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Presenter: Director for Operational Planning, Joint Chiefs of Staff Maj. Gen. Richard Sherlock

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2007**

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

GEN. SHERLOCK: Ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon. I have some brief comments regarding operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Then I would be happy to take your questions.

Coalition troops and Iraqi security forces continue to target terrorists who bring weapons, explosives and other lethal materials into Iraq. Coalition forces and ISF will continue their focused operations against those interfering in Iraq. Our forces remain committed to dismantling terror networks that seek to kill innocent Iraqi men, women and children and the coalition and Iraqi security forces that protect them.

We are setting the conditions for the Iraqis to improve their governance capacity. For example, during this past week, as a result of coalition and ISF activity in Al Anbar province, the municipal government has reemerged in Kharma. Two Iraqi Army basic training classes are in session, with over 2,000 new soldiers, in Habbaniya. And the Iraqi police academy in Habbaniya will begin a new class next week with approximately 700 new police trainees.

In Afghanistan, NATO's International Security Assistance Force, combined with Afghan national security forces, continue operations to reduce Taliban and al Qaeda influence, specifically targeting enemy leadership and safe areas.

Last Sunday, a major new component of Central Asia's emerging transportation network opened, which is a bridge across the Pyanj River connecting Tajikistan and Afghanistan. The ceremony marked the opening of the bridge, was attended by the presidents of Tajikistan and Afghanistan, as well as the U.S. Secretary of Commerce. The new bridge will help expedite the delivery of goods and services, humanitarian aid and will increase commerce and promote regional stability. It's also important to note that the security for the ceremony was planned and executed by Afghan national security forces with some coalition forces only in a supporting role.

Given the understandable interest in current combat operations, it's also important from time to time to provide a quick snapshot of how engaged your military is worldwide. There are currently about 490,000 U.S. service personnel forward-deployed around the world. We have approximately 237,000 deployed in Southwest and Central Asia, 144,000 in the Pacific, and 104,000 in the European theater. Additionally, there are 5,000 U.S. service personnel in Latin and South America, which includes our participation in Panamax, which is multinational cooperation exercise for the defense of the Panama Canal, with 19 nations, 7,600 personnel, including seven U.

S. ships and over 4,000 personnel.

The hospital ship, Comfort, also continued its humanitarian mission and is now en route to Haiti from Colombia. The forces just described include over 45,000 Reserve component personnel. Additionally, we have approximately 10,000 National Guard and Reserve personnel involved in homeland defense missions, and we can't fulfill our missions without them. They are conducting a full range of missions from combating terrorists to securing the homeland, to maintaining alliances, to training the militaries of partner nations, and helping those who cannot help themselves by providing humanitarian aid.

They and all of our military families are a critical part of our team. They're the best America has to offer, and we're proud of them.

And with that, I'll take your questions.

Bob.

Q General, a question on Iraq -- as the British forces in the Basra area move closer towards leaving eventually, is there consideration being given that you may need to provide U.S. or other coalition forces to pick up some of the slack down there when they leave?

GEN. SHERLOCK: Well, MNC-I might be better postured to answer that. But as we've said in the past and as General Petraeus and General Bergner have said, as you position forces around the country, you have to take into account the battlefield geography of the areas in the whole country so that you don't give up some advances that you've gained. As the U.K. forces reposition, again, the U.K. government's in a better position to comment on their forces than I am. But all that will be taken into account, as well as what security needs for each region are as forces are repositioned, excuse me.

Q What I was getting at was whether it's assumed that conditions will be sufficient to allow the Iraqi government to have complete control of security in that area. Is that the assumption? Or is there also the possibility that conditions will not permit that, and then you'll have to provide -- you know, fill in some behind the British when they leave?

GEN. SHERLOCK: Well, right now, I know that Basra is scheduled to transfer shortly to provisional Iraqi control, and there are a number of Iraqi units that are lead in that area. As conditions on the ground dictate, MNC-I and the multinational force will redistribute those forces as necessary. So to speculate what might happen in the coming weeks, I don't think is in my purview.

Q You're not planning for that possibility at the moment, then?

GEN. SHERLOCK: MNC-I again is better postured to answer that than I. But as you -- as the security forces and the security requirements on the ground dictate, they will reposition forces with the battlefield geography in mind so that they don't give up gains that they've made in different areas, including in Basra and in the south.

Yes.

Q General, recently, a U.S. F-15 was allegedly involved in a friendly fire incident in Afghanistan. Can you say whether the pilot and crew are still flying missions or whether they've redeployed?

