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Presenter: Commanding General of Multinational Division Baghdad and 1st Cavalry Division Maj. Gen. Joseph Fil Jr.

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2007**

DoD News Briefing with Maj. Gen. Fil from the Pentagon Briefing Room, Arlington, Va.

(Note: General Fil appears via teleconference from Iraq.)

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

GEN. FIL: I can, Bryan. How are you today?

MR. WHITMAN: Fine. Thank you for spending some time this afternoon and joining us again here in the Pentagon briefing room. I think it was February of last year when you did this once again for us.

For those of you who are not familiar with General Fil, this is Major General Joseph Fil. He's the commanding general of Multinational Division Baghdad, as well as the 1st Cavalry Division. And he is at Camp Liberty today in Baghdad. And he assumed command responsibilities for MND-Baghdad, I think in November -- he can correct me if I'm wrong -- and is here to give you another operational update and take some of your questions.

So again, General, thank you for joining us this afternoon, and let me turn it over to you.

GEN. FIL: Well, it's my pleasure, and thank you very much for letting me join you today.

I do appreciate the opportunity to address you all and to discuss the security situation within Multinational Division Baghdad's area of operation.

Operation Fard al-Qanun has hit its stride here, with surge troops now employed throughout Baghdad. And we're aggressively conducting operations throughout the capital, denying sanctuary for al Qaeda and other extremist groups in areas like East Rashid, Mansour, Amiriyah and Adhamiya.

We are hitting them where it hurts, and we're taking away their ability to control neighborhoods and brutalize the population.

Simultaneously, we're working with grass-roots movements against al Qaeda, in partnership with the

Baghdad Operational Command and the Ministry of Interior. Together with our Iraqi security force partners, we're looking at ways to integrate these citizens' groups into the security efforts here. And regardless how they're employed, we do recognize that they must all serve to assist in the stability of Baghdad and be brought into the existing governmental security agencies.

Now our combined presence with the Iraqi security forces in the heart of Baghdad's communities and neighborhoods is making steady progress in achieving lasting safety and security in many districts.

To be sure, the enemy is fighting back hard in some of these areas that we've taken away, and they continue to perpetuate violence against innocents in their efforts to keep sectarian fires fueled and to undermine the efforts of the coalition and the Iraqi government.

Our efforts in Baghdad, in addition to the combat operations, include bringing in provincial reconstruction teams, who are experts in governance, business and provision of the central services. And these specialized teams with unique skill sets assist brigade commanders with local governance, and they identify issues and meet them head on. The veteran diplomats and subject matter experts filling the ranks of these provincial reconstruction teams assist brigade combat team commanders by providing a better bridge between coalition forces and the local district and governmental bodies. Now this has not been done before at this level, and I believe it's already setting the stage for future success here in Baghdad.

While the overall numbers of attacks in the Iraqi capital are down, we are still experiencing some very tough days here. And some of our soldiers and their partners in the Iraqi security forces have paid dearly in this fight against terror. And some wonder, are we progressing fast enough; are we ahead; are we on track?

This is a fight against extremists. It's a fight to put power back into the hands of the average Iraqi citizen, and to give them a vote and a voice in their own future, without intimidation or fear. I see progress, a steady progress, in every neighborhood that we've cleared and then established a full-time presence. We continue to move forward not only in security but in the development of infrastructure and essential services, local economies and local governance as well.

I'm extraordinarily impressed by the courage and hard work of soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines operating within the formation here in Baghdad. And I believe America should be very proud of the dedication, the service and the professionalism of its sons and daughters in uniform. I know that I am.

Well, with that said, I'd be very happy to take your questions.

MR. WHITMAN: Very good, General, and we have plenty of them here. Let's start with Bob.

Q General, Bob Burns from AP.

I'd like to ask you about the attack yesterday in which five MND- Baghdad soldiers were killed and seven were wounded. Very few details were released here. But still it was striking, not only for the number of casualties but also the complexity of attack involving small arms fire and RPGs, as well as an IED. And I know that that's not unprecedented by any means, but I wonder if you could comment about what it says about the capabilities of the insurgents at this stage of your operation.

GEN. FIL: Well, it was a very violent attack and we thought it did show a level of sophistication that we have not often seen so far in this campaign. As you know, it was in East Rashid.

