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**Presenter: Commanding General, U.S. Marine Corps, Multinational Force West, II  
Marine Expeditionary Force (Forward), Maj. Gen. Walter Gaskin**

**December 10,  
2007**

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

Note: The general appears via teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq.)

BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): All right. Let's go ahead and get started. Let me just make sure General Gaskin can hear us.

General Gaskin, this is Bryan Whitman from the Pentagon. Can you hear me okay?

GEN. GASKIN: I can hear you.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you for joining us again. I think this is the third time that you've done this type of format for us, and we do appreciate your time.

For those of you who don't know General Gaskin, this is Major General Walt Gaskin. He's the commanding general of Multinational Forces West. Like I said, this is the third time that he's done this format back here to the Pentagon, and we appreciate that.

He is speaking to us today from Baghdad, and as he has done in the past, he has a brief overview that he'd like to provide for you in terms of what his forces have been doing and then is going to take some of your questions.

So, General, again, thank you for being with us this morning -- this afternoon, your time -- and let me turn it over to you.

GEN. GASKIN: Thank you, Bryan. I guess it's been about five months since I last had the opportunity to update you.

Today I would like to bring you up to date on the situational -- in the Multinational Force West area of operation, the Anbar province. The security situation in the province is -- on the whole, is good, with only a few trouble spots remaining. Coalition and Iraqi security forces have aggressively pursued a strategy of expelling al Qaeda in Iraq from all the major population centers -- (brief audio break) -- AQI out into the desert, where we then can target and eliminate them. We have been largely successful with this strategy, resulting in acts of violence

being dramatically reduced in the cities across -- all over the province in Anbar.

As you can see by the slide now showing, the number of enemy incidents against coalition and Iraqi forces continue to drop. We define an enemy incident as any type of attack or attempt(ed) attack, such as when we find unexploded improvised explosive device. This slide shows that the average daily (sic -- weekly) number of enemy incidents in Anbar from the last December to this week -- at the time last year, there were 460 enemy incidents. Compare that to 40 incidents we had this past week.

November marks the 10th straight month of decreasing enemy incidents. This positive trend is a testament to the hard work and dedication of the coalition and Iraqi security forces -- (brief audio break) -- work of Anbar's political and tribal leadership.

Earlier this year, we averaged approximately 70 enemy incidents per day. Now our average is nine incidents per day, and dropping. More than half of these incidents are tracking unexploded IEDs, that we find them.

Al Qaeda in Iraq is still capable of pulling off isolated attacks, like the suicide car bombing at the Justice Center in Ramadi on 21 November. That attack claimed the lives of two Iraqi police officers and one innocent civilian. Far from striking fear into the population, this attack was met by outrage and disgust by the citizens of Ramadi, who want nothing more than just the return to a sense of normalcy.

We are partnered with an effective Iraqi security force, and we share a common goal of ridding the province from al Qaeda's influence and improving their lives. Our defense is set in concentric circles. The outermost ring are the border enforcement forces who operate out of the border forts along more than 550 miles of international border. Next is the Iraqi army soldiers from the 1st and the 7th Iraqi Army Divisions, who own the battlespace outside the city. The Iraqi highway patrol work along the major economic corridors so vital for trade and economic growth. And finally, the Iraqi police forces protect the citizens of the province within the towns and cities. In all, there are almost 40,000 Iraqis in uniform here in Anbar sworn to protect the Iraqi citizens.

To give you a scope of how far we've progressed, there were less than one-half the number of Iraqi forces in the province last year when we arrived in February. Now there are 12,500 Iraqi soldiers; -- (inaudible) -- 400 than from last year, 10,600 Iraqi police officers in the province; now there are more than 25,800 police and border enforcement officers. That is a sobering fact. Roughly half of the Iraqi security force of Anbar have been in uniform for less than an one year.

This is one of the most difficult tasks ever performed -- recruiting, training and equipping and arming a police force while simultaneously combatting a ruthless enemy. The Iraqi security forces are acquitting themselves magnificently. They just need time to gain the experience required. You cannot buy experience; it has to be earned. And that time is coming. And it takes time to do that.

The praise I offer for the Iraqi forces is merited. They are not empty words. As the coalition forces redeploy out of Al Anbar, Iraqi forces have taken up their battle space. The 1st Iraqi Army Division soldiers are working in the Lake Thar Thar region northwest of Baghdad.