GEN. SHERLOCK: Right now there are two investigations that are ongoing into that. There is one investigation being led by the U.K. and one investigation being led by U.S. forces. As those investigations continue and as the information on that becomes more available, I'm sure that they'll be able to comment on that,

but I don't want to comment on ongoing investigations.

Q But can you comment on their status, whether they're still flying or whether they're grounded, pending the outcome of the investigations?

GEN. SHERLOCK: All personnel that are involved in different incidents, whether it's attacks against the enemy, whether it's blue- on-blue incidents against other friendly nations, for example, go through a review process. Whether they're grounded or not, I can't say; whether they're still flying, I can't say. I'd like to let those investigations take their course.

Yes.

Q General, there has been almost daily shelling across the Iranian border in the north into Sulimaniyah and Erbil and to some Kurdish areas, and today the Iraqi foreign minister commented on this, called in the Iranian ambassador and expressed concern about this shelling. What do you know about it? What are the targets? What does the U.S. plan to do about it? You mentioned that the U.S. will take action against anybody interfering in Iraq's affairs.

GEN. SHERLOCK: We've seen reports to that effect. We're still determining where the rounds landed and whether they landed inside of Iraq. Again, MNC-I may be better postured to answer that question.

As information becomes available on that, I'll pass that on, but I can't answer that right now.

Q Do you know anything about the group that purportedly was targeted, the PJAK, P-E-J-A-K (sic)? It's part of the PKK.

GEN. SHERLOCK: Again, I've seen reports to that effect. I don't know the full details on that. MNC-I, I'm sure, is conducting an investigation into that, and I'd rather let them comment on that, as their information is more current than mine.

Yes?

Q General, can you give us an idea of what you're seeing on the part of the JAM today, a day after Sadr told everybody to cease the armed activity? And also, what's your assessment of what rival Shi'a groups are going to be doing in this time period?

GEN. SHERLOCK: Well, calls for calm and calls for groups to cease operations against coalition forces and Iraqi security forces are certainly welcome. The proof in this pudding is going to be actions and not words. And so if JAM forces cease their operations and start to participate with the government Iraq -- government of Iraq to improve security, then we would certainly welcome that, as in all groups that would cease activities along those lines.

I think we have to wait and see. Again, as I said, I think the proof is in the pudding and that we need to actions that correspond to that as opposed to just calls for calm.

Q And the rival Shi'a groups? How are you expecting them to react to this?

GEN. SHERLOCK: It's my understanding that several of the groups have called for a period of calm. I know the government of Iraq has called for a period of calm. We need to see how that pans out, and we need to see what the groups do as opposed to just particularly calling for ceasing activities.

Yes?

Q General, do you have any figures, any numbers related to the attacks against U.S. forces in Iraq, in Baghdad and outside Baghdad, how many attacks per day?

GEN. SHERLOCK: Again, MNC-I, Multinational Corps-Iraq, is better positioned to talk to specific numbers of attacks and specific areas where they've come from. As I said last week, attacks in Iraq continue to decline.

They've declined for several weeks now, except for one or two very high-profile attacks such as the attacks in Nineveh. But overall casualties, overall attacks against coalition forces and overall attacks against the Iraqi civilian population have continued to decline. Again, as we get ready for the reports by Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus, as we get ready for the beginning of Ramadan next month, and as we approach the anniversary of the September 11th attacks, we can expect our enemy to try to accomplish more high-profile, highly visible attacks to flavor how those reports are received.

Yes?

Q Does the Joint Staff or Joint Chiefs of Staff have an opportunity to see a draft of the GAO report? And was there any comments that you made in terms of how the military views the benchmarks that were -- their assessment of the benchmarks in the GAO report that's coming out next week?

GEN. SHERLOCK: I have not seen or read the GAO report, but it's my understanding there are also two benchmark reports. There's the GAO report that's just being published, and then there's the president's benchmark report due in mid-September. I also understand that the GAO benchmark report is a report on the those benchmarks that have been achieved as opposed to the president's benchmark report, which will discuss and cite progress towards the achieving of those benchmarks. So the GAO side you have a pass/fail, whereas on the president's benchmark report, you'll be able to chart the progress and the progress that's been made towards achieving those.

It's also important to note that many of the things outlined in the president's benchmark report are also ongoing without necessarily having achieved those benchmarks completely. For example, the government of Iraq is already sharing oil revenues with different areas of the country and different groups, in advance of fully passing those laws.