This is an area that we've fought very, very hard in recently, and it is in fact an area that's now the division's main effort over here inside of Baghdad. There were four soldiers killed, another seven that were wounded, one of whom succumbed to his wounds and died later on, last night.

As you say, there was a very large IED that caused it, and then there was a combination of small-arms fire and RPGs. We thought at the time there were also some VBIEDs, some car bombs, involved in it, just because of the violence of it. But we now believe that that was not the case, that it was a single deep, buried IED.

As far as the assessment, we believe that we are into an area here in east Rashid, in the Dura area, where we're seeing a very strong al Qaeda cell. And as we have gone through the city and concentrated in a lot of areas where they had free rein sometime before, those areas are now denied to them. And so their freedom of maneuver inside of the city, their own battle space, has been more and more restricted, and their support zones have been severely restricted, both inside the city and also in the belts around the city. And so they're running out of maneuver space and they are starting to fight very hard. And that's what we saw yesterday.

They have previously been, you know, frankly, elusive when we actually got into an area and started to clear it, and we're seeing that in this area of east Rashid, they are standing and fighting. And we are fully prepared for that.

As a matter of fact, I was with the brigade commander there and his seven battalion commanders this morning refining our plans for this operation, and we are going to take it to the enemy. And that area, those three -- those muhallas in particular, where al Qaeda has decided to stand and fight, is where we're going to concentrate our efforts here in the next several weeks.

MR. WHITMAN: Thom.

Q General, it's Thom Shanker of The New York Times. A two- part question if I could, sir. As the new offensive is focusing on the belts around Baghdad and Diyala, are you seeing any degrading in your ability to maintain security because of forces being assigned to those other missions? And to turn that on its head, are there any specific ways that the pressure in the belts and Diyala is paying off in Baghdad already?

GEN. FIL: I have not seen a degradation of our capability inside the city, in answer to your first question. We now have -- the soldiers that we're going to have now are fully in battlespace due to the surge, and we are, I think, now able to really touch all parts of the city with coalition forces. I'll also tell you no soldier, no commander ever has all the forces he wants, and I would be very pleased to take more, but I believe we have -- we have what we need right now for this phase of the operation.

So there -- I have not sensed a degradation due to the operations that are out there; quite on the contrary. There's no question that the operations that the 3rd Infantry Division, the Mighty Marne Division to our south and east, the 25th Infantry Division up to the north, and the Marines out there in MND-W out in Al Anbar -- the combined efforts in this Operation Phantom Thunder that we've now embarked upon in this co-operation is in fact showing up across the theater. And I believe it's going to lessen the ability of the enemy inside of Baghdad to reinforce themselves and will eventually -- certainly lessen their ability to rearm themselves as well. So I think we're going to see that all of these things work together, and in fact, we're already starting to see that.

MR. WHITMAN: Kristin.

Q Sir, it's Kristin Roberts with Reuters. You said earlier in your opening remarks that attacks have gone down. Can you first of all give us some specific data about the level of attacks, the trend lines you're seeing there?

And then also you mentioned grassroots organizations that you're beginning to work with, and yesterday the president mentioned neighborhood watch organizations. Are these not the same militias that we were talking about for so long that were working at odds with the Iraqi government and the coalition forces?

GEN. FIL: On the trend lines first -- there's no question here in Baghdad that -- although we are still in a tough fight here, there's no doubt about it -- but the overall trend lines are positive. The attacks and -- the number of attacks, first of all, has come down. The effects of those attacks has come down significantly.

Let's take car bombs, for example. Although the number of car bombs, VBIEDs, has remained relatively constant since almost November, the effects of those has come down significantly. That's due to safe neighborhoods that have been created, the safe markets that have been created, and I believe being compressed more than that -- the very deliberate work that we've done against VBIED cells, not only in their organization and their command and control but in their ability to make these things, these car bombs. And so that has shown up, and there's a very significant and clear decrease in them.

Likewise the number of murders in the town has gone down very significantly, any way that you count it. I mean, yesterday we had three -- very unfortunate; today we had two -- again, very brutal murders, but the numbers are way lower than they were when we started this.

And if you go by -- you know, it's a city of about 7 million, so if you go by per capita, the trends are all in the right direction. So by most measures, the operation is having a positive effect with the trends in the right direction on measures of violence and the effects of those violence.