They took over this area when the 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit left last September. The Iraqi forces have shown a tremendous degree of skill and confidence in their operations. They have continued to capture key al Qaeda leaders, disrupt their operations, and unearth hidden weapons and cache sites. These operations and success in this is theirs and theirs alone.

I assess that one of the key factors in our success here has been our embedded transition teams. We currently have approximately 1,700 Marines, soldiers and sailors assigned to transition teams who are partnered with the Iraqi army soldiers and police detachments and broader defense forces. These men live and work side

by side with their Iraqi counterparts. They share the same trials and hardships, and the satisfaction of being there when the unit performs in the field. They are trainers, mentors and facilitators. They are partners. I believe in the importance of their mission, so much so that we have increased the number of personnel that we assign to these transition teams by 40 percent. We assure that these transition teams have been integral for our success and remain a vital element in our security strategy.

The progress we've experienced in economic development and reconstruction efforts would not be possible without the improved security we are now experiencing. Our Provincial Reconstruction Teams and the three Embedded PRTs are capitalizing on the progress to revitalize the economic infrastructure across the province. Last month in Husaybah, the port of entry border crossing was officially open for business. This opening will reinvigorate the economy in western Al Anbar. The city's health clinic was recently renovated, restoring medical services for approximately 10,000 residents in that area.

Further down the Euphrates River Valley, in Baghdadi, members of the EPRT have begun working with the government to develop a plan to distribute warehouse and farming supplies and equipment as part of an ongoing effort to revitalize agriculture in the central Euphrates Valley. Government officials in Ramadi are anticipating the grand opening of the microfinance program office next week, and although the center is not fully operational, the center has already received over 15 microfinance applications.

And south, in Fallujah and Ferris Town, the Al Ikiyah (ph) medical fabrication plant is scheduled to undergo a renovation. This project has the potential to employ an additional 2,300 residents on top of the 3,000 that will be employed once the factory is operating at full capacity.

This is just a snapshot of the projects -- (audio break) -- moving ahead. We will continue to push forward for our Iraqi partners, to improve their lives, for the citizens of this province.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, General, certainly a lot has happened in five months, and we appreciate that overview. But we do have some questions here, so let's go ahead and get started.

Go ahead.

Q Sir, it's Pauline Jelinek of the Associated Press.

We're told that in some areas, there are so many concerned local citizens that officials are thinking they need a civilian job corps, rather than make more of them into police. These 25,000 Iraqi police that you have in your area -- they're all agreed to by the central government. And is that what you need, or do you have a lot more people who you need to find other types of jobs for as well?

GEN. GASKIN: If I understand your question, you're talking about the citizens who are candidates for our Iraqi police department.

Basically we've got about 24,000 policemen and we plan to move that up to 27,000. I don't have concerned local citizens in my area. What we do have is a neighborhood watch. All of those that are in our area are candidates for the Iraqi police. All of them are hired by the minister of interior. So what we do is for those that are potential candidates, they receive approximately 80 hours of training as they await for their turn to go to the academy in Habbaniya.

So yes, I think this is a good thing, because the police have provided the center of what we talk about in those concentric circles. And the security -- (audio break) -- their communities. They are trained to be professional police and they are sworn and vetted, and work within the rule of law. So this is a good thing for the

stability within the province.

Q They're candidates. Are they actually -- have they been hired and are they working for the central government? What's candidates mean?

GEN. GASKIN: Well, what it means is, is that they are initially waiting their turn. What I have in the province is, more want to join the police than I actually have the capacity to train or the numbers allocated. I'm assigned that number of 24,000, moving to 27,000. That is the ceiling that's provided by the central government.

Every one of those that do work, however, have hiring orders from the central government. As a candidate, that means that they have been looked at -- (audio break) -- but they are waiting an opening or they're waiting training to become official policemen.

Q The more people that you don't have positions for, do you have a plan for them, some other kind of job?

GEN. GASKIN: Well, that's why I talked about the economic development because one of the things that we want to do is employ. Within my AO, there are about 17 state-owned enterprises. Those state-owned enterprises have been historically a great hiring and employment provided for the citizens of Anbar. We are working with at least five of them that will generate jobs. I talked about the precision metal factory around Fallujah. There is the Ramadi ceramic factory. There is the phosphate factory out in al Qaim. (Audio break) -- generate jobs for the young Anbaris.