There are a lot of reports that are getting ready to come out. The one that we are focusing on right now is the assessments and the recommendations coming in from the combatant commander and the ambassador. And we'll focus on those as they come in.

Yes.

Q Can I follow up on that? Then can you describe a little more detail about what the Joint Chiefs and the Joint Staff is going to do? Are they waiting to see Petraeus's assessment, and you're responding to that for all of the chiefs, the chairman, everybody developing their own set of recommendations? What -- with some detail, what is it that you all are doing right now?

GEN. SHERLOCK: Well, the president wants to hear from all of his senior military advisers. That includes the MNF-I commander, General Petraeus, the combatant commander, Admiral Fallon, and from the Joint Chiefs and from the chairman. They will have the ability to provide their unvarnished recommendations and assessments to the president so that he's completely informed and able to make the decisions that he needs to make.

Q Just to follow up, are the Joint Chiefs of Staff expected to speak in one voice? Or will General Casey, General Moseley, Admiral Mullen have a -- individual times to speak to the president?

GEN. SHERLOCK: The recommendations they will provide don't necessarily have to be a consensus. But

each of them will provide assessments from their perspective. General Petraeus's perspective is as the MNF-I commander. Again, Admiral Fallon's perspective is as the CENTCOM commander.

The Joint Chiefs each have responsibility and perspective for a global set of responsibilities, including manning, training and equipping the armed forces, and sustaining those forces. Each will get the opportunity to provide their recommendations and their assessments to the president. The chairman gives his assessment to the secretary and the president privately, and he hasn't made any decisions or recommendations yet.

Q Do you know when the service chiefs will provide their assessments to the president? Has that been scheduled?

GEN. SHERLOCK: I don't know. I believe that the president is scheduled to meet with the chiefs soon, but we'll have to see when that's scheduled.

Q Will the president come here to the tank?

GEN. SHERLOCK: Potentially. He I believe is scheduled to come here to the tank I think tomorrow, but we'll have to wait and see what they recommend.

Yes.

Q General, recently, some Iranian officials were mistakenly apprehended in Iraq. There was footage of them being led through a building blindfolded. Does the Defense Department plan to apologize to Iran?

GEN. SHERLOCK: There are checkpoints all over Baghdad and there are checkpoints all over Iraq. As a vehicle approaches a checkpoint, the security forces, whether they're coalition or Iraqi security forces, look at the vehicle and look at the occupants, and any suspicious behavior or any suspicious items in the vehicle trigger a further investigation.

That's what occurred. An investigation occurred after the individuals were detained. It was determined that they didn't need to be detained, and they were released a little bit later. With regard to an apology, that's a policy issue, not a military issue, and I'd prefer not to address that.

Q General, can I just quickly follow up on something you just said?

GEN. SHERLOCK: Yes.

Q Did you say -- did I understand you to say the president is scheduled to come to the tank tomorrow to talk about Iraq options?

GEN. SHERLOCK: Bryan, I think that's correct. Yes.

Q Well, is that going to be his meeting with the chiefs, where they present their views?

GEN. SHERLOCK: If that's the -- I don't know if that's going to be the only meeting. They have the opportunity to provide their military advice to the secretary and to the president. They do that in private, and again, I'd prefer to let that be on their schedule.

Q Will General Petraeus be there?

GEN. SHERLOCK: I don't believe so.

Yes?

Q Sir, can we go back to the Iraqi provincial control. This adviser is due to switch over shortly. What other problems are due to switch over to Iraqi provincial control?

GEN. SHERLOCK: I'll have to get back with you on that. There are a number of provinces already under Iraqi provincial control. I believe, in fact, there are about 14 of the 18 provinces that are already under Iraqi control. There are a number that are scheduled to transfer in the next several months. It might be one or two less than 14. There are a number that are scheduled to transfer over the next couple of months, and I don't have that data in front of me.

Q By the way, congratulations on the second star.

GEN. SHERLOCK: Thank you very much.

Yes?

Q On Iran. Could you paint the picture for the public in terms of the level of involvement of Iran today in terms of providing lethal assistance and training? Are there any new wrinkles in terms of the weaponry they're providing, and how does this contrast a year or two ago? Has it been fairly steady or has there been an acceleration in the last -- this year, in '07?

