



U.S. Department of Defense
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Presenter: Commander, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division Col. John Charlton

August 03, 2007

DoD News Briefing with Col. Charlton from the Pentagon Briefing Room, Arlington Va.

(Note: Colonel Charlton appears via teleconference from Iraq.)

BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Well, good morning, and let's get started.

Let me just make sure technically we're okay. General Charleston (sic), this -- Colonel Charlton, this is Bryan Whitman from the Pentagon. Can you hear me okay?

COL. CHARLTON: I sure can. Good morning.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you for joining us this afternoon, and good morning to the press corps here. We are privileged to have as our briefer today Colonel John Charlton, who is the commander of 1st Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division. He and his brigade are currently operating in western Iraq, where they assumed responsibility for security earlier this year. Today he is speaking to us from Ramadi.

This is his first opportunity to brief you in this format here. But he is familiar with the format and is going to give you a brief overview of what his unit has been doing and the security situation in his operational area and then will -- has been kind enough to take some questions from you.

So with that, let me go ahead and turn it over to you, and we can get started.

COL. CHARLTON: Okay. Good morning. I'm Colonel John Charlton, commander of the 1st Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division. I want to thank you for allowing me the opportunity to provide an operational update on successes and the way ahead for the brigade combat team here in Ramadi, the capital of Al Anbar province, Iraq.

I'll start by providing you an overview of our brigade combat team. We arrived here approximately eight months ago from Fort Stewart, Georgia. This is the brigade's third deployment serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Twenty percent of the brigade has deployed all three times with the brigade, while 60 percent have deployed twice with the brigade. I myself have deployed three times to Iraq with the 3rd Infantry Division.

The brigade combat team assumed responsibility of Ramadi on 18 February 2007. Ramadi is Al Anbar's provincial capital and is approximately 70 miles west of Baghdad. Our area of operations, known as AO Topeka, is roughly 8,900 square miles and contains a population of about 500,000 and is 99 percent Sunni Arab.

I currently command a joint brigade combat team of approximately 6,000 soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines. There are also more than 12,000 Iraqi security forces. So our total combined forces are greater than 18,000.

This is truly a joint and coalition fight. Our mission here, in partnership with our embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team, is to conduct counterinsurgency operations, to defeat al Qaeda and secure and stabilize AO Topeka, to set the conditions for the transfer of security and government functions to the government of Iraq.

Security here in Ramadi continues to improve as the Iraqi police and army forces work daily to keep the population safe. When we arrived in February, we were averaging between 30 and 35 attacks per day in our area of responsibility; now our average is one attack a day or less. We have experienced entire weeks with zero attacks in our area and have more than -- have a total of more than 80 days with no attacks in the city. I attribute this success to our close relationship with the Iraqi security forces and the army forces -- I'm sorry -- and the support those forces receive from the civilian population. The Iraqi police and army forces have uncovered hundreds of munition caches and get intelligence tips from the local population every day.

I believe stabilizing communities is a fundamental part of a successful counterinsurgency campaign. Counterinsurgencies are fought and won neighborhood by neighborhood, with the focus on protecting the population and improving conditions in the community.

After clearing the area of terrorists -- and we do this by conducting large-scale offensive operations -- our focus shifts to an establishment of a permanent security presence with coalition forces and Iraqi security forces. That is the purpose of the joint security stations. The joint security stations help secure and stabilize communities by providing an overt security presence, which establishes the perception of security in the minds of the population. Once they feel safe, the people begin to provide intelligence to the police, and security continues to improve steadily.

This also helps insulate the community from terrorist attempts to move back into the neighborhood. We then shift our focus to nonlethal efforts to stabilize the community. This is done through day labor programs, small business development, engagement with the local sheikhs and imams and information operations focused specifically on that community.

We recently received intelligence reports that terrorists were attempting to stage attacks from an area south of the city. We increased our offensive operations in that area and made contact with a large group of al Qaeda terrorists that were attempting to infiltrate Ramadi. There were about 60 to 70 well-equipped and well-trained terrorists who were moving towards the city in two large trucks. They all had new equipment, weapons, and many were wearing suicide belts.

