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Presenter: Deputy Director for Operations, Joint Staff Brig. Gen. Perry Wiggins

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DoD News Briefing with Brig. Gen. Wiggins at the Pentagon Briefing Room, Arlington, Va.

GEN. WIGGINS: Good afternoon.

Operation Phantom Thunder is into its third week, with U.S. and Iraqi security forces conducting operations, as you're well aware, in the northern and southern Baghdad belts, as well as Diyala and Anbar provinces, and still in Baghdad through Fard al-Qanun working on hot spots. As expected and as has been reported, this offensive is involved in some very difficult fighting, this fighting against al Qaeda in areas where they've long had freedom of movement as well as time to prepare elaborate defenses.

During Phantom Thunder, U.S. and Iraqi forces have captured nearly 500 enemy and found over 50 major weapons caches. The most remarkable thing about these gains is that the actions are increasingly a result of local Iraqis coming forward and providing tips and responding to those tips and finding these caches. They know where the bad guys are hiding, they know where the weapons are, and they're giving them up to the Iraqi security forces as well as U.S. forces operating particularly in Baqubah, in favor of a better option.

These caches have contained stores of mortars, rockets, as well as IED components. In Baqubah we have rooted out what can only be described as a shadow government set up by al Qaeda. We have found a courthouse, jail and torture houses, which provide an indicator of the type of inhuman justice one could expect if al Qaeda was in charge. We've cleared over 120 deeply buried IEDs, numerous booby-trapped houses, some that were so extensively booby-trapped that instead of being, I guess -- EOD taking them and disarming them, they had to be blown up.

These facilities and the local al Qaeda authority demonstrate more than anything I could say about the nature of the enemy and their continued willingness to commit horrific atrocities against the innocent Iraqi people.

In concert with these operations, Phantom Thunder also includes aggressive shaping operations by U.S. and Iraqi special operations forces that are going after al Qaeda leadership as well as Jaish al- Mahdi special groups and car bomb networks that are located throughout Iraq. Within the city of Baghdad, U.S. forces, along with 12 Iraqi security force brigades, continue their disrupt, clear and retain operations in the 10 security districts in Baghdad through Operation Fard al-Qanun.

As Phantom Thunder continues to squeeze al Qaeda and other insurgents, we expect them to oppose our

progress by trying to inflict high numbers of casualties among the Iraqi people as well as coalition forces, by using asymmetric weapons like suicide bombings, high-profile attacks and buried IEDs.

In Afghanistan, NATO's International Security Forces and the Afghan security forces have seized the initiative, as I stated during the spring offensive in 2007. We have yet to see a summer offensive from the Taliban. On July 2nd, Operation Adalat concluded in the south with over 250 Taliban killed, as well as Taliban sanctuaries, operations and lines of communications disrupted. In the eastern region, Operation Maiwand, this marks the first Afghan National Army offensive led by them and involves U.S. forces in support. This is a significant step in the development of Afghan National Security forces. Maiwand is aimed at separating the enemy from Taliban -- from the populace -- excuse me -- and removing the Taliban from the Ghazni belt.

As I close, I think it's important to remember that tomorrow we celebrate our 231st anniversary of our freedom. And as we celebrate here, we should keep in mind that our very best that our nation has to offer is standing on point and fighting for freedom. I ask that you keep your -- our servicemen and women in your prayers, along with their family members.

And with that -- as we celebrate our 4th of July tomorrow. And with that, I'll take your questions.

Yes, ma'am?

Q Sir, Turkey's military chief again today criticized what he's calling a lack of cooperation from the international community regarding the PKK problem in northern Iraq. And you mentioned the last time you spoke to us that the U.S. is cooperating with Turkey on this.

Can you specific about what that cooperation consists of?

GEN. WIGGINS: Turkey has been an ally with us on this global war on terrorism, and I know that's no secret. We've worked with them, we understand their concern with regard to the PKK terrorists that operate both in southeast Turkey and that have set up some safe havens within northern Iraq. We continue to work with Turkey as they prosecute the war on terror. We continue to work with them as an ally in this global war on terrorism. We have several opportunities where we have worked with them both as a cross-section of intelligence with the Turkish government, the Turkish military particularly, and we'll continue to do so.

Q (Off mike) -- they don't think it's enough. Do you -- could you sort of say how you assess the successfulness of your efforts?

GEN. WIGGINS: Well, I'd tell you, from a military perspective, we have a great relationship with the military in Turkey. We do do the training.