GEN. SHERLOCK: I don't know the exact levels of Iranian support or whether they're -- what percentage or what level of increase that would have been. We have talked fairly openly about what we believe to be Iranian Qods Forces' support for insurgents in Iraq to provide both training inside Iraq and to be able to provide weapons that the coalition has reviewed and looked at, assembled and disassembled parts of, that show that there is milling and manufacture that's coming from Iran.

As far as the extent of that support, MNC-I, again, is better postured to comment on that than I.

Q (Off mike) -- any new wrinkles on weapons? I mean, EFPs have been obviously written a lot about. Have you seen greater numbers of EFPs and were Iranian designs showing up or precision- guided rockets or any -- sniper rifles, any other indications of Iranian lethal support?

GEN. SHERLOCK: We have seen indications of EFPs and a number of different EFP/IED devices.

As far as the other pieces of equipment and what they may be providing, again, I'd rather let MNC-I comment on that.

Yes?

Q In Afghanistan there were reports today that the top Taliban leader, Mullah Berader --

Q Berader.

Q -- his brother -- was killed in an airstrike. Do you any independent confirmation of that, that report?

GEN. SHERLOCK: I've seen initial reports of that. Again, as the -- as that gets reviewed and they make identification, CJTF-82 or ISAF are better postured to answer that.

Q But are there indications that he was actually hit in this strike?

GEN. SHERLOCK: I don't know that --

Q Are there any indications?

GEN. SHERLOCK: I don't know that for a fact. I've seen initial reports that say that. But again, they have to go through a process of identifying the personnel that were killed or captured, in any event, and so I'd rather let them comment.

Yes?

Q Is your latest intelligence that Muqtada al-Sadr is still in Iran? And then what's the Joint Staff's sort of overall analysis for this declaration that he made yesterday to curb violence for the next several months? What do you believe his motivations are behind that?

GEN. SHERLOCK: Again, as I said a couple of moments ago, the proof of Muqtada al-Sadr's sincerity is in the pudding. If the groups do reduce their level of attacks, if they do cease operating against coalition forces and Iraqi security forces, that's a good thing, because it contributes to the stability of Iraq, which will then help the government of Iraq provide goods and services and governance to the people. Whether that comes to pass or not, we'll have to see in the coming days.

Q But considering al-Sadr has been arguably an enemy of the coalition for the past several years in Iraq, why -- what's the analysis? Why do you think he made this declaration and he's suddenly telling his followers not to fight anymore?

GEN. SHERLOCK: I don't want to speculate on his motivations. I don't know his motivations. All I know is that if this indeed does come to pass, and the JAM extremist groups and the JAM militia and the Mahdi Army do cease operations, that's a good thing for all the people of Iraq.

Q Is he believed to still be in Iran?

GEN. SHERLOCK: I don't know his current location.

Q Just to follow up on that, was there any United States direct or indirect negotiation with the office of Sadr or the Mahdi Army, in terms of bringing about this declaration?

GEN. SHERLOCK: That's not an operational, military question. I'd have to refer you to the policy or Department of State or someone else.

Q Well, I mean, let me phrase -- was the United States military -- that you are aware of, was MNF-I involved or MNC-I involved in any sort of negotiations with the Mahdi Army --

GEN. SHERLOCK: Not that I'm aware of -- I don't know that.

Yes.

Q Going back to Afghanistan, over the last month, there seems to be a number of attacks on fire bases, including several in Anaconda, where they have had direct Taliban attacks on the base -- ambushes or whatever you want to call it. What is this saying about the boldness of the Taliban right now in Afghanistan, if they're approaching these fire bases and doing multi-pronged attacks?

GEN. SHERLOCK: Well, first of all, I'd say that it shows some desperation on their part, because what they're trying to do is create a sensational event. They're trying to elicit an event that they can exploit in an IO

campaign, that says, we've overrun a position. They have not been successful at that. They've been -- a couple of different events where they've killed over 1,000 enemy doing those kinds of attacks. As far as, as what their motivation is behind that, other than what I've just commented, I don't know.

Q Can you characterize the strength of the Taliban right now?

GEN. SHERLOCK: No, I can't. Again, CJTF-82 and ISAF are better positioned to do that than I am.

Q (Off mike) -- of how many fighters you estimate they have right now versus maybe a year ago?

GEN. SHERLOCK: Anything I would give would be exactly that; it would be an estimate, and it would be -- it wouldn't be accurate, so I'd rather refer that to CJTF-82 and ISAF.

Yes.

