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Presenter: Pentagon Press Secretary Geoff Morrell

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DoD News Briefing with Press Secretary Geoff Morrell from the Pentagon Briefing Room, Arlington, Va.

MR. MORRELL: Good afternoon. It's a pleasure to be with you all today. I had no idea my first briefing would generate this much interest, but thank you for coming.

Q We all have season tickets, so -- (laughter).

MR. MORRELL: This is the first of a great fore.

Before I take your questions, though, I want to first announce that next week the Defense Department's inspector general will travel to Iraq with an 18-member assessment team. There, they will join up with teammates already on the ground in order to determine the magnitude of the U.S. military problem in accounting for and controlling weapons provided to the Iraqi security forces.

Since January, the Inspector General's Office has been thoroughly investigating reports of unaccounted for weapons as well as allegations of arms ending up in the wrong hands. Secretary Gates, who since May has twice received lengthy briefings on the progress of the probe, is deeply troubled by the reports and the allegations. He asked Inspector General Mick Kicklighter to use whatever resources are necessary to ensure we currently have adequate oversight procedures in place. General Kicklighter has informed the secretary that he will remain in-country as long as it takes to find out if record-keeping problems persist, and if so, make recommendations to the commanders on the ground how to fix those problems.

On another matter, later this afternoon Army Secretary Pete Geren will announce that he has formed two special teams to assess the contracting situation. As you may have read lately, several people involved in contracting for goods and services in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom have been charged with crimes, including bribery. Geren's teams are out to learn if the accused represent isolated cases of alleged corruption or are indicative of a more pervasive, perhaps even systemic problem with how we do contracting for the war.

If the latter is true, Secretary Gates has asked the Army secretary to identify and correct any procedural weaknesses, inadequate staffing and training of contracting professionals and management deficiencies.

All of this of course is separate from the ongoing criminal investigations. Like Kicklighter's team, Geren's will be operating in high gear and are expected to reach conclusions and offer remedies within weeks, not months, though the Army secretary will have much more to say about his plan a couple hours from now.

Secretary Gates fully supports these aggressive efforts. They have been under way for months now, and he will continue to keep a close eye on them. If in either arms or contracting there has been criminality, he is committed to bringing to justice those who have broken the law. If there has been mismanagement, he wants it corrected as soon as possible and those responsible held accountable.

And with that, I'll take your questions.

Bob?

Q Could you unravel, perhaps, a bit the mystery of the timing of various reporting to the president and Congress on Iraq beginning with Secretary Gates' -- when he'll present his recommendations to the president?

MR. MORRELL: I will do that as best I can. It is a little bit of a complicated procedure that I'm still working through myself, but I've gone to great lengths today to try to move the ball forward a little bit.

First of all, I think it's worth clarifying, as best I understand it. We've so often referred to the Petraeus report -- and I think we want to confirm this with his people, if you like -- but my understanding of the Petraeus report is that it's actually not a report but is an assessment which he will offer both to the president and to the Congress. Now there may be actual, you know, printed testimony that they will release, but I just want to get away from this notion that there's a lengthy report that will be handed out at one point.

As for the process beyond that, you know, we've reached a critical point in Iraq with regards to our policy and our future operations, and it is essential, therefore, that the president get the best military advice he can possibly get so that he can decide the proper way forward. Now I have no idea what State is doing on this matter, but from a military perspective, Secretary Gates has been working hard to make sure that the president will hear directly from each of his senior military advisors, including, of course, Commanding General David Petraeus. But he'll also hear from, for example, CENTCOM Commander Admiral Fallon; he'll also hear from the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Peter Pace, and from the rest of the Joint Chiefs. And as you mentioned, he will also get the advice of the secretary.

As for how this will be done, I can't get into the specific modalities of how these communications will take place, but I will tell you this: The secretary is determined that each of these people will be able to present their advice directly and in an unvarnished way so that the president will be getting each person's individual assessment on where we are and where we should be going. And armed with all that information, he'll then be able to make the best decision on the way forward.

Now, they may come in the end to a consensus, but the objective of the system that the secretary has put in place is not to reach consensus.

That may be the end result, but that's not what he's looking for. He's looking for a way to sort of make sure that the normal bureaucratic massaging that sometimes eliminates the rough edges or the sharp differences between individuals does not victimize this process so that the president can get distinct -- if that's the way it turns out to be -- points of view on where we are and where we need to go. Does that help?

Q Yeah, but it sounds like if some of that has happened, Geoff. In other words, the secretary has not yet presented his views or the Chiefs have not presented their views?

MR. MORRELL: No. No. Listen, there are constant meetings. I mean, you've been around here long enough to know -- just in the two- plus months I've been here -- the secretary spends a lot of time at the White House. And this has been the primary concern for quite some time now, and we have been working towards the September 15th due date of the Petraeus report.

So clearly we're getting into crunch time. These meetings that I've described will undoubtedly take place between now and when the president finally speaks to us about where he wants to go from here.

Joe.

Q Geoff, do you have any comment on what Muqtada al-Sadr announced today, that he ordered his militia to stop attacks against U.S. forces for six months? Your comments? And do you still consider his militia, the Jaish al-Mahdi, as a major threat to stability in Iraq?

MR. MORRELL: Joe, you know, it's the objective of the American mission of Iraq to try to bring as many of these militias and armed components into a legitimate fighting force under the central control of the Maliki government, so that's what we're pushing for. We're less concerned about people standing down temporarily than we are in pursuing efforts that would draw in as many of these armed groups into a legitimate fighting force as possible that is accountable to one authority, that being the central government.