As far as any other initiatives, it might be something you might want to take on the policy side with regards to what we're doing with the Turkish. But we've worked with them in the past, we continue to work with Turkey. Right now our focus is on Iraq. Our military focus is on Iraq and the situation in Iraq. And I know, as the secretary of Defense has said, any disruption or -- up in northern Iraq would not be helpful at this time.

Yes. Yes, ma'am.

Q The U.S. Army released a report yesterday indicating that a gunner shot at two friendly positions in Afghanistan in March of 2006. The individual who was responsible for that was not actually questioned. We're just wondering if he was going to be questioned; will he be disciplined at any point?

GEN. WIGGINS: Well, I can't speak specifically on the issue you're talking about, but I can tell you that any time there are issues or allegations or incidents where friendly fire takes place, they are thoroughly

investigated by the commander. We don't normally discuss those things while they're in an investigation, but normally the commander takes those particular investigations, and we take those particular pieces seriously, and we do investigate them to the fullest extent.

Yes, ma'am.

Q On Friday, we understand that the Joint Requirement Oversight Council agreed to validate the Army's request for more than 17,000 MRAP vehicles. How fast can those vehicles be made? Has the JROC actually approved 17,700, which was the Army's request? How fast can they be produced? And can they be produced in enough time in the next -- over the course of the next year to get those 17,000 to Iraq?

GEN. WIGGINS: That's a good question. I can tell you that they have validated 17,700 for the Army [sic -- the Joint Requirements Oversight Council informed OSD/PA that this decision has not yet been made.] and I believe 3,400 for the Marines and approximately 300 for our Special Operations Forces

I can tell you that the deputy director for regional operations -- I'm not the best person probably to ask as far as how quickly they can be produced. That's probably something better served for the J-4 section and piece. But I can tell you that I know that the commanders in the field want those produced as quickly as possible to get them out to our soldiers and Marines that are out there in the fight, and that's about all I know on that.

Yes, sir.

Q General, I noticed that you mentioned both in talking about Iraq and Afghanistan the number of enemies that have been killed. Do you think that the enemy body counts is a real measure of success in these operations?

GEN. WIGGINS: I can tell you that, personally, I don't think that that's necessarily an indicator, particularly when we're looking at military efforts alone are not going to win the fight, whether it's Afghanistan or whether it's in Iraq. You know, we're primarily providing security in order to shape and give time and space to the Iraqi and Afghan governments so that they can formulate their security forces in order to take the fight to the Taliban and take it to al Qaeda, particularly in those two countries.

So body counts is not necessarily something that we get into. It's not something that I advocated as a success measure or gauged success on, but I can tell you that those are just indicators that we're taking the fight to the enemy, the enemy's still there. It's also indicators that it's still a dangerous place out there, and -- but as far as success can be measured, I think we measure success on the security, primarily securing the population, enabling governance to take place within Iraq and Afghanistan. Those are the important indicators that we look at.

Q If I could just follow up, when you mention these indicators, whether it's the number of enemy killed or the number of deeply buried IEDs or weapons caches that are found or, in fact, the statement that there are an increasing number of hits coming from local Iraqis -- those are all things we've heard over and over and over again over the last four years in numerable briefings.

So I guess my question is: What indications are there that anything is going better now than in all those previous times that we're also given these sort of positive indicators?

GEN. WIGGINS: Yes, sir. And I would say -- I get what you're trying to get at. I would probably say we ought to wait until General Petraeus comes in September and makes this assessment and kind of ties in those pieces. We're reporting figures, and I understand we've been reporting figures all along.

But what I'm saying is I don't tie that to overall success. There's a number of indicators and pieces out

there that we tie together to indicate success.

In this particular case, we are making slow and steady progress with regards to military operations. But as I said, military operations alone is not what I gauge as to overall success there.

Q If I could follow up on that question, General. As you know, General Pace, in two consecutive briefings here, mentioned that, in his view, public perceptions among Iraqis -- how they feel today versus how they felt five years ago, how they'll feel in five years from now -- are better measurements, it's a better metric for gauging progress or lack thereof in Iraq. Would it be fair to say that that is the way the Joint Staff is starting to think about how to measure progress, by looking at public perceptions in Iraq?