You asked, though, about the work that we're doing as we are in reconciliation with many of the tribes both inside and outside of Baghdad, and it is not a matter of arming militias. In fact, these tribes are already well armed, and we are not arming any of them here in Baghdad. What we are doing, though, is we're embarking in a dialogue with them, and some of them who have previously been fighting us have come to us as we have spoken with them and they want to fight with us. They are tired of al Qaeda and the influence of al Qaeda in their tribes and in their neighborhoods, and they want them cleaned out. And they want to form an alliance in order to rid themselves of this blight. We think it's a very positive development, we're excited about it, but we are, frankly, being cautious. And we are working closely with the government of Iraq and the Iraqi security forces so that -- you know, this is -- as we embark on this conversation, it's conditional.

First of all, they have to sign up with an oath of allegiance to the nation of Iraq. They have to renounce violence. If we do embark upon organizing them into groups, it has to be done under the auspices of the -- either the Ministry of Defense or the Ministry of Interior. As we are getting into this conversation with them -- and we are now deeply in a conversation, and for example, the Abu Ghraib area, where we've got more than 1,500 of them who have signed up to serve in the security forces of Iraq, and we're signing up about 300 a day in the application process. We are taking fingerprints and all the biometric data. They are very carefully vetted with tribal leadership, and then they are brought before a panel of Iraqi positions and leadership out of the Ministry of Interior for the interview process.

So it's a deliberate program. I think it's got huge promise. We're very excited about it. It is not just on tribes, it's also inside the city in some of the neighborhoods, where we have problems with police in the numbers. So -- and for example, we're doing the same type program in Ghazalia, which is an area where there currently is completely insufficient number of Iraqi police service, troops. And also we're doing -- we'd like to do the same thing with some of the Shi'a groups as well, both on the east and west side of the rivers.

MR. WHITMAN: Let's go over to Barbara.

Q General Fil, Barbara Starr from CNN. When you were talking about attacks being down, can I go back to that?

And could you help us understand, in Baghdad, are attacks -- casualties, fatality rates against U.S. troops, specifically, going down, are they steady, are they up?

And you mentioned deep-buried IEDs. We've heard this term several times recently. Are the IEDs you're seeing buried deeper? Are they getting harder to detect? They seem to be the mass casualty IEDs.

And also, on the threat side, there was discussion a few days ago by, I believe, General Odierno about seeing Iranian-origin rockets, mortars in the city. What Iranian weapons are you seeing in the city? What Iranian-backed fighters are you seeing in the city?

GEN. FIL: Well, thank you. Let me take those in the order in which they were asked.

First of all, casualties, the U.S. As overall casualty rates have come down -- and they've come down with Iraqi civilians month by month -- occasionally there's a spike that goes the wrong direction as we have a setback of some kind, but overall they've come down. They've come down with the Iraqi security forces as well. They have not come down with our on forces here in Baghdad, and I believe that's a function of really two things.

Number one, we are out in the neighborhoods; we're not in FOBs anymore. Most of our soldiers, the combat soldiers are out in joint security stations and coalition outposts, and they're out on the streets patrolling and interacting with the population and with the enemy at a much higher rate than we've been before. Plus, the number of troops is much higher. The number of combat troops is up by two- and-a-half brigades here in Baghdad alone. And so those two together, plus the very, you know, high operational tempo that we're keeping. In fact, the casualty rates have come up some.

We're working very hard on that. We study every single casualty, and we are working very, very hard on going to the root of the cells and the networks that are causing these, especially with the IEDs.

So again, the trend lines are very positive with the Iraqi security forces, certainly with the Iraqi population, but they have gone up somewhat for coalition soldiers over here. But again, I would attribute that to the rising population of coalition soldiers and a hugely increased operational tempo.

You asked about deep-buried IEDs. These are explosive devices that are put underground. And when we say deep-buried, it's because they're not just surface-laid or just under the surface. They're put in deliberately, frequently with a very high explosive weight, either a number of artillery shells or sometimes homemade explosives, sometimes mines. Frequently it's all of these things put together.

We are working on the techniques to help discover them, and we are working very hard on the techniques to help counter the cells who are putting them in. And we have learned, we believe, most of the techniques that they've developed to put them in deep. And so we're now going, for example, on sewer systems. We're, you know, going around and frankly welding shut many of the access covers. We're being very careful about drainage ditches that pass underneath roadways and any other way that there is to put explosives underneath roads. The deeper it is, the harder it is to detect, obviously. But again, we're working hard on counters, and I probably shouldn't say much more about that in this forum.