The targets were the Iraqi police and the tribal leaders in Ramadi, and we know this from the propaganda videos that we took off of the terrorists following their defeat. We attacked these terrorists using ground forces and attack helicopters, resulting in the destruction of that force. If this force had made it into the city, it would have been a tremendous victory for al Qaeda. We successfully defeated their attack, but we know that they will try again in the future. The good news is that the people of Al Anbar and Ramadi are united in their stand against al Qaeda.

There are approximately 7,400 police officers and 4,700 Iraqi army soldiers providing security to the citizens of Ramadi. Every day they get better at performing their security operations; most importantly, they are making their presence known and felt in the region.

The police are from the local area and can identify with who belongs here and who is out of place. A year ago, there were less than 200 police officers operating in two police stations here in Ramadi. As mentioned earlier, that number has grown to approximately 7,400 officers operating in more than 30 police stations and substations throughout our area.

Our biggest challenges with the Iraqi police are getting them fully equipped, paid and consolidated into police stations. They still rely heavily on coalition logistics and support; however, we expect the equipment issues to improve soon, and we are working hard to get their logistics and command and control systems in place.

One thing that is not lacking is the courage and the dedication of the Iraqi police and the Iraqi army in Al Anbar.

For them, this fight is personal. They know that al Qaeda is targeting them, their families and their tribes.

The Iraqi army has seen significant growth in this region as well. As we watched the police numbers increase, we wondered why the army wasn't seeing the same growth. It turned out that the potential recruits were afraid of joining the military and then being sent to serve throughout Iraq. They wanted to serve Iraq, but they wanted to do it in the local area. The Iraqi government intervened and allowed the men to join the military and to be assigned to one of the two brigades operating in my area. When the Iraqi army held a recruiting drive at the end of March, more than 1,200 recruits enlisted in over three days. Both brigades are now capable of planning and conducting operations with minimum coalition support.

The success we experienced here could not have been achieved without the close personal relationship we developed with the tribal leaders. Their support of coalition troops and their distaste for al Qaeda has been incredibly helpful. If a tribal leader tells members of the tribe to join the security forces, they will join the security forces. I could spend an entire day emphasizing the importance of security and the need to join the police and army but get nowhere, but if the sheikhs step forward and if they tell their young men to join the Iraqi police and the Iraqi army, you can bet that it's going to happen. Their support has been absolutely phenomenal.

Some of our most recent successes have been in the areas of reconstruction and governance. The city government did not exist before April of this year but has grown steadily over the past few months and is now providing essential services to the population. In areas that were battlefields only a few months ago, city electrical employees are now repairing transformers and power lines; sanitation workers are fixing sewer leaks caused by the hundreds of buried IEDs that have gone off over the last few years. The Iraqis have now repaired the electrical grid inside the city, and we're getting about 80 percent power throughout the city. And about 50 percent of the rubble from the battle damage has been removed. We expect to have all the rubble removed in the next 90 to 120 days, which will allow for many parts of the cities to start rebuilding.

Our Embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team or EPRT is working hard to help build the municipal government in Ramadi. The EPRT is composed of personnel from the United States State Department, USAID and other experts in various areas of government. We've partnered the EPRT with officials from the municipal government in much the same way that we partner soldiers and Marines with the Iraqi police and the Iraqi army. The EPRT works every day with the city government helping them with budgeting, planning and delivering services to the public. The EPRT is a critical capability that we never had before, and I'm confident that it's going to make a big difference in building stability here in Ramadi.

We've been working closely with the chief judge of the province to rebuild the judicial system here in Ramadi and throughout Al Anbar province. Four months ago, there were no attorneys, judges or investigators because of the threat from al Qaeda. Now that we've greatly increased in security throughout the area, these legal professionals are coming forward and we are helping re-establish the rule of law. Investigative judges are reviewing files -- case files for prisoners in Iraqi jails. They've released many of these prisoners because of lack of

evidence, but they've also prepared more than 35 files for prosecution. We established a detective's course in our police training center to help the Iraqi police do better investigations and evidence collection. We expect to have criminal courts hold their first trial here in Ramadi this month. That's pretty good progress considering that there was no rule of law, no judicial system only a few months ago.