GEN. WIGGINS: I'd say that's one indicator. Like I said, I'd probably wait till General Petraeus comes in and gives his assessment on how things are with regards to Iraq, and I think that's going to happen in September. I don't have the exact date on that particular piece, but --

Q (Off mike) -- indicator --

GEN. WIGGINS: It is an extraordinary indicator. You know, the people -- it's important. And people are always important when you're talking about their country. Those are sovereign countries, you know, and people -- and protecting the people and the populace are absolutely critical to conducting operations there.

In Anbar, what's important is the people are coming forward because they're tired of the indiscriminate killing and they're pointing out the IEDs, they're pointing out the weapons caches. These are all accelerants, these are all things that the enemy uses in order to create high-profile attacks and to create mass casualties.

So is that a positive sign? Absolutely a positive sign. Is this something we want to continue happening? Absolutely we want to continue it. And those type of initiatives are spreading, and not just in Anbar; Salahuddin -- they're also happening in Diyala. So these are a positive. We see them as positive signs. But, you know, we have cautious optimism with regards to those, because there is an enemy out there that continually takes a look at those same type of indicators, those same positive trends and tries to target those and tries to take action against those positive trends.

Q Do you have any polling data, though, on that? I mean, does the military conduct any --

GEN. WIGGINS: I don't have any polling data, no, sir.

Q What metrics will General Petraeus be using to decide whether the surge is succeeding?

GEN. WIGGINS: Ma'am, I really don't know. I don't want to speculate for General Petraeus on what exactly the metrics are he's going to use at this time. I really don't know.

Q General, within the past couple of weeks, a number of NGOs and news organizations reported that the number of civilian casualties in Afghanistan, the number of civilians killed in Afghanistan by coalition forces had exceeded those killed by the Taliban or al Qaeda in Afghanistan.

At the time, the U.S. military strenuously denied that conclusion, but I understand within the past couple of weeks the number of civilians killed by coalition forces has indeed, even by the U.S. military's own estimates, surpassed those killed by enemy forces in Afghanistan. Is that the case? And can you provide those numbers for us today?

GEN. WIGGINS: I don't have the numbers. I've seen the same reports you've seen with regards to the NGOs. They're reporting those particular numbers.

I can tell you that it's difficult for me to believe that you can actually capture an accurate number with regards to the terrain in Afghanistan, some of the remote areas where some of these operations go on, and the fact that you have motivations out there that are different. Not to say that all the numbers are wrong, but to absolutely say that we -- when we conduct operations, we go out and investigate thoroughly, especially when there's accusations of civilian casualties.

In a number of cases in recent, we've gone out and investigated where they have claimed there were civilians killed and in fact those were unfounded. And in cases -- we go to great lengths, as I've said in the past, in order to mitigate civilian casualties. I think you've seen demonstrated on a few occasions times where we have actually bypassed targets, not engaged targets because we've had civilians in the area.

Our forces use positive control of indirect fire means, whether that's air or whether that's artillery. We have people who are qualified on the ground that bring those particular type of weapon systems on the target. For example, you probably recently read in the press what happened in Diwaniyah with regards to indirect fire from the enemy into a forward operating base there, firing approximately 75 rounds into that camp.

Well, what I can tell you is that camp -- those rounds that were fired didn't -- all those rounds did not necessarily fire into the FOB. Matter of fact, a great amount of those rounds actually fell short of the forward operating base and fell into the city of Diwaniyah. The F-16 that was launched was not only launched to protect the FOB, it was also launched to protect the citizens of Diwaniyah from these indirect fire attacks.

And when the F-16 was overhead, we had positive ID on three buildings where the fire was emanating. We launched the F-16 with guided munitions onto those three buildings, three targeted buildings, with positive ID of enemy. They hit their intended targets and had secondary explosions out of two of those buildings.

So we use precision weapons systems. The enemy, on the other hand, fires from highly populated areas, once again, fires in densely populated areas, concentrations of civilians, fires with a indirect fire system that is not a accurate system, not a point weapons system, and indiscriminately kills civilians. So that is the difference.

Q I guess -- but returning to my original question, has the U.S. military, have coalition forces, dropped any firm denial that coalition forces have killed more civilians than enemy forces in Afghanistan? Are you backing away from that point?

GEN. WIGGINS: And to be honest with you, like I said, I don't track, from the Joint Staff perspective, don't track civilian casualties. I know that the theater tries to go and investigate as they happen and they go out and do thorough investigations of those sites. But -- so I would -- to answer your question, if we're backing off or do -- are we denying, I wouldn't be able to do that from here.