There's no way the hiring in the Iraqi security forces, either that be the police, the border patrol or the army, can meet the total numbers of job requirements for the province. So this economic development and revitalization of the infrastructure within the province will provide jobs, and we see that moving all the time.

MR. WHITMAN: Let's go over here to Jamie.

Q General, Jamie McIntyre with CNN. How confident are you that the positive trends you're seeing are going to continue, and how soon do you think it will be before U.S. troops can leave Anbar entirely?

GEN. GASKIN: Well, I think that the positive trends are permanent. The Anbaris, in particular, have seen the brutal way in which al Qaeda operated. They don't want to return to that. In fact, they have what's known as blood feuds with al Qaeda; meaning, it takes about six generations to eliminate that type of strife. The Anbaris are tired of violence.

They will tell you that they have lived in violence -- either they were committing violence, receiving violence, intimidated by violence, and they are really sick of it.

So they want a life of normalcy. They want to have their kids go to school. They like to have employment. And so I think that part is permanent.

What is necessary is that while we have the umbrella over them to allow that to develop, we've got to do just that. I talk about having the number of security forces, but they are relatively new. It's been less than a year since these forces have been organized. They have to be trained, and they have to gain experience. That experience -- (audio break) -- what we have done is given them the opportunity to do that by training along with them, by providing example for them, mentorship, leadership. And I see this as we improve their capacity and we, meaning the coalition forces, are able to withdraw back into overwatch. We can see now that these forces will be capable of doing and operating on their own. Independence, self-reliance all is coming.

As I told you five months ago, I thought it would take the Iraqi security forces about 24 months to evolve to the point where they could be self-sustaining both logistically, tactically, operationally. I'm just five months into that, so by 19 months I see them rising to the level for -- which is required for them to operate independently.

MR. WHITMAN: Let's go over here to Andrew.

Q General, it's Andrew Gray from Reuters. If I could just follow up on that, I understand that you're talking about another 19 months before they can operate completely independently. But when will you be able to draw down your forces to hand over more responsibility to them? Do you have a timeline roughly in mind of when you can start to withdraw from Anbar?

GEN. GASKIN: Well, I think we're all aware that General Petraeus and General Odierno are talking about the drawdown of surge forces. But we have to take a look at where we are as it relates to al Qaeda and security arrangements and the training.

What is needed for security in Anbar will always remain. The question is who will provide their security and whether or not they have the capacity to do so. I see the training and the involvement of the Iraqi security forces as progressing very well, and that's what I'm talking about, where over the next 19 months, because of the operations that they're participating in as we move out of the cities into the hinterland to get at al Qaeda, we also see the interoperability that exists between the police and the army.

And for the protection of the citizens, we see them dealing -- the police -- with the criminal enterprise as well as the terrorists. So in this COIN environment, I see that as evolving, and so to actually set a timetable, it is dependent on their development. Currently, I think that that timetable for development is about 19 months away when they have actually had all of the type of operations necessary to validate where they are.

MR. WHITMAN: Let's go over here to Jim.

Q Sir, Jim Garamone from American Forces Press Service. Can you just discuss a little bit the relations between the national government and provincial leaders? Are they getting -- is the province getting the funds from the Iraqi national government? And if I might, with the opening of the port in al Qaim, are you seeing private businesses come into the western Euphrates River Valley?

GEN. GASKIN: I'll take the second one first. With the opening of the POE at Al Qaim, it's too early to tell. You know, we just opened that POE up. It's going to be the economic development because, for years, the corridor -- the economic corridor that leads down the Euphrates Valley has come through that POE and the Syria connection. So I see that as great promise for the province.

The other question that I think you asked -- would you repeat that part again?

Q Yeah, sir, the relations between the Iraqi national government and provincial leaders, if the province is getting the money it needs to -- that hold, clear -- or clear, hold, build, if you're actually getting the money you need to build.

GEN. GASKIN: I think it is -- it's beginning. That is also demonstrating or living within the democratic principles that allow the national government, down through the prime minister to the governor or down from the ministers through the director generals down to the provincial level. As you know, the Provincial Council is back operating. It has only been operating since around May. They were basically in exile because of murder and intimidation.