Tom.

Q There was a story today about an additional request of \$50 billion for Iraq and Afghanistan. The Hill people said they were expecting 20 (billion dollars) to 25 billion (dollars). Can you talk a little bit about that?

MR. MORRELL: I can to the extent that the story was news to the secretary. He picked up the paper this morning and said, "That's news to me." And I think that's news to him because we simply aren't there yet.

I'm told that next week we will begin to delve into this process. But we certainly will not come to sort of any finality on what, if any, additional money we would like to ask for until after the commanding general reports, Ambassador Crocker reports and the president charts the course for the way forward. So such stories as for how much we're going to ask for, if we ask for more money, are premature.

That said, you know, we certainly -- at no time have we indicated that the money which we went up for in -- I think back in February, was the end of this. There is always the possibility that we will need additional funds, depending on the mission, as you saw in, I think, just a couple weeks ago. We went up and asked for additional monies to buy more MRAPs to protect our forces in Iraq.

So there is always the possibility we'll ask for more money. I think we've signaled to Congress that we may indeed be coming to them shortly for additional monies to fight the global war on terror.

But I think at this point, in terms of numbers and when that will happen, we're ahead of the game.

Q General Odierno says that he would like to see the so-called surge last into the spring and then you start drawing down. Can you tell us what the surge costs per month?

MR. MORRELL: I can't. I can't. But I'm sure we can get you those numbers. Off the top of my head, I cannot tell you what the surge is costing per month. But -- and I'm sure that General Odierno's opinions on how long the surge should last will be considered in General Petraeus's assessment that he offers up the chain of command.

Barbara?

Q I wanted to ask you two questions. First, about the incident with the Iranians being taken into U.S. military custody in Baghdad. Since it was rapidly determined that there was no reason to hold these people, number one, does the United States military or this department apologize or is -- are they are sorry for taking the

Iranians into custody? Why or why not?

But I wanted to go back first and ask you. Your statement that all of these generals and the secretary and everybody's going to give the president their opinion about what to do -- what the best course forward is -- why does that -- explain to me, when the president turns back and says, "Okay, but what do you guys think I should do," who stands up at the end of the day and tells President Bush what the U.S. military and this department's recommendation is? Or do they just throw that all on the table and not give him -- don't they have an obligation to give him a view about what they think --

MR. MORRELL: Yeah. Barbara, I'm not so sure what their obligation is. I think their obligation is to provide him with the best military advice possible. The way the secretary, from talking to him, believes that the best way to do that is, is to offer to the president the best advice of his various senior military leaders.

I think the American people would be concerned if General Petraeus was not able to directly communicate his assessment and his recommendations to the president.

Now, do you want to just have the commanding four-star general of your operations in Iraq provide the only way, the only advice that you want to take as the commander in chief?

I don't believe the secretary believes that is the only thing that should be provided to the president, so that now we have a system in place, as he's laid it out, where the president will get multiple senior-level views on this current situation, where we should go.

But I'm not in the position from this podium to judge whether or not that's appropriate or not. It's the way the secretary thinks it's best to go. And I believe the president has been in that office long enough and is familiar enough with decision-making that he could hear lots of advice from lots of people and still comfortably come to a decision.

Q He's always -- I just -- I want to not get away from my Iran question. But he's always said that he listens to his generals. That --

MR. MORRELL: Well, he has ample opportunity to listen to his generals. We're giving him lots of generals to listen to.

Q Is he going to personally meet with all the joint chiefs, plus --

MR. MORRELL: Well, I think, as I've just explained it, yes. The president will have an opportunity to meet with all the people or at least have direct communication with all the people who I just described to you. Now, I want to be careful not to step on the White House's toes on this. But this is the plan that the secretary would -- believes is best to provide advice from this building, from this organization.

On Iran.

Q On Iran, can you -- you know, you let these people go very quickly after taking them. Was it a mistake to take these Iranians into custody? Have you simply poked at Iran yet again? Are you -- is this administration apologizing? Is it sorry? Are you sorry you took these people?

MR. MORRELL: Yeah, you know, I -- Barbara, I wish I could help you with any one of those but I really can't. I mean, I have the press release here that you all have from MNF-I. I just don't have a whole lot more guidance beyond what they've released. I think you have it, and I'm going to let that stand on its own. As for an apology, I'm certainly not in a position to offer one from this podium, nor do I know at this point whether one is appropriate.

Anybody else.

Kristin.

One sec, David.

Q On Abu Ghraib, in 2004, the then-head of this department said that people responsible would be held accountable. But no officers have been criminally held accountable for this. And this week, we saw that Jordan was acquitted of all charges related to the abuse.

Does this department think that the court-martial system has worked well in making sure that those responsible have been held accountable?

MR. MORRELL: Let me answer the question this way. I've heard nothing in this department to suggest that the court-martial system has not worked well, but nor have I heard something that suggests it is working well. So I don't really have a good guidance for you on that one. But I certainly have heard nothing to suggest that what has happened with regards to the prosecution of those accused in the Abu Ghraib atrocities are -- has been handled improperly in any way.

That's the end result of the judicial system that's been stood up. And a jury judged these people, and that's the end result. But I don't have any more for you on that, Kristin.

Q Well, then what do you think that says to the Iraqi people, who were promised some accountability on this?