We're also making good progress on economic development by focusing on low-level economic stimulation. Once we completed our large-scale offensive operations in February and March, we realized that we needed to provide a massive and quick economic stimulus in order to stabilize the communities within the city. Because of the fighting in the city, the economy was in ruins, and it was clear that it would take some time to get the businesses back in operation. We started a day labor program throughout the city that helped clear trash and rubble as well as provide an economic shot in the arm to these devastated communities.

These day labor programs are all planned and executed by company commanders, and they're effect was just absolutely dramatic.

We've provided more than 5.5 million in aid to these programs and employed more than 18,000 Iraqis. All this happened in about three or four months. This decentralized economic development program used only about 10 percent of my reconstruction funds but it has accounted for over 70 percent of the employment here in my area. These programs have cleaned neighborhoods, uncovered caches of munitions and have restored hope and pride to the citizens of Ramadi.

We've joined our efforts with organizations like the Iraqi- American Chamber of Commerce & Industry to help revitalize small businesses in Ramadi. Company commanders went throughout every neighborhood and conducted assessments of all small businesses in Ramadi, so we could help jumpstart the small business grant program. We collected over 500 assessments, which helped the Iraqi American Chamber of Commerce begin its grant operations.

This is the same technique that we use with all non-military organizations. We use our presence in the city and our access to the population to facilitate their operations. Revitalizing small businesses in Ramadi will lead to more stable communities, which helps us maintain overall security in the area.

We have a great relationship with other non-governmental organizations operating in the city as well. They focus on programs for the community stabilizations, just like we do, and they provide help in ways the military can't. For example, they funded a citywide soccer league by providing equipment and uniforms to hundreds of young Iraqis. The organization has also helped -- these organizations have also helped us form women's outreach groups that focus on adult literacy, health and education issues. Forming relationships with these non-governmental organizations is essential in the counterinsurgency campaign and complements our efforts to improve security.

Finally I'd like to tell you that our efforts here are a direct result of our servicemembers, and I'm proud of everything our men and women are accomplishing. They're operating in tough, austere conditions and every day, they continue to accomplish amazing things. America should be proud of what they are doing, and I know I am.

Thank you. I'll now take your questions.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you for that overview, Colonel, and we do have some questions here so we'll get right into it.

Go ahead, sir.

Q Colonel, it's David Wood from The Baltimore Sun.

Very impressive list of things you've accomplished and as you know, here in Washington, Anbar has a pretty high visibility because of the model it's said to provide for the rest of the country. I'm interested in how enduring these changes are. And in that respect, I wonder if you could talk to two points you brought up.

One was -- one is the provincial and how -- to what extent is it sort of taking hold and providing services? And the other is, you mentioned that through your funds, you've provided 70 percent of the employment in your region. And I wonder, is that an ongoing -- are those permanent jobs or are those like day labor jobs that come and go? And if the latter, what's the prospect for continued employment?

COL. CHARLTON: Well, let me start with the second question first. I just want to clarify something. When I said 75 or 70 percent of the employment, what I mean by that is, of all the Iraqis that have been hired using U.S. reconstruction funds, 70 percent of that employment came from day labor programs.

So what that shows is -- and it only took about 10 percent of my reconstruction funds, so you get a tremendous bang for the buck there. 10 percent of my reconstruction funds accounted for 70 percent of the Iraqis that have been hired using U.S. reconstruction dollars in my area. So it's a real payoff and it is short-term labor. Make no mistake -- it's not the final answer.

It's certainly not something that will sustain the economy for a long period.

What it's designed to do is get the economy going. You know, when I went through Ramadi in March, it was clear that it -- that the entire was just in really bad shape. There were no businesses up and running. The fighting was so tremendous that there was no economy really to speak of. And so we had to get that moving quickly.