And so from the Joint Staff and from the J33 regional operation perspective, I don't have an answer to that. I can tell you that we do go and investigate. On a number of those occasions, we have gone and investigated. We have found those claims to be unfounded. But we have found that in a number of occasions, the Taliban uses those civilians as human shields. And in some cases when we do target, you know, and there are civilians that have been killed as a result of targeting, those are reported.

Yes, sir.

Q About that Diwaniyah incident, I believe the press release that was issued on that said that there was a review underway as to whether the appropriate firepower by coalition forces was used to respond to the mortar position. Can you explain to us what that was? Obviously you're pointing to the issue of the F-16 as appropriate position targeting. But I mean what exactly is the review about?

GEN. WIGGINS: Well, as I said, whenever there is accusations that civilians were casualties, they're investigated by the commander. Every commander does that as a matter of course, and it's the right thing to do. So in this particular case, I'm sure, because of the accusation, once again, it was reported that there's a commander out there that's doing the appropriate investigation. They take a look at those particular reports to see if they're founded or unfounded and then report when they have complete investigation and the facts are made available.

Q Just out of curiosity if not for the record, why does the U.S. military, if they conduct these investigations, if they make payments to families who have lost loved ones as a result of coalition strikes, why does the U.S. military not provide or keep accurate records of civilians, as best they know, killed by coalition forces?

GEN. WIGGINS: As I said, from the J3 and the Joint Staff perspective and from my foxhole, I don't keep track of those particular pieces. There might -- and commanders probably do at their level and commanders down range.

That's probably something better served to take down range to the tip of the spear and those -- with those commands that probably do -- commanders do keep track of operations and when civilians are in fact -- become casualties.

Yes, sir.

Q General, can you give us any statistics to back up what you said at the beginning of your briefing regarding the apparent lack of a spring or summer offensive by Taliban? What do you base that on? Can you compare the number of attacks that they made at this point last year to this year? Can you give us anything that backs up that claim?

GEN. WIGGINS: Right. I primarily deal with trends with regards to that. So as far as specific numbers, I can tell you that the attacks are down significantly. As far as the exact numbers, I don't necessarily have that and that's not how I track up here on Joint Staff. I can also tell you that they have suffered a number of casualties to include their senior leadership. The architect of their spring offensive, Dadullah Lang, was taken out, and there are indicators that they're having problems trying to find somebody to fill his particular shoes as well as others that have been taken out.

So those are the indicators we use. It's primarily the fact that, based on previous springs, based on indicators that we had that there was going to be spring offensive this particular year and it hasn't necessarily panned out, that's what we've used. And now we're past and through the spring.

Q So when you talk about attacks, I mean, if we talk about Taliban attacks on civilians, for example -- which seems to be the way they operate to a large extent because they're not involved in pitch battles with coalition forces to a large extent -- are you saying there are fewer attacks on civilians by the Taliban this year than last?

GEN. WIGGINS: What I'm saying is -- and you got it partially right. They did target coalition forces. As a matter of fact, they made a concerted effort last year to target coalition forces in the south as an effort to fracture what is considered ISAF when they took over, particularly the Canadians and the Dutch.

So with that, this particular year they tried to do a similar piece, particularly against coalition forces in the south once again, and particularly, in this case, they took on and they're starting to try to take on the national police because they see that as a weaker enemy. The Dutch went and responded and took the fight to the Taliban, resulting in numerous Taliban forces -- what's also starting to happen, we're starting to see shape, is the Afghan National Army standing toe to toe with the Taliban on their own and defeating the Taliban. That you

probably would not have seen in the past, and now you're starting to see more and more of that. We'd like to see the national police there, you know, increase in their capabilities and working hard to make that happen as well.

Yes?

Q The British says they're investigating any potential links between their car bomb incident and al Qaeda in Iraq. What evidence, what information have you seen that might indicate that there would be links? Is there any indication in recent months, or years, even, that insurgents or fighters in Iraq have moved into Europe, have moved into the U.K.?

Is there any indication yet the kind of technology used has any parallel to al Qaeda in Iraq? Has the British government come to the U.S. military, which maintains, of course, a forensic database on all the car bombs and IEDs in Iraq? Has there been any discussion in your world about this?