MR. MORRELL: I don't frankly know what it says to the Iraqi people. All I know is that we have a system in place. It's worked for years and presumably it worked in this case too. I have no reason to believe it didn't work in this case. A jury of the accused's peers decided his fate and they acquitted him. I don't know what more I can tell you on that.

David.

Q Just back to the issue of how the -- providing advice is going to unfold.

Is there any division of responsibility here among the various generals who are going to be providing advice directly to the president, assuming this plan's --

MR. MORRELL: Not that I'm aware of.

Q I mean, in some ways --

MR. MORRELL: I mean, presumably, I mean if he hears from the Joint Chiefs, presumably when he hears from General Casey -- General Casey's view offering the Army's perspective on things -- when he hears from the commandant, he may weigh-in on the Marines' view of the matters, but I don't know any clear division of advice that's being offered.

Q But I mean, in some ways the implication of what you're saying could be that there are differences of agreement among these various people about whether to continue the surge, about some basic issues. And I guess I'm wondering --

MR. MORRELL: If there are, David, differences of opinion among the people who will brief the president --

I'm not aware of them, and I tried to make clear, based upon the guidance that I've gotten from the secretary, that consensus is not the goal of this process -- if there are differences, the president will hear them.

Jamie.

Q You know, I'm sure that you're aware there's a lot of anticipation of this September reporting time frame, and the perception is that the president -- and you sort of fed into this as well by saying the president's going to get all this advice, and then he'll decide what to do -- that there's going to be some kind of decision made in December. At the same time, we've heard from General Petraeus that he considers to be a deadline for report not necessarily a deadline for a decision.

Can you help us understand to what extent we should expect some sort of decision to be made by the president about the course ahead, or is it possible that he may just take all of this in advisement and things will just continue on? Should we expect some sort of decision?

MR. MORRELL: Yeah, you know, I don't want to speak for the president from this podium, but my understanding is that yes, indeed, when he gets all this information, the president has some decisions to make. I mean, do we continue the surge, do we -- for how long and at what strength? There are decisions to be made on the horizon, and I think it's the expectation of this building, it's the expectation, I believe, of the American people that there will be some announcement from the president as to what he's doing with David Petraeus' advice. He may choose to stay the course -- that, I presume, is a possibility -- or he may alter that course. But I think once he receives the advice from General Petraeus -- and as I have outlined -- and others, my understanding is that he has a decision to make, and that's how it's been described to me from my colleagues over at the White House.

Tony and then Julia.

Q I've got a question about MRAPs. Back in mid-July, we heard there's about 3,500 of these would be in Iraq by the end of the year. A week later, \$5 billion was designated to buy more, and a couple weeks after that, you told some of us that, oh, it's only going to be 1,500 in Iraq by the end of the year. How was the department caught so flat-footed on that that that you had to retract in that short period of time? You knew the logistic demands of taking a fresh MRAP and making it militarized, so what happened?

MR. MORRELL: Let me just take issue with the premise of your "caught flat-footed." I think there's a couple things that happened here.

Number one, from this podium -- I don't know a month ago --

Q (Off mike.)

MR. MORRELL: Thank you, Tony -- July 17th -- we announced an enormous reprogramming request to the Congress. At that time, you heard from John Young, who is the chairman of the MRAP Task Force, and he gave what we believe at that point to be our goals. The next day he went to Congress and corrected something he had said from this podium, which was that we would produce 3,500 -- or would deliver to theater 3,500 by the end of the year, and he made it clear to Congress that he had misspoken from this podium. That said, we did pronounce that from this podium so we are working towards that goal, Tony.

But in answer to your question as to why we will not have 3,500 there by the end of the year -- and we're still working towards that -- but it's very simple, actually.

As you know, we've gone from a cold production, and it's ramping up every month. Our peak production months this year are going to be November and December, where we'll produce, we believe, in excess of 2,000 vehicles. But as you know, it's not just taking them off the assembly line and dropping them into theater. They

have got to be outfitted with communications and other protective equipment, electronics, and then they've got to be transported from South Carolina, where that process takes place, into Iraq.

That process at this point looks as though it could take 50 days. We are working hard to streamline that process, as we're looking hard to streamline every aspect of the production process, from the vendors who produce the vehicles to the SPAWAR guys who insert the government- furnished equipment, to TRANSCOM, which delivers them. And we've already cut down dramatically the amount of time that it takes to outfit these things. I think we've gone from a 30-day timeline down to a 15-day timeline is my understanding, or at least that's the goal at this point.

And then in terms of delivery, I want to make one thing clear here, also. We're going to come to a point very soon -- I think that people are looking at the October timeframe -- where production will be such that we'll produce enough vehicles that they will be sealifted as well as airlifted. Throughout this process, airlift will continue and will continue in greater numbers than it's at now, but we're going to introduce sealift very shortly so that we can get as many to theater as possible.

The last thing I want to add to this is -- because I just learned this, frankly, last week -- and that is that we airlift these directly to Iraq. I thought it was to theater, I thought it was to Kuwait; it's directly inserted into the battlespace. It goes to Baghdad, Balad, al Asad. So we get it as close to the troops that need it as quickly as possible.

One last point in this whole thing is you know from the get-go -- we always hate to talk about numbers from here, but we got into it, so we've got to deal with it. The real goal here has always been to produce as many vehicles as possible as quickly as possible and get them to the troops who need them as quickly as possible.