And this is kind of like a New Deal program for Ramadi. It was designed to get some money in people's pockets, and then that would create the effect of, you know, further stimulating the economy. That's why we have a stair-stepped approach to economic development here. The next step up is to work those small business grants and loans, so that those -- (audio break) -- they lack inventory. They need -- (audio break) -- and so we're working very hard, like I said, with the Iraqi -- (audio break) -- and other groups to get those -- (audio break) -- to get those businesses going.

And then kind of at the top end of the employment or the economic development spectrum is the large factories. We have a -- one of the biggest employers in my area is a ceramics factory that makes very good product. And we hope to have that open on a limited capacity in the next couple of months. We've been working very hard with the Iraqis to get that open. The facility itself's in pretty good shape. It's just suffering from a couple years of non-use, but we're hopeful to get that open very soon.

And then, you know, we do other things, like contractor workshops and vocational and technical education. All of this is designed to keep that economy -- get it going quickly and then keep it going, so that it -- so we have some long-term economic growth.

Getting to the point of the provincial government, you know, their problem is -- it kind of -- it's tied to the way the Iraqi government works. One of the challenges we have is that the Iraqi government is organized along the ministries, and the money that comes down for services and for facilities comes through those ministries.

For example, if the mayor of Ramadi wants to build a new school, he has to turn to the director general of education for the city of Ramadi and request that that school be built. Then the director general at the municipal level then has to go to the director general at the provincial level, and that ultimately has -- that request has to go all the way up to the Ministry of Education to get the funding to build that school.

So it's very centralized, which means it's not as flexible and not as fast-moving as if, you know, the local

government had a large budget and could do these things on their own.

So we're working with the Iraqis to navigate through that province, but we are -- or that process, but we are making pretty good progress. Recently the provincial government posted 190 projects throughout Anbar, 70 of which are in the Ramadi area. So that process is starting to come together.

And the other good news is that we're working very hard with the provincial government and the municipal government to develop their 2008 budget. So that governmental process of getting funds from the central government and working its way down to the local level is starting to work now. It's just in its early stages.

MR. WHITMAN: Courtney, go ahead.

Q Colonel, this is Courtney Kube from NBC News. I just had one quick question from your opening remarks. You spoke about a recent attempt -- terrorists or insurgents in two trucks -- that was thwarted by the U. S. military. Can you just give us a date for that?

And then I was struck by the fact that you said they had new equipment and weapons. Do you know where the weapons were -- where they're coming from, who supplied them, and who these insurgents were affiliated with?

COL. CHARLTON: Well, they were definitely al Qaeda, because they had -- they actually had propaganda videos. They'd made some CDs, and we captured these CDs. So they kind of already had their propaganda already built, and they were, I'm sure, expecting to post that onto the Internet as soon as they'd completed their attacks.

So we do know that they were al Qaeda.

In fact, the unique thing about this tact -- and by the way, it occurred at the end of June. We made contact with the enemy on 30 June, and then the fight continued throughout that night, and then we were continuing to attack remnants of that force for the next several days. What was unique about this attack was that it demonstrated two things: First, that al Qaeda wants Ramadi back and wants Al Anbar back. You know, Ramadi was declared by the Iraq -- the Islamic State of Iraq as its capital last year, and this was their prize, Ramadi was. And they've been defeated, they've been driven out, they've been killed, captured; they're no longer present in the city and in the surrounding areas, and in fact across Anbar, al Qaeda has been defeated multiple times. So this was a strategic loss for al Qaeda.

So this attack represents -- it demonstrates that they are not giving up on Al Anbar, they're not giving up on Ramadi. I think for them it may be a -- you know, their honor is at stake, and so this attack was meant to show that they still have the capability of inflicting damage and violence. They specifically were targeting the tribal leaders in Ramadi that had stood up to them, as well as the Iraqi police. And again, we got that through interrogation of some of the members of that group that we captured.

When I say they were "well-equipped and well-trained" -- they actually had in their propaganda videos showing them marching in formation, very much like a military unit. Everyone was dressed the same, they appeared to have new equipment, they were carrying weapons and ammunition in backpacks with rations and medical supplies. I mean, this looked as much like a military force as I've ever seen. It wasn't just a bunch of guys that got together and decided to do an attack, you know, on a whim. This had been well-planned and well-executed, and through our interrogations and through other intelligence that we've gathered, we believe that this attack was ordered by the most senior levels of al Qaeda leadership in Iraq. They had planned it for a considerable amount of time, they had used very sophisticated techniques to infiltrate and to prevent from being captured and compromised on their way to Ramadi.