Finally you asked about comments that General Odierno made the other day. I was not there at his conference, but I've discussed many times with him this increasing frequency with which we find Iranian arms and munitions over here. And I can tell you that much of the indirect fire that we receive, especially that which is pointed at the International Zone, the Green Zone, is in fact Iranian.

And when we check the tail fins of the mortars, when we find the rockets -- and frequently we're able to find them preemptively, before they actually launch -- we're -- there's no doubt that they're coming out of Iran. Most of them are made fairly recently, in the past several years, and they have lot numbers that we can track -- trace later on.

I'll also say that most of these are coming from the eastern side of the river, by far the majority, in and

around the Sadr City area. And so we focused our efforts very strongly into discovering where these areas are that they're frequently shooting from and denying those. And that's a major effort for their vision that will of course continue.

MR. WHITMAN: Guy.

Q General Fil, Guy Raz from NPR. Can you give us an update on how many of Baghdad's neighborhoods have been cleared and are being held, how many remain, and at what point you expect all of Baghdad's neighborhoods to have been cleared and held?

GEN. FIL: I'd be very happy to. There are 474 -- they're called mahalas, which is roughly equivalent to a neighborhood -- here in Baghdad, in the city. And we track our operations in each one of these neighborhoods.

As you may be aware, our strategy involves one of -- starting with disruption and then we go through clearance, controlling, retention and then finally it gets transitioned to pure Iraqi security forces.

Several months ago, in April, we were at about 41 percent in disruption, 35 percent in clearing, and we had -- some 19 percent of them were in what we call control, which is where we have our security forces there and we're denying that space to enemy forces.

That has come up significantly, and now we're at -- about 15, 16 percent of these are in the disruption phase. Thirty-six of them -- 36 percent of them, which is 191 of these actual mahalas, are in clear, which means we're in there with our forces and the Iraqi security forces in active operations. And 41, 42 percent of them, about 195 of the mahalas, are in control.

And then there are actually a little over 7 percent of them, 34 of the mahalas, that have actually transitioned into the retain pace. So control and retain together is about 48 and something percent. These numbers are fluid, and as we progress, you would expect the number of disruption to be reduced, the number of clearance to be raised as they go from clear to control. That would be raised, and then, eventually, they'll end up in retention.

The number of clearance of forces remains relative constant because that's as much work as we are confident in doing with the forces we have available. Even though we've increased some of our forces over time recently, the clearance forces remain relatively constant, and those additional forces have gone into the hold phase, the control and retain phase.

Q (Off mike.)

GEN. FIL: If I might -- just -- when do we expect it to be finished? I can't say. That -- I gave you a glimpse of what the progress has been in the past several months. I am very confident that we're going to be able to continue progress along those lines. But I'm also quite sure that there are going to be some neighborhoods where we come across a very determined enemy who is going to stay there and fight, and we're in some of those neighborhoods right now -- in Dura, this portion of east Rashid I talked about earlier, and it may take some time to get those fully cleared so that we're confident in leaving security forces there and moving on to the next area of town for clearance.

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead, Pam.

Q General, this is Pam Hess with United Press International. September has taken on rather mythic proportions back here in Washington, and I'm wondering if you would tell us what you think are realistic expectations should be on the part of Washington for where you guys are in Baghdad in September; and from a military perspective, if this de facto deadline is having any impact on how you operate, or how you plan, or morale

or what your expectations are for where you can be.

GEN. FIL: I think I heard everything except for the term before -- mystic -- or mythical proportions.

If you'd say just the first sentence again, please.

Q (Off mike) -- Washington, September has taken on mythic proportions as being a deadline. Congress has put it into law. There's -- the report is expected. But I wonder how much relationship it actually has to reality.

GEN. FIL: Yeah. I can tell you that we're very aware of the rising expectation in the United States and especially in Washington for this September date, at which -- during which General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker will make I think what'll be a situation report on our progress here.