Q My only point was why you didn't factor all this in when you did the press conference, because you look like "The Gang That Couldn't Shoot Straight" when you realized --

MR. MORRELL: "The Gang That Couldn't Shoot Straight"? Tony, Tony, I'm up here for the first time -- "The Gang That Couldn't Shoot Straight"? I think we're shooting a little straighter.

Q I wanted to go back to the upcoming assessment by General Petraeus and the advice going to the president. How -- given that Secretary Gates is meeting with the president on a weekly or multiple times a week, how -- what's going to be different about whatever he's about to deliver? I mean, how is that going to differ from the normal assessments and advice that he gives on a weekly basis to the president?

MR. MORRELL: I think probably the time in which it's being delivered and the context of the actual sort of official delivery of the commanding general's advice.

And I think he will -- whatever the secretary's ultimate advice is, I think, will be in the context of the rest of the advice that's being provided to the president.

I don't quite know, on a day-to-day basis, what the communication is between the secretary and the president on Iraq on a day-to-day basis. I think it's more on a -- it's less, perhaps, looking down the road, as David Petraeus may present, than it is in management of the situation at hand. But I think you're getting into an area which I frankly am not quite clear on the distinction between his advice now versus his advice very shortly on this larger issue.

(Cross talk.) Yeah, hold on. (Inaudible) -- wait, let me just --

Q Is the secretary concerned that all the membership of the Joint Chiefs of Staff has not been heard enough in the Iraq war so far? I mean, is that why he's -- you seem to making a point that --

MR. MORRELL: Yeah, I have no -- I understand your question. I have no indication that's the case, that this is -- that his effort to be as inclusive as possible of senior military leaders in the advice stage of this process to the president I don't believe to be a reflection upon the fact that they've been neglected in any way up to this point. I just am not in a position to believe that's the case.

Q (Off mike) --

MR. MORRELL: Now hold -- I'll come back, Barbara.

Jennifer?

Q Back to al-Sadr. Is it your understanding that Muqtada al- Sadr is still in Iran or is in Iran? And is it -- do you think the reason for this announcement is some indication that he feels that either the noose is closing in around him or top lieutenants? Is there still a warrant for his arrest by the U.S. military? Why did he make this announcement right now?

MR. MORRELL: You know, when I was in theater a couple weeks ago, I think the belief was then that he was in Iran. I have not seen the latest intelligence on where we believe him to be now. So I'm sorry on that front.

Do we believe this is reflection of, as you said, that the noose is closing in on al-Sadr? I don't know that to be the case. I would say this: that it was interesting, when I was there, talking to people, that there was a sense, not only as what's been reported here, that indeed we've had remarkable progress in places like Anbar because the Sunnis have turned on al Qaeda. But I was getting the sense, when I was there, that people were beginning to see Shi'a turning on JAM.

And so is the pressure of that at all impacting Sadr's decision? It's impossible for me to gauge from here. But I do think that's a reality. I do think the momentum is turning against the insurgents throughout Iraq, no matter who they are aligned with.

Yeah?

Q Geoff, just to make clear in my own mind -- Dave Wood, Baltimore Sun -- there will be no Petraeus report and there will be no Defense Department written assessment or publication?

MR. MORRELL: I wouldn't hold your breath waiting for printed material from this building, as I understand it. I do not think we are providing a written report, certainly not from the secretary. And I usually don't speak for the Joint Chiefs, so I'd refer you to them. But my understanding is, there's no written report coming from here. And it's my understanding, furthermore, that there's no written report coming from General Petraeus. There may be some written testimony, but I'd also ask you to check with his people as well.

Hold on -- Bob, I'll come -- let's get some -- yeah. Go ahead, Ken.

Q Okay. (Inaudible.)

MR. MORRELL: No.

Q (Off mike.) You said there'll be no report from this building or from Petraeus. There's a statutory requirement, as you know, for a report by September --

MR. MORRELL: That's the president's -- that's the president's report. That's a separate matter. Yes, the president will deliver his benchmarks report before -- or by September the 15th as legislated by Congress. You

know there's other reports, too. I mean, there's obviously the Jones report, which actually -- I think as I'm speaking to you right now the secretary's being briefed by General Jones on his efforts in Iraq to sort of gauge the training of the Iraqi security forces. There's also a 9010 report, which we deliver quarterly, and that will at some point be delivered to the Congress as well, as mandated by them. And then, there's a GAO report which will be coming out as well.

It was brought to my attention with regards to the GAO versus the president's benchmark report, I think it's worth noting when you all do get it, that although they are assessing the same benchmarks, the standard by which they assess them is different, and this is just -- I thought it was interesting and I think you should keep it in mind. And the standard that GAO has set is far more stringent -- some might argue it's impossible to meet -- and that is I think they have to sort of say definitively whether a benchmark has been met or not; whereas, as you saw in July with our interim benchmarks report from the president, we're able to say whether there's been satisfactory progress towards meeting the goal. So when you get them, I think it's worth keeping that in mind.

Q Follow up quickly.

MR. MORRELL: Yeah.

Q When General Petraeus goes before Congress -- first of all, has a date certain been set for his testimony?

MR. MORRELL: No. It's interesting -- you know, that's beyond our control. That is a Hill matter, but as I'm sure you've all been watching or talking to your colleagues who cover the Hill, there is some to-ing and fro-ing up there as for who will go first, who will be the beneficiary of his insight first and who will follow, and on what days that will take place. But I think the focus, as you know, is on the week of September the 10th, and I think factoring into all this is some concern about whether it's appropriate or not to hold hearings on September the 11th.