We believe the attack started or originated from the Salahuddin province and then worked its way south and actually came up from Ramadi -- to Ramadi from the south. So there was a very sophisticated infiltration route that they had put together for this attack.

MR. WHITMAN: AI?

Q Colonel, it's Al Pessin from Voice of America. You talked about how the tribal sheikhs have come over to your side and told the young men to join, and so the young men joined. My question is, how confident are you that that is a strong alliance or, to the extent possible, an irreversible decision by those sheikhs? Just as they told the young men to join, couldn't they tell them to leave?

And also, to follow up on what you said -- al Qaeda is not giving up -- how long do you think it's going to take to defeat them and for the Iraqi forces to be in a position where they can maintain order without you or with minimal coalition help?

COL. CHARLTON: Well, first of all, I don't think that we have to worry about the tribal sheikhs telling the young men of Anbar to no longer serve in the Iraqi security forces because they know that that would provide the opportunity al Qaeda needs to move back in and conduct their attacks. I mean, they understand that the Iraqi police are the key aspect of maintaining security in their tribal areas.

So I think they're committed, you know, for the long term on keeping their young men serving in the Iraqi police and the Iraqi army. So we've seen no lack of support for the Iraqi security forces. I mean, this is personal for them. They know what's at stake. If they don't have security, then al Qaeda will certainly come back in, and when they come back in, they'll punish those that stood up to them.

I get asked a lot about, well, when can the Iraqis take over, when will they be ready to do all this on their own, and I think it's more a question of certain conditions being met rather than time. Remember, we didn't have a police force a year ago, it didn't exist. There was a handful of police and a couple of police stations. All the other police stations in Ramadi had been destroyed; they'd been blown up by al Qaeda, and it was a death sentence to put on a police uniform. And when the sheikhs came together, they realized that their families were -- you know, what was at stake here was the survival of their families, their way of life, and so they cooperated. They started cooperating with the coalition forces to help fight al Qaeda.

Fast-forward a year to now, I've got about 7,400 police, and they are very dedicated. You go out on the street, it's about 120-25 degrees out there, and you'll see these young men standing on checkpoints out on the highway knowing that they're a prime target for a truck bomb or a car bomb. And in fact, many have been killed, but it does not dampen their commitment one bit. They are out there every day.

But like I said in my opening remarks, what they lack, because they're such a new force, is all of those systems that are necessary to sustain them. We still provide them a lot of fuel; we assist them in getting weapons and ammunition, so it's that logistic space. Once that gets established, then I think that -- I am certain that this force can protect their area because they're so committed, but it's a matter of can they sustain themselves. I think probably in the next six to eight months we ought to be able to get a lot of those systems in place. We're working at it every day. The Iraqis are working it very hard, so I'm hopeful.

But I'm really hesitant to put a hard date on it because, again, you know, we have to have all of that in place, and it's such a new force that it's going to take a while to mature and get its legs underneath it in order to, you know, sustain itself for the long haul. But I certainly think that every day that we move forward they're getting closer and closer to that objective.

MR. WHITMAN: Gordon.

Q Sir, Gordon Lubold from the Christian Science Monitor. I wonder if you could talk a little bit more about the -- you talked about the story -- if I understood it correctly -- that the Iraqi government intervened to allow those groups to join the Iraqi army locally there. Does that -- if I understand that correctly. Does that in any way undermine the effort to make the Iraqi army a national force that's not necessarily susceptible to local influence?

COL. CHARLTON: Well, let's start by -- let me give you some background on my Iraqi army forces.

I have two Iraqi army brigades -- one from the 1st Division and one from the 7th Division -- and when we took over, those brigades were at about 60 percent strength. They were undermanned. Interestingly though, those soldiers were predominantly Shi'a. These two brigades were Shi'a in terms of their make-up, and so that was kind of an interesting dynamic to have to work with. The problem was -- it wasn't that the local, you know, the young men of Anbar didn't want to join the army, they wanted to provide security. Their concern was, though, that they wanted to protect their local areas, and there was some concern that, you know, they would be sent somewhere and be subjected to sectarian violence.