Understanding the requirements of building a budget, of awarding those contracts for the rebuilding of all of the major cities and having a city council, a city government that can connect with the provincial government

and provincial chair, these things that we have worked on very well and as far as governance, are sitting down having a -- within the PRTs, for example, teaching how to write city government, having economics understanding, how to build a budget and how to request funds from the central government.

This is new. Before, the money was force fed. Now it's requested through budgetary requirements. Probably in 2006 budget, not very much granularity. 2007, we were able to, along with Governor Maamoun and Dr. -- and his provincial chair, Dr. Abdulsalam, they were able to sit down and work out with the mayors of the major eight cities within Anbar and request a budget.

They had a budget of about 107 million, and that went -- able to go back to the federal government and request a supplement, probably the first time that we've had a supplemental budget. And so they end up having \$170 million. So from the grassroots level, they've been able to build a budget and do governance and connect that to their federal government, based on the requirements within the province.

Addition to that, we had what's known as Anbar Forum II, where the province itself petitioned the federal government in areas that dealt with the state-owned enterprises, the infrastructure, agriculture, microfinance, all those areas that request, so that the government itself, being the provincial government, can receive funds. Are they receiving all that they should? No. Are they -- have they got procedures in place to request? Yes, and it's growing, and I anticipate the 2008 budget will bear witness to that, that connection and request for funding of those rebuilding both economically, and for the salaries of those who work within the provincial government.

Q Gordon Lubold with the Christian Science Monitor.

Kind of touching on that point a little bit more, you talked before about the challenges of raising the logistical capabilities of the ISF. What impact does the budget struggles from Baghdad have on what you're seeing, in terms of the ISF raising their capabilities logistically?

GEN. GASKIN: Well, I think, it's falling in the embryonic stages. I've seen some progress in logistics for the army, for example, and their transportation. I would like to see a lot more in their maintenance, and they do a lot of contractual maintenance and work as far as parts. They don't really have the connection with the industrial base, so that is a work in progress.

I think however that the processes are in place for both through their ministers, up through the minister of defense and the minister of interior, as it relates to the police, to request funding of not only their life support systems but the ability to repair and replace items that they need. So again is it smooth and simple? No. Is it difficult? Yes. Is it beginning to work? We see progress.

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

I wanted to ask you about the Awakening, and you talked a little bit about how there's this blood feud, and how the Anbaris have rejected the brutality of al Qaeda. Would you say that the progress that we've seen this year in Anbar had to do with something that MNF-I did? Or was it entirely indigenous to the inner workings of the people who live in the province?

GEN. GASKIN: I think it's a combination. You know, you can't separate the fact that this multinational corps and force out here was designed to eliminate al Qaeda.

And al Qaeda is a part of why the Awakening came about, is to awake and see that you can have self-reliance. We can join with the coalition forces and rid ourselves of the brutality and the caliphate and the just plain disregard for how the Anbaris live.

Now, it kind of manifests itself out here in Anbar because these were Sunnis -- (audio break) -- and

therefore, they resisted the Taliban-like life -- the life and ideology that al Qaeda was bringing to this area. But it did not come without a cost. Al Qaeda was very brutal to the sheikhs, and this is a very tribal society. As a matter of fact, the sheikhs often say that we were tribal before we were Muslim, and therefore, this is a(n) anchor point within our society. And so when al Qaeda attacked that, they did some very brutal things to the sheikhs, did not follow customs allowing the sheikhs to die in the desert and not burying them within 24 hours. That's what I mean by the blood feud and that they have created a schism that I don't think will ever be repaired.

And because they really want to return to a life where they can have control of their own destiny, I see this as an opportunity since -- (audio break) -- have joined with al Qaeda -- with the sheikhs and the people against al Qaeda. This is going to work, and I think it's enduring.

Q But General, might that not have happened anyway without MNF-I, without the surge, without the new counterinsurgency strategy?

GEN. GASKIN: I doubt it. I think if you -- if you look at the history of the fighting here, you will see that several times the sheikhs have attempted to rid themselves of al Qaeda.