But as I last heard coming in here, there had not been any finality as to when and who goes first.

Q And one last question. Do you expect General Petraeus to go beyond -- in his testimony to Congress whenever it occurs -- go beyond the immediate situation on the ground in Iraq and talk about looking forward?

MR. MORRELL: Yeah, I don't know. I don't know. I don't know if he's going to just provide the president with his view of where we go from here. He will have spoken, obviously, and delivered his advice to the president before he goes to Congress, of course, so he may feel more comfortable, less encumbered and able to talk about the way forward. I'm sure he'll be pressed on -- for his advice on the way forward. You can be certain of that.

All right, Barb, I will come back to you. Let's just make sure everybody gets in here.

Louie, my old colleague from ABC.

Q Going back to your opening statement, can you tell us when the decision was made to send the inspector general and a team to Iraq? And can you describe possibly with some specificity what were some of the details in the two briefings that the secretary received that have raised a concern level?

MR. MORRELL: As to when General Kicklighter -- you know, listen, Kicklighter has decided to go because he thinks it's best to go. The direction from the secretary was: Let's get to the bottom of this. So however you need to -- whatever you need to do to get to the bottom of it, do it. And General Kicklighter has come to the point -- now, keep in mind, he's got people on the ground and who have been on the ground for some time, but he's now to the point where he feels it would be beneficial for he himself to go, as well as a team of his assessors or investigators. So they shove off next week.

As for the specific things in the briefings that the secretary got that caused him concern, well -- some of which I can't talk about because it involves sort of ongoing criminal matters, some of which is just the fact that -- you know, you read the GAO report, which talked about deficiencies in recordkeeping with regards to weapons distributed to the Iraqi security forces.

Now, keep in mind that chronicled 04/05, a long time ago. We've made enormous progress since then. But the secretary really wants to make sure, is this a problem that persists today? And if so, I want it fixed.

Additionally, I think what you're going to hear -- and I really want Secretary Geren to talk a little bit more about this -- and I don't mean to be confusing the two issues because he was briefed simultaneously, at least yesterday when I was with him, on Kicklighter's efforts as well as Secretary Geren's efforts. And Secretary Geren, I think, can expand upon this, but there are issues -- I mean, you've seen in the news issues of bribery, corruption that are troubling to everybody, especially the Defense secretary. So he wants to make sure we have a system in place that ultimately prevents this kind of behavior.

And are these a few -- I don't like to use the term, but "bad apples"? Are these a few isolated incidents of criminality and poor judgment? Or is our system right now constructed in such a way that there are not enough controls on this type of behavior? And does it in any way invite this kind of behavior?

We, as you know -- and I think -- I got -- confirm these numbers with Secretary Geren, but I think -- and he'll tell you this, I'm sure -- I think we started off -- you know, he's the executive agent in charge of this contracting effort over there since the war began -- I think we started off with eight contracting people -- and double-check these with him -- eight contracting people in charge of \$50 million worth of contracts, and I think now -- five years later -- we're up to a billion dollars that they're controlling, and I don't know that the team has grown dramatically since then. And so the question is, do we have enough skilled professional contractors to handle the demand to support this huge war effort?

It's not clear at this point that what we have is not working entirely. But clearly there are gaps, and he wants to figure out how pervasive this problem is.

Q (Off mike) -- indications that this is actually a growing problem?

MR. MORRELL: Are there indications this is a growing problem?

I'm going to let him characterize it. I think that it's enough of a problem to this day, or there's enough concern that it remains a problem, that the responses that I just outlined are taking place and are taking place at the direction of the secretary of Defense.

Courtney.

Q So back to the Iranians who were detained yesterday --

MR. MORRELL: Yeah.

Q -- can you both -- who specifically, not even necessarily a person but what sort of unit or what level gave the order, the higher headquarters, to detain them?

MR. MORRELL: No idea. I mean, talk to MNF-I. I have no idea from who --

Q But do you know who it was that said to -- that they could be released? (Off mike.)

MR. MORRELL: I don't. I mean, I assume these are operational details. I don't know how high up the chain of command these go. I mean, I think -- my understanding is these guys were stopped because they had weapons. And for some reason, they thought that was a problem, and dealt with it. And they took some time but they figured out what the situation was and felt comfortable enough releasing them such as they have. I don't know how much more there is to it than that.

Q (Off mike) -- the items, the computer -- I think it was -- the money and things that were taken out of their hotel rooms -- did the U.S. military keep those items, or were they --

MR. MORRELL: I don't know. I really don't. I don't mean to be difficult. I just don't know.

Yeah, go ahead, Jeff.

Q I believe you said earlier that you expect MRAP production to reach 2,000 a month in November and December. Is that --

MR. MORRELL: No, no, no, no, no, no, no.

In November and December combined, we hope to produce, I believe, over 2,000 vehicles. I think it's 900 in November, 1,200-plus in December.

Q Is DOD solid on those numbers?

MR. MORRELL: Are we solid on the numbers? Those are the numbers we're gearing for.

This -- Jeff, you know this process well. You're covering this process. It started from cold, okay. We are -- this is -- every day is a new day in MRAP development. We have set goals. We're trying to get there, but it's an evolving process, and who knows if we're going to get there. The -- I think there's confidence right now among the MRAP task force that production-wise, we're on target; we're going to get there. The more -- you know, it's -- but it's not just a production question; it's an outfitting and delivery question.