So we discussed this with the tribal leaders and came to the conclusion that, you know, the best thing we could do was at least offer them temporary assignments in the local area, and that's pretty much the agreement that was made. The Ministry of Defense agreed to allow the young men of Anbar to serve in these brigades in Anbar at least for the first two years, and then after that, it would be based on the needs of the army at large. But the good news is, again, we've been doing recruiting for those two brigades and all of the units across Anbar, so now you're starting to see very well-balanced units coming out of this. So I have one of my brigades that's completely full, and it's about 50-50 almost in terms of its make-up between Sunni and Shi'a.

I have another brigade that's about 80 percent.

And in fact, we just did a recruiting drive for that and had over -- almost 400 recruits get sent off to training, again local Sunnis joining a brigade that is predominantly Shi'a. So it's actually doing a very good job of balancing these brigades out, and I think it's going to work out fine. It satisfies the requirement for the local population to want to stay at home initially and protect their area but yet gives the flexibility to the ministry of defense to employ them, you know, elsewhere in the near future.

MR. WHITMAN: We're about out of time but Jim, go ahead.

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

I wonder if you could explain, if local loyalties to the sheikhs, the tribal leaders, run so deep, how was it that al Qaeda was able to establish such a hold in that area? And I understand that they use tactics of intimidation, but it would seem that they would also have had to have some popular backing. And I wonder if you could explain how you see that.

COL. CHARLTON: Well, they certainly were -- you can't have any kind of insurgency operation or terrorist operation without at least some tacit support from the population, and so there was that. I mean, I talk to tribal leaders all the time, and they admit that, you know, there was a lot of misunderstandings between the coalition forces and the tribes initially. Mistakes were made on both sides as far as understanding what needed to happen and the way forward. And you know, I'm sure there was quite a bit of animosity in some of these areas about, you know, the coalition operations.

Over time, we've gotten past that and we've developed a great relationship with them, and al Qaeda actually helped that process along. When you say they did a murder -- or an intimidation campaign, it was actually a murder-and-intimidation campaign. You know, that's how they intimidate. They go murder members of your family. And they started targeting the tribal sheikhs themselves. Many prominent sheikhs were killed. There was police chiefs that were killed.

And so, you know, the tribes out here realize that this was not something they signed up for. They also, you know, rejected the extremist ideology that al Qaeda embraces. And I've talked to a lot of religious leaders here, and they're very, very upset about the way al Qaeda has taken Islam and distorted it into something bad, and they're very upset about it.

So this was kind of a -- well, they call it the -- (Arabic word) -- movement here in Anbar, because -- (Arabic word) -- means awakening in Arabic, and that's how they truly feel. They feel they've finally seen the light as far as what al Qaeda represents, and they've also seen the good things that the coalition forces have done. And so now it's developed into a pretty strong partnership. I will say that it's something that you have to work at every day. We continually meet with tribal leaders, religious leaders, to try and maintain that relationship but so far, it's been going very well.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, Colonel, we have reached the end of the time that we've allotted for this and we want to be respectful of your time. We know you're very busy, and we appreciate you spending some time with us today. But before we bring it to a close, let me throw it back to you in case there's anything that we've done here that has stimulated some final thoughts that you might have.

COL. CHARLTON: Well, I just -- I can't sign off without taking the opportunity to tell everyone in America about how proud they can be of their servicemen and women here in Iraq. I have the honor of commanding these great Americans every day, and they continue to inspire me and make me proud. They work under the toughest conditions. I mean, it is brutally hot out there now. And they work under very dangerous conditions yet they're fully committed to serving their country and accomplishing their mission. They truly are making a difference in the lives of Iraqis here in Al Anbar. And I just ask that everyone please remember these great men and women and their families in your prayers and just be proud of them.

Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you, and we hope that we have the opportunity to talk to you again soon.

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