Q You started out talking about the busy U.S. force -- you gave us a snapshot of U.S. forces around the world -- 490,000 worldwide. If the surge in Iraq right now continues beyond April of next year, what are some, from a purely joint operational standpoint -- what are some of the implications of that in terms of the U.S.'s ability to meet worldwide commitments with an already stretched force?

GEN. SHERLOCK: Well, the Department of Defense and the military will meet whatever requirements are given to it by the President and by the Secretary of Defense. We have a number of forces stationed around the world; those include a number of forces and large commitments by the Army and the Marine Corps in the Central Command AOR; we have a variety of other Army and Marine units that are stationed around the world as well as a whole host of naval and Air Force capabilities.

With regard to the surge in Iraq, those -- the decisions that will be made after the report by Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus will drive a lot of those decisions, so speculating on whether the surge can continue or will continue past a certain point I think is just speculation. I'd rather wait for the report to come in and the recommendations made by Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus and then the decisions by the President.

Q I'm not asking you to speculate on whether it continues, but the point being you plan well ahead -- you plan for various contingencies. What impact would it be in terms of strain on the force if the surge continued? I mean, you must think that through as a -- under the operations umbrella.

GEN. SHERLOCK: There are -- again, as I said, there are a variety of forces around the world. We have a number of Army and Marine forces that are committed in the CENTCOM AOR. There are a variety of other forces we could bring to bear in the event of another contingency somewhere else.

And again, we'd have to look at what those contingencies might be. We'd have to take a look at what forces are available in order to determine an appropriate response.

At this time that's all speculation, and so I'd rather not go into that until we hear the recommendations and the decisions.

Yes?

Q General, tomorrow's -- when the president comes to the Pentagon tomorrow, you mentioned General Petraeus will not be here. Will he or Ambassador Crocker participate using videoteleconference?

GEN. SHERLOCK: I don't know that. I don't know that.

Yes?

Q Can I go back to what you were saying about these thousand Taliban? Just for a little clarification, was that in one incident or is this over several incidents -- there's about estimated?

GEN. SHERLOCK: I don't think I said a thousand. There have been a couple of incidents where we engaged and killed a hundred Taliban. For example, there was an attack yesterday against an Afghan national security force, where over the course of a couple hours they did kill about a hundred -- a little over a hundred Taliban or enemy fighters. That has occurred a couple of times over the past several months.

So I -- as far as their strength or what their motivations are, I can't say. I do think, though, that they are trying to create some kind of a sensational event, where they can show that there is a victory in this process, and to date they haven't been able to do that.

Yes?

Q In preparing -- in assisting the chairman in his assessment for the chiefs as well for their recommendations to the president, can you describe what the Joint Staff is most concerned with in terms of maintaining the surge in Iraq?

GEN. SHERLOCK: The Joint Staff and the Pentagon, again, will take the decisions that are made by the President, based on the recommendations of Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus, and we will then have to take a look at what the implications are and what decisions may have to be made in order to support that.

So I'd rather wait until those recommendations have been made. Those recommendations are made in private, and then decisions will be made that will drive those planning factors.

Q (Off mike) -- question with regards to the recommendations that General Pace and the chiefs will be making.

What were of most concern to them in developing their own assessments to the president?

GEN. SHERLOCK: The chiefs and General Pace will make their recommendations in private, and until they make those recommendations, I think anything we say at this point is just speculation.

Yes?

Q Well, have the Joint Chiefs gotten any kind of a briefing or have you gotten a copy of the General Jones' report, and can you give us any information on his take on the Iraqi security forces?

GEN. SHERLOCK: I have not read General Jones' report. I know that the Iraqi security forces, again, as General Dempsey has said yesterday and as General Bergner has said, continue to grow in capacity. With regard to what General Jones is going to say, I have to wait and read his report.

STAFF: Take one more question.

GEN. SHERLOCK: Yes?

Q General, just to be clear, then, so tomorrow, the president comes here, and he's not getting the Joint Chiefs' assessment on Iraq? Is Iraq the topic tomorrow or can you tell us exactly what President Bush is going to be briefed on tomorrow and to what extent?

GEN. SHERLOCK: The Joint Chiefs will be able to provide the president with their unvarnished recommendations and their assessments of current operations. And again, until that gets made, I don't know what they're going to say. They'll make those individually, and they'll make those privately.

Q So this is all Iraq, this is the assessment we were told yesterday that the Joint Chiefs individually are going to be providing to the president.

GEN. SHERLOCK: I believe so, yes.

STAFF: Thank you.

GEN. SHERLOCK: Thank you.