Q I just want to make sure, because originally of course, the Defense Department said that 3,500 would be delivered, and that had to be clarified -- (cross talk).

MR. MORRELL: Yeah.

Q I just want to make sure that there's no reason to believe that the Defense Department will once again have to clarify how many MRAPs it expects to be done -- be produced by the end of the year --

MR. MORRELL: But let me take issue with that there, Jeff.

Okay, so we've said 3,500 and we're shooting for 3,500, okay. The 3,500 will get to theater and they will get there shortly after the new year.

If things continue as they have been and if we stay on schedule, we will produce 2,000-plus vehicles in November and December. And whatever the outfitting and delivery time, however long that is -- right now it's believed to be about 50 days, but hopefully by then it'll be shortened -- but even if it's 50 days, that means in January- February, you'll take delivery of those vehicles. So shortly into the new year, you will indeed have 3,500 new MRAPs in theater to protect our forces there.

Q So not to belabor it, you can say you are fully confident that you will create the 2,000 by the end of the --

MR. MORRELL: No, I'm not going to get set up -- stuck up here again saying I'm fully confident of anything. I believe -- in terms of MRAP production numbers, I believe that the task force believes that we are on the right course to producing what we believe we can produce. That's what I'm confident in saying to you.

But, Jeff, I also want to point out -- you know, I think we do talk a lot about MRAPs, but keep in mind, these are not fail-safe vehicles. This is the next-best thing we have in force protection. But I don't want to build these things up so much is that there is expectations of the American people or anybody that these are impenetrable vehicles. This is the best force protection anybody in the world is making today. But we are dealing with an evolving, agile, cunning enemy who will undoubtedly try to find a way to attack these vehicles as well. But we are determined to spend whatever the money necessary and work as hard as necessary to make sure they have the very best equipment we can offer, and that right now is the MRAP.

Yeah.

Q A senior intelligence official last week, when they were briefing on the NIE, said that while there was evidence that the Iranians were increasingly supplying EFP technology, there was no evidence -- or the intelligence community had found no evidence that the Iranians were directly involved inside Iraq's borders either attacking U.S. forces or helping attack their forces. Is that an assessment that the Pentagon agrees with?

MR. MORRELL: You know, I'm not going to talk, I don't think, about our intelligence assessments. I think you've heard from commanders in the field who talk about what a meddlesome and persistent problem Iran continues to be in Iraq, whether it be through supplying, as you mentioned, EFPs or whether it be providing mortars, rocket propelled grenades -- whatever it may be, they continue to supply insurgents with the devices that are used to attack and kill American forces. So whether they are in country or out of country -- I'm not prepared to comment on from here -- they remain an obstacle to the success of our operations in Iraq, and we encourage them to refrain from doing so.

Q And do you have any evidence that the Revolutionary Guard or some subset is operating within the Iraqi borders?

MR. MORRELL: I'm not prepared to comment on that from here at this point. I'm sorry.

Yeah. I'm sorry. You've been patient. Yes.

Q I was wondering if you can comment on Basra, specifically Basra in the wake of the British withdrawal there. I mean, is this -- is security there a concern for the U.S.?

MR. MORRELL: Sure.

Q You know, to what extent are we concerned about an escalation of power struggles in that -- (inaudible)? And also, is there any -- obviously, U.S. forces are stretched pretty thin.

Is there any talk of sending some folks down that way?

MR. MORRELL: Well, I'm not up to date on what exactly the sort of -- I forget what they call it -- sort of force geometry, what the adjustments would be when and if the British withdraw their forces from the south, but I assume that when they do we'll have to adjust accordingly.

Are we concerned about the situation in Basra? Absolutely. It is a place where you have a variety of different Shi'a groups competing to control the resources down there and what business there is down there. So it's a -- it is a little bit unlike the sectarian conflicts you see further north because there is sort of inter-sectarian

strife. And what the motivation really looks like -- when I was there, as it was described to me -- is that these are sort of almost Mafioso kind of situations where people are trying to carve up the pie and who controls the money-making businesses and ventures down there. But it's ugly and it's a problem, and we are concerned about it. And hopefully the British will continue to work hard on it, and when and if they leave, undoubtedly we'll have to deal with it as well.

Yeah.

Q U.S. combat deaths are down by half since May, and I'd like to know what the Pentagon attributes that to. How much of it, do you think, is because of the surge or current operations in Iraq? How much of it is because fighters have moved out of the surge area?

MR. MORRELL: I think, like all things in this conflict, it's probably a combination of all of the above. I think the surge forces have clearly contributed to security. They've created a climate in which people feel more comfortable cooperating with American forces. We've seen a dramatic increase in the number of tips about insurgent activities, which has allowed us to stop and preempt attacks before they take place. I think you're also seeing an increasingly capable Iraqi security forces. So I think it's the combination of things that have evolved from putting more forces on the ground in Iraq, and thankfully American men and women in uniform there are right now the beneficiaries of a slightly safer environment thanks to the -- thanks to the surge.

Q Do you believe forces like the militia and the insurgents left before the surge began or were driven out during the surge?

MR. MORRELL: No, we --

Q And what evidence do you have for either one?