And at the division level, I am certainly cognizant of that, but I can tell you that we haven't altered any of our plans based on this date, which will be an important one, but it'll come and go. Instead, our strategy remains intact, and we're pushing hard, very hard with our operation, and there's nothing that would be wise to do in preparation for September that we're not already doing. And so we're going to continue very hard to work our own operations, to work with our Iraqi counterparts to help them stand strong as they stand up, to work the other lines of operation that are so important -- economic development, the infrastructure repairs that need to be made, helping the local governments to stand up at the neighborhood and district level -- and I think that that will be the progress that both General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker will be able to speak to when they make this report in September. So it's not a suspense that has altered the events on our timeline at all so far.

You asked if it is affecting the morale of soldiers over here; no, it's not. They're quite busy doing what they're doing. They're getting after this. They are very, very good at it, and they know it. They are confident in their own operations, they're confident in the training that they've had, the leadership they've had. I think they're confident in the operation they are conducting, and they're focused on getting the job done. So I haven't seen one bit of -- or heard one bit of concern on their part on this. But as it gets closer, we'll keep an eye on it.

MR. WHITMAN: Gordon?

Q Sir, Gordon Lubold with the Christian Science Monitor. You talked about casualty rates. I wondered if you would -- if I could just draw you out a little bit on that. The rates of U.S. casualties is used, you know, sometimes to show progress in taking it to the enemy and whatnot, and then on the other side suggests failure of the policy.

Can you -- do you think it's a fair metric, in your words, to use one way or another? And come September, if rates are as high as they are now, how would you see those numbers then?

GEN. FIL: I would say first of all that, you know, clearly any soldier who is harmed here, whether he's wounded or he gives his life, in this action -- I mean, it's just a tragedy. And I mean, it's a huge sacrifice that not only the soldier makes but his family makes, that the nation makes. And we're very determined to lower them every way we can.

But I'll also tell you that this is a tough fight, and it is taking determined soldiers, brave, courageous, determined soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines to fight it. And they are out there fighting strong. I would never say that the number of our soldiers is a measure of success, but it is a measure of the difficulty and the commitment to this fight.

I would also say that it is not a good measure of failure, as you suggest. This is a skilled and determined enemy. He's ruthless. He's got a thirst for blood like I've never seen anywhere in my life, and he's determined to do whatever he can. Even as he is attrited, even as he is put into a smaller and smaller area, even as he is

denied options and opportunities, he's determined to continue fighting.

And so this is a fight that we're into, and it's a fight that the soldiers are committed to. And whether or not it will be at the same rates, higher or lower, in September, I cannot say.

But I can tell you that we're doing everything we can to lower it while we increase our tempo against the enemy.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, sir, the time has just flown by, and I'm afraid we've reached the end of the allocated time. And we want to be respectful of your time.

But I do want to turn it back to you in case there's something that we didn't cover or something that we've brought up that has spawned a last comment or thought from you, also.

GEN. FIN: Again, as last time, we're just touching this, and I do wish that we had more time, frankly.

I would like to thank you all for your attention today and for this opportunity to speak with you. It occurs to me that the 4th of July, one of our favorite holidays, is fast approaching, and the early days of our nation's history were difficult once, as we struggled to define our national identity and our place in global society. And we survived in part because of the assistance that we received from other nations. And our Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776, but it wasn't until years later that we attained our independence, and that was after a long, tough war. And during that time of turmoil and uncertainty, I don't believe that our nation would have been successful, much less become the most powerful nation in the world, unless we had had this help and the determination to carry that through.

Iraq is still in its infancy. Its early challenges are not unlike those that we experienced, and we remain dedicated to standing side by side with our Iraqi counterparts to help them move forward here.

I would also tell you that our soldiers are amazing. I spent time with them out on patrol yesterday, was with their commanders again today. And their selfless sacrifice, their service, their professionalism is what is making this nation so proud of their work, and it is part of what makes our nation so great, I think. And it's truly an honor to be here serving with them and to be able to command America's finest.

And I thank the American people for their steadfast support of the American service member and for what we're trying to do here as well.

Again, thanks very much everybody. I appreciate your time and attention. It's been my pleasure to speak with you today, first team.

MR. WHITMAN: Thank you, General. It is very valuable for us to have time with not only you, but also your subordinate commanders that you make available to us in this format. And any time that you want to talk to us, we will make time here for you.

So thank you very much.

GEN. FIL: Well, I appreciate that, and we're going to take advantage of your offer.

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