GEN. WIGGINS: Not in necessarily my world. I mean, I've heard some discussion in regards to car bombs. Any time there's a car bomb, you know, and they try to correlate, I know that some of the partners that I've had, particularly our British partners that we've had discussions, this is primarily a homeland defense type of lane. But with regards, you know, you don't want to rule out any sides here, from whether al Qaeda involvement to one extent down to somebody who is just acting out on their own.

But, you know, with Iraq, the car bombing piece, I know that there's a lot of forensic data that's being developed. I think that's going to be probably better served to be asked for homeland security because it's a policing function, and I believe the British allies that I talked to specifically when this happened, just through the course of a discussion, stated that that was a police function going on in Britain and that they continue to work that and roll up and arrest these people as they come across them.

Q Have you seen any indications of movement or interest by Iraqi insurgents or al Qaeda in Iraq in moving from Iraq into Europe, into the U.K., into Germany?

GEN. WIGGINS: I have not. But what I'll tell you is, is, you know, a war takes two sides, you know, and in this particular case, you know, the enemy has, back since 9/11, has been trying to destroy the freedoms here in this country as well as in Europe. That has never stopped being an aim. The fact that we took the fight to them in Iraq and we took the fight to them in Afghanistan has de-synched them, made it a little more difficult.

But you know, I don't think that their aim has changed. This United States was their first battleground, by launching 9/11. The fact that they're out there trying to do that I don't think is any secret or any surprise to America, nor Europe and the Brits.

Yes, sir.

Q General, you described at the beginning of your briefing the large number of deeply buried IEDs. Could you give us a little bit more detail on what these IEDs are looking like? As well, do you see any kind of shift in tactics by insurgents towards burying these mines for any reason, because they're harder to detect or because they're more lethal, they're directed against a certain kind of coalition or U.S. technology?

GEN. WIGGINS: Right. What I'll tell you is, as you're well aware, when General Petraeus talked of getting at these areas where we have not been at with any continued presence, and getting at these areas where the -- where al Qaeda's had an opportunity build VBIEDs (Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device), for example, of which, in Baqubah, we have discovered nine, one of which recently was a fire truck IED. So they're building them larger. They're using trucks.

In these particular cases, in areas where we haven't been, they've had the opportunity to emplace these

particular IEDs in areas. And then, through the course of time -- they have a lot of patience with regards to these particular weapons -- they become camouflaged, they become over the top. And then it's just a matter of time before they either -- through whatever the triggering device, engage them.

Are they buried deeper? Yes, because it gives them time.

But getting at these areas, what that does is restrict their freedom of movement in these particular areas, makes it harder for somebody with a shovel to dig something very deep. And also you now have the local citizens that are out there identifying these people and turning them in. It's made it more difficult.

I can tell you that in Anbar province, where we've had these tribal initiatives go on, we have had 70 percent, you know, of IEDs, particularly, that have been found and cleared in those particular areas. We've also had a 40 percent reduction in attacks. That's a direct result of local populace getting involved, similar to what we have here in the United States. If somebody went out and did something, suspicious activity, it would be reported to the police.

The other thing is, they're reporting these particular things to the Iraqi security forces as well, in larger numbers. And that in fact is due in large course because they're building a credibility with the people.

We have built these neighborhood watch programs through these tribes. We're getting them integrated into the police support units that are established getting to be a part of the Iraqi security force structure, and that is working out very well right now.

The last question, please. Yes, sir.

Q The figures, General, for -- how many casualties continue to be caused by IEDs, especially since the surge began and -- particularly in the last few months, when U.S. deaths were so high? Secretary Gates has given a round figure of roughly 70 percent. I wonder if that's on the increase, and can you be more specific more than that.

GEN. WIGGINS: Well, like I said, from my perspective, we deal on trends and percentages, not necessarily specific numbers. But I can tell you that one of the things that has happened through the neighborhood watch and the -- and Safe Neighborhoods Initiative within Baghdad and setting up security checkpoints and other things, it's made it harder for al Qaeda to get at the civilians, although they still execute high-profile attacks. But about 70 percent, 75 percent of all attacks -- or these type of attacks are basically going against coalition and Iraqi security forces now as opposed to civilians; in that, about 70 percent, as Secretary Gates said, causes U.S. casualties.

Q (Off mike) -- specific numbers, but how are you developing trends if you don't have specific numbers?

GEN. WIGGINS: Well, I get those, sir, I get those reported. That's probably commanders downrange. We get reports provided to us. We kind of track those trends. All right?

Q Thank you.

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