to be reintegrated, in other words? Or is this just the new Baghdad that we're seeing, something that is just going to be a permanent thing?

GEN. ODIERNO: I would say on the first question, first, we already have all the mechanisms in place to coordinate this. You know, for example, you know, I have a joint operation center that works for the corps that is responsible for all the battlespace in Iraq. And we have direct links to the divisions, who have direct links to the brigade, and we can do this. We have a system set up where we can simultaneously pass information, and very quickly.

And so, you know, how it will happen is they will coordinate with us, as they move through the battlespace, where their missions are going to be, what are they going to do. So we know where they are and understand what their mission is, and we will quickly coordinate down throughout the chain of command. We do that every day with our formations because we have formations that traverse several different brigade and battalion battlespaces within a couple hours, and so we routinely do this anyhow.

And so we will just put this in part of the system we already have in place. Obviously we'll put a little more attention on it if it happens to be some high-level people that are going in there. But it also in my mind is an advantage, because it helps us. We can help out, if they get into a problem, much quicker, and that's why it's important to have this coordination.

In terms of the neighborhoods, again, I said that I think over a period of time, it has happened. I don't think it's as significant as some people have made it, but it has happened. I will say, what my goal has been from the beginning is, let's stop it. And when we saw it in January and February increasing, we wanted to stop where it was, bring security to the population. We have done that.

I think again there's people that have left, that we want to move people back into the houses that are left. They are starting to do that slowly. In terms of moving people around, I think that's longer-term, and I think that's something that has to be solved by policy and has to be solved by judges adjudicating who lives where. So I think that is more of a longer-term solution. And I think as we get further and further away from conflict, it'll be easier to resolve that problem.

MR. WHITMAN: General, as usual, this hour has been a great discussion and very valuable to us back here. But we are at the end of our time, and I wanted to give you the last opportunity here, in case there's something that we brought up, or comments that you'd like to make here at the end.

GEN. ODIERNO: Sir, thank you very much. I think I have one other slide I'd like you to put up, please.

And I'd just -- kind of give you a quick conclusion here, that the progress we've made thus far is a direct result of the tireless efforts and extraordinary tenacity of the men and women executing the mission. They are at once forceful and compassionate, aggressively taking the fight to the enemies and fostering positive relationships with good citizens of Iraq while deftly negotiating the treacherous operational environment of a counterinsurgency fight. As the days go by, my admiration for these remarkable individuals continues to grow.

This past Sunday, I was fortunate enough to take part in a ceremony honoring three more individuals who added to the long list of heroic and exceptional men and women I've encountered this year. Just prior to their redeployment, I was given the honor of presenting three young company-level commanders the award of the Silver Star, one of our military's highest honors for heroism. Captains Blake Kyle, Daniel Herd and Shane Finn served in the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division, where they patrolled what was once known as one of Iraq's most dangerous regions in the southern Baghdad belts. During Operations Phantom Thunder and Phantom Strike, these three leaders led air assault missions, week-long foot patrols and countless other missions in areas that had seldom seen coalition presence and were riddled with all manner of IEDs.

Each of these young men showed extraordinary valor and uncompromising courage in the face of great danger while fighting to uproot al Qaeda and push them out of Iraq. Whether it was Captain Herd charging into a densely packed rural area loaded with pressure-sensitized IEDs so he could attend to a wounded soldier, or Captain Finn encouraging an intensive enemy -- excuse me, encountering an intensive enemy ambush, standing firm, then promptly and violently returning fire that drove the enemy from their positions, or Captain Kyle leading countless patrols for days on end detaining a number of high level AQI operatives and discovering literally hundreds of enemy munitions and weapons, these young men represent the best of what our nation has to offer. And frankly, they represent our future leaders.

Their efforts contributed to turning around what was at one time a dire situation along Baghdad's southern fringes. I recently visited their area of operations, a former AQI stronghold on the Euphrates River once known as the Triangle of Death. While there, I had the opportunity to meet with Sheikh Qadim Jaber Hamza al-Kargoui (ph) and several of his concerned local citizens. Sheik Qadim (ph) was very appreciative of their new found security and had this to say, "Thank you for our new name. We are now the Triangle of Life instead of the Triangle of Death."

Each one of these brave men put their soldiers, their mission and their country before themselves, clearly exemplifying the ideals and valor -- values we hold dear in our nation's military.

Ladies and gentlemen, I'm here to tell you Iraq is in good hands. With soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines like these three young officers leading the way forward, there's no doubt that we'll (sic) do everything in their power to accomplish any mission they are handed. What they have accomplished to this point was unimaginable just a year ago. These incredible men and women are making it happen day and night, in extreme conditions, and I'm absolutely privileged to have the pleasure of serving in their ranks.

Thank you for allowing me to be with you today. I appreciate the time, and may God bless all of you, and may God bless America. Thank you very much.

MR. WHITMAN: Thank you for your time and for your service, general.

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