MR. MORRELL: I think we've seen cases in which they were clearly driven out of areas which they once claimed as their own. Anbar was billed as the Islamic state of Iraq. It is no longer the case. There are minimal al Qaeda attacks in Anbar now, as when I was there -- and I know one week does not an expert make, but I went to Sheikh Sattar's house and sat down for a grand tribal sheikh conference with 95 sheikhs who had all agreed to all of a sudden work together towards one goal: defeating al Qaeda with the assistance of U.S. armed forces.

That's a dramatically different place than they were just months ago.

So their working together, in conjunction with us, has certainly contributed to driving out insurgents from Anbar. You're seeing that in the north, in Diyala as well.

Did some run before we got there? Probably the smart ones did. Others were killed or captured, or they're still on the run.

Yep?

Q Geoff, you said General Kicklighter decided on his own to take an IG team to Iraq to look at the problems with missing weapons. I didn't hear you give a date. Was that --

MR. MORRELL: When he's going to go?

Q Yeah, when he decided to go --

MR. MORRELL: Oh, you know, I don't know exactly when he decided to do. I know, as I think I mentioned, that he sort of briefed the secretary on his plans yesterday. And I think he leaves early next

week. And I think more importantly (sic) than when he decided to go -- and I maybe can get you some of the background in terms of how long he's -- you know, I think I said since January that he's been looking into that portion of this --

Q Right. His report was published on Sunday, which raised our consciousness considerably.

MR. MORRELL: No, no, no, no. Okay. That's the question. I understand your question. No, no, no, no.

This trip is not in any way a result of the story that was published in The New York Times on Monday. This has all predated that. I mean, he has an enormous team going over there with long- standing plans. None of this was predicated upon The Times story. In fact, as I told The Times, the secretary was planning to make essentially the announcement I made today this week, expressing his concern about this matter and sort of outlining where we're going from here. And that decision he made -- he expressed that to his staff while on vacation. He made clear that when he got back, he wanted to step forward and pronounce his concerns and his plan of action with regards to these two issues, the accountability of arms and contracting.

So no --

Q Why didn't he do it?

MR. MORRELL: Why didn't he do it?

Q He said he was going to come out here and talk about it.

MR. MORRELL: Well, I'm here to talk about it. Is this not sufficient? He's a busy man. He's dealing with a lot of bigger issues.

Who haven't gotten to in the back? Yes, sir.

Q Yeah. In Japan there is another -- the third Defense minister since the beginning of this year.

MR. MORRELL: Yes, a lot of turmoil.

Q And first of all, has Secretary Gates had a chance to talk with the new Defense minister? And then meanwhile, this -- with this political turmoil in Japan, the opposition party in Japan is threatening to cut the extension of Japanese participation in OEF maritime operation. And then I would like to have your -- how do you assess how essential is the Japanese participation in the OEF maritime operation?

MR. MORRELL: To the first question first, I'm not so sure he's spoken with the new minister of Defense, nor do I know if he hasn't.

I do know he recently met with the second minister of Defense, but -- I think that was a couple of weeks ago, but I guess that's inoperative now.

With regards to the Japanese contribution to OEF, we appreciate it. We would strongly encourage them to continue it. I think all the coalition efforts, contributions are necessary towards our collective mission of defeating terrorism worldwide but in particular in dealing with it in Afghanistan and creating the kind of climate there where that country can get back on its feet and remain an ally in the war on terror.

Q How -- do you think it's irreplaceable or?

MR. MORRELL: I don't know that it's irreplaceable, but I hope we don't have to get to a point we have to

determine whether it's irreplaceable. We would hope the Japanese would continue their efforts and their support in OEF.

Yes?

Q Yesterday, the U.N. reported that the opium crop in Afghanistan this year is going to be, I think, the largest on record, far larger than it ever was under the Taliban. Doesn't that suggest -- since the crop has been growing every year since the U.S. has been there, doesn't that suggest a major failure of U.S. policy there?

MR. MORRELL: I don't -- I wouldn't characterize it nearly as you did. I don't think it suggests a major failure of U.S. policy in Afghanistan. The effort of -- the focus of our efforts in Afghanistan is to create a stable climate for this young democracy to flourish. Is the narcotics business helpful to that end? Absolutely no. And this department works in several ways to try to assist those who are tasked with dealing with counternarcotics.

But you noted that U.N. report, and it did talk about how there has been tremendous opium production in the south, but I think that report also noted that there has -- now -- there are now, I think -- the north and central regions are now, I think, opium free essentially. So while there is certainly some bad news in that report, I would caution you to also look at the good news in that report.

As for why the south, I think you've seen -- I think wherever there are insurgents and Taliban who are now using the proceeds, the profits from the drug trade to support their terrorist activities, it seems to be that the opium production follows where they are, so. But we have increased forces that will be dealing with that problem in the south. You've started to see more Afghan forces in that area that are going to be taking on this problem. But the key to all this is root out the insurgency and find a way to provide another means of an economy for those farmers who believe it's imperative for them to grow opium.

And I know the secretary has ideas on this that hopefully will be incorporated, but that's about where I am on the U.N. report.

I think -- one more question. Is that it? Have I been fair to everyone?

Q No. Just after Barbara, you promised --

MR. MORRELL: Barbara, I did promise that. (Laughter.) You're right. Did you notice, though, I went from -- from the wires to TV? I'm very egalitarian, especially to my former TV colleagues.

Yes, Barbara.

Q I want to circle back on two things that you said. On the unaccounted for weapons story, that certainly has been an issue on the table for months now, something that has been well understood and well-known. So why the secretary's concern now? Is there any evidence that U.S.-supplied weapons of any sort have been used -- fallen into insurgent hands and used against U.S. troops? Why is he concerned now?

My other question is, circling back, you mentioned three things you said you believed the president would be announcing. Do we continue the surge? For how long? And at what strength? So on those three points, the secretary, the chairman, the Joint Chiefs, Petraeus, all these people -- are they going to make recommendations to the president on these three points?

MR. MORRELL: I thought I gave you a lot on this. I cannot get into granularity at this point as to what the chairman of the Joint Chiefs --

Q I'm not asking you what the -- (off mike) --

MR. MORRELL: Or even -- or even the parameters of their advice. I'm just not in a position to give that information. Perhaps --

Q (Off mike.)

MR. MORRELL: Hold on. Barbara? Barbara? Barbara? Look, I think I qualified it by saying that's what I expect -- what we expect. I don't know for a fact what the president's going to say to you, and I'd refer you to the White House on that.

But let me say this, there is time yet between now and when General Petraeus goes to the Hill. Perhaps between now and then we'll have a greater sense of what in particular these military advisers are going to offer, at least in terms of subject matter. But I'm not in a position to tell you now.

I thought I -- I thought I came armed with some clarifying information on the process. I hope you agree.

Q Okay, a quick question on unaccounted-for weapons. Is there any evidence that the secretary -- why now? It's been on the table for months. Is there any evidence --

MR. MORRELL: I don't know that there is evidence that we have that these weapons have been used by insurgents against U.S. forces. Frankly, I don't know that there's evidence at this point that any of the weapons which we -- that it's very clear at this point whether this is a bookkeeping issue, and that we gave the weapons to the people to whom they were supposed to go, and it is after that point that they have been lost and perhaps ended up in the hands, as you suggest, of those who should not have them. It is unclear, and that's why there's an investigation taking place. I cannot speak to you about the particulars of the investigation.

Q I'm just not understanding why now, when it's been an issue -- the first report about this problem is months and months and months old. It's been out there --

MR. MORRELL: Which report are you referring to?

Q I believe it was the first GAO report some time ago, and this was back in the winter.

MR. MORRELL: In much different quantities than we're at now. But here's what I'm -- than the most recent report quoted. But I don't want to leave you the impression -- and I think I tried to make it clear -- that there has -- this has been going on for a long time; i.e., the investigations. Okay?

Q But my question stands: Why is the secretary now so concerned and ordered this next step? What has led him to this position?

MR. MORRELL: And I think there's been some articles -- and I would refer you to some of them -- particularly in the Turkish press that, in May, it came to our attention that the Turks were concerned about American-issued weapons ending up involved in crimes in that country. And when that came to our attention, we very much worked with the Turks. They're a close ally in the war on terror. We appreciate their concerns and wanted to address their concerns.

Q Can you -- (off mike) -- about --

MR. MORRELL: And so the secretary dispatched the general counsel for this department -- Jim Haynes. He went over to Turkey, heard firsthand the Turkish concerns and expressed our commitment to work with them to get to the bottom of this. Does that help at all?

Q Well, let me just ask you then. Is there evidence that American-supplied Glocks have wound up in the hands of Kurds and have been turned around and used against the Turks?

MR. MORRELL: I'm not aware of evidence and I'm not going to speak of evidence from this podium as to what the investigators have determined in terms of the chain of custody of given American weapons. I know that, as I've expressed to you and you'll see in reports that we've -- that we've cooperated with, that the Turks certainly have the concern that American-issued weapons have ended up in the hands of criminals in their country. But let me jump ahead. There is -- as you know, it is the policy of this government and this department that, for example, the PKK are terrorists.

We don't deal with terrorists. We don't deal with the PKK and we certainly don't arm the PKK. So if American-issued weapons have ended up in the hands of criminals in Turkey or terrorists in Turkey, that is not based upon the policy of this department or this government.

Q But did Haynes get enough credible --

MR. MORRELL: Okay, hold on. Let me --

Q Excuse me.

MR. MORRELL: No, excuse me.

Q If Haynes did get enough credible information from the Turks, was it that briefing -- is it information from Turkey that has now led the secretary to take this step? (Off mike.)

MR. MORRELL: I think what -- no, I -- this is what I -- Haynes -- the secretary dispatched Haynes. You have the order backwards.

The secretary dispatched Haynes after getting a report about Turkish concerns, and we wanted to allay their concerns.

All right. Any more --

(Cross talk.)

MR. MORRELL: Let me --

Q But was there hard evidence?

MR. MORRELL: Excuse me.

Q Was there hard evidence?

MR. MORRELL: I'm not prepared to talk about the evidence here. And that's what an investigation will focus on, and they'll get to the bottom --

Q Well, Haynes has already been there, though.

Q Back on the Sadr issue one more time.

MR. MORRELL: Yeah.

Q Does the military judge this announcement as significant?

MR. MORRELL: I'm -- Kristin, I'm sorry. I just can't sit here and tell you, yes, we think it's significant or we think it's insignificant. I think our encouragement would be to Sadr and to anybody else who has a militia in Iraq, that they should work to get their fighters incorporated into the legitimate Iraqi security forces and be accountable to the central government. That's the goal. That's the way Iraq will stand up as a thriving, functioning country that can govern itself, sustain itself, protect itself and be an ally in the war on terror.

Thank you all.

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