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**Presenter: Commanding General, Gulf Region Division Army Corps of Engineers Brig. Gen. Michael Walsh and President of the Society of Iraqi Surgeons and Advisor to the Deputy Prime Minister of Iraq Dr. Quraish Alkasir**

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**May 23, 2007 9:00 AM EDT**

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**DoD News Briefing with Brig. Gen. Walsh from Iraq**

(Note: The general and the doctor appear via teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq.)

BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Good morning. Can you hear me in Baghdad?

GEN. WALSH: Yes, we can hear you.

MR. WHITMAN: (Off mike) -- Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon. Good morning to the press corps, and good afternoon to you, gentlemen. Today we are joined by Brigadier General Michael Walsh. I think -- whom all of you here actually know, who is the commander of the Army Corps of Engineers' Gulf Region Division. And he is joined by Dr. Quraish Alkasir, who is president of the Society of Iraqi Surgeons and adviser to the Iraqi deputy prime minister. They're speaking to us today from the Coalition Press Information Center in Baghdad and will be discussing the ongoing efforts in the area of Iraqi health care. They have a few comments that they would like to make about this and then are going to take some of your questions with respect to this topic.

So with that, gentlemen, let me turn it over to you to open it up.

GEN. WALSH: Well, thank you very much. And good morning, everyone in D.C., and thank you for your interest in the Gulf Region Division and the Iraqi reconstruction program. I'm glad to be here this morning with my colleague, Dr. Quraish, to discuss the status of the health care construction.

As you know, the United States contributed almost \$22 billion towards Iraq's reconstruction efforts, and of that, 376 million (dollars) went to the health care sector. The U.S. contribution was intended to jump-start the rebuilding efforts here in Iraq and help the Iraqi government lay the foundation upon which to continue to recovery and rebuild their country.

Every day in Iraq, we see the fruits of our labor. Many of these successes are things in America that we take for granted. One of them is access to local medical facilities throughout the country.

The Gulf Region Division is working on renovation projects at 20 different hospitals. We're also

constructing 138 primary health care centers, and constructing one new speciality hospital, all focused -- all of these are focused on pediatric care or maternity care.

One of the hospital's renovations highlighted includes the Najaf Teaching Hospital. This project was a full renovation of seven-story building with 13 operating rooms. The renovation was done in three phases and includes upgrades to the doctors' residence as well as the ancillary buildings, and all of the systems -- the heating, ventilation, air conditioning, plumbing, electrical; oxygen-sensing reverse osmosis machines and ultra-clean air systems were all added to this project. This was about a \$14 million project and it was completed by an Iraqi-owned business. This hospital employs more than 1,200 people, about 200 of which are doctors. More than 250 students are trained at this medical facility.

Another area that ensures the people of Iraq have access to health care are 138 primary health clinics that we're building. The clinics are located throughout the country: 46 are in the north, 34 in the central region, and 58 in the south. Currently, 18 clinics are completed across the country; eight are open to the public and 10 are recruiting and training staff. More than 80 clinics are at the 90 percent complete stage and should be turned over in the next several months. Eight clinics that are currently opened, as I mentioned, are seeing more than 250 patients each day, clearly filling a need. Gulf Region Division outfits each one of these clinics with medical and office equipment and furniture -- pretty much a turn-key operation.

We're also building a state-of-the-art 94-bed pediatric oncology training hospital in the south, along with our partner, Project Hope. The Basra Children's Hospital will be the first new hospital built in the country since the 1980s. We are working closely with the Ministry of Health, who wants to make the Basra Children's Hospital a center of excellence in technology, practice, training and administration. The project is currently at 51 percent complete and is on track to complete -- construction complete in July of 2008. Right now, an average of 700 workers are on site daily to ensure that that project continues to progress.

We also provide development and training for more than a thousand Ministry of Health employees. All of the construction and the development programs are done working very closely with the government of Iraq and our partners.

And I'd like to turn the floor over now to Dr. Quraish, and then we'll be happy to answer your questions.

Dr. Quraish, as mentioned, is a surgeon. He's an adviser to the deputy prime minister, Zobei'e, and he was the president of the Society of Iraqi Surgeons, and I'm honored that he's here with us today.

DR. ALKASIR: I want to thank you, General Walsh. Good morning, friends in Washington, D.C. Thank you for letting me to be here and to tell my friends what we are doing here with the cooperation of our friends the Americans and the coalition forces.

Really since -- months or years, I can say that our cooperation started with -- for putting this strategy for the health care, although my department, as a deputy department, is responsible for most of the services to be issued to the people.

Regarding the health care which was taken and an important issue for the people, as we had so many problems regarding the hospitals and regarding the ministry itself. So we had put this strategy through the committees, and the committees really started when the big bosses from government and the Americans started to have the committee, beginning with the deputy prime minister, Dr. Salam Al-Zobei'e, and Ambassador Joseph Saloom made the big Committee for Services of Iraq, and then subdivisions were put, and part of those divisions were regarding the health care in all Iraq.

We had -- for the strategy for that, looking