They started in about 2005 out in al Qaim, where the sheikhs raised up, calling themselves the Desert Protectors, put down brutally by al Qaeda. It started again in and around Ramadi, where 11 sheikhs raised up to try to rid themselves of al Qaeda and its caliphate and shura law. And 11 of -- of those 11 -- (audio break) -- were put down brutally.

And so again, in Ramadi with Sheikhs Sattar Abu Risi (ph) who started the Sahwa Allah Iraq, which is the Awakening movement. He had lost two brothers and a father in that fight. So he realized, too, that the joining of the coalition who had there to aid them in getting rid of al Qaeda, that we were better equipped, better trained and had a better principle (sic) of what was happening to them and all of that. This joining of us with them would not have happened -- it definitely would not have happened in the time frame for which we are experiencing now because al Qaeda was better organized, better financed and a lot more brutal than the Anbaris ever expected in dealing with them.

And so I think this was a -- (audio break) -- and it's proved to be ridding them of al Qaeda and allow them to get on with their economic development and governance of this province.

Q General, looking at the decrease of incidents, it looks -- you know, you've been able to demonstrate that they've gone down, but 2007 was still one of the deadliest years of the war. And how has the nature of the incidents changed? What are you seeing -- how -- how do you define an incident changed over this time period that you're showing us?

GEN. GASKIN: Well, first of all, each one of those incidents, it could be an IED, it could be indirect fire, it could be small arms fire, coordinated attacks. Those are how we define incidents. And make no mistake about it, al Qaeda in Anbar is defeated. As you recall, al Qaeda declared Anbar as its Islamic capital, so they will always attempt to come back. And that's why it's important that the capacity of the Iraqi security forces is capable of dealing with that.

Over time, as we saw -- for example, I told you, this time last year, there were 460 of those incidents, and this week it was 40. The reason why it is 40 is because we have kicked al Qaeda out of Anbar and they haven't had a chance to go to those cache sites that we discovered, they don't have a chance to intimidate the local citizens, and the Iraqi security forces are better at fighting and dealing with them.

When they deal with the Iraqi security forces, they have a formidable -- formidable foe. It's just no longer intimidation and you can't wear your uniform, if you're police, to come to work, or the Iraqi army don't have enough members of indigenous Iraqis to fight. They are trained to fight, they have acquitted themselves very well,

and al Qaeda knows this. So that's why the incidence levels are going down, because we are dealing with those who perpetrate those incidents.

MR. WHITMAN: We've reached the end of our time, but let me try to get one more in. Lisa's been trying to get a question asked here for some time.

Q Hi, General. This is actually on the same topic. Lisa Burgess with Stars and Stripes. Would you say that you have enemies other than al Qaeda that you're facing? You said something about a criminal element. Can you describe that a little further?

GEN. GASKIN: Well, I think we all have seen throughout here that this insurgency started with some of the nationalist elements out here that were kind of absorbed by al Qaeda; for example, like the 1920 Brigade. We have not seen much of that -- (brief audio break) -- have been eliminated. But there's also black marketing and there's also inner squabbles, criminal elements that exist in any society.

So the ability for not only the Iraqi police to deal with the terrorist aspect, but -- and within the rule of law, they've got to be able to deal with the criminal element and those that just do the normal crime against citizens. So the training of this Iraqi police is designed to deal with all of that so that they will have complete stability within the major population centers and surrounding area.

MR. WHITMAN: We have reached the end of our time, and we appreciate you setting aside some time again to talk to us and to explain to us what's going on basically in MNF-I West. But before I bring it to a close, let me turn it back to you in case you have some final remarks that you'd like to make.

GEN. GASKIN: (Short audio break) -- a little more than 35,000 Marines, soldiers, sailors and airmen assigned to the Multiforces West. And as their commander, I couldn't be more proud. We have a difficult mission, but there has been perseverance and that of the Iraqi allies is paying off. Every day I see their hard work achieving significant results in Iraq. The success we have seen is (inaudible) and is a testament to the continued dedication to the mission.

I would also like to express my deep gratitude to our service- member families. We appreciate all the sacrifice that you have selflessly made. You have continued to support us, and that has been crucial to our success and mission completion here.

I thank you again for the opportunity to talk to you.

GEN. GASKIN: Well, thank you, General. And thank you again for making your regimental combat team -- your subordinates available for this format too. We appreciate it. Thank you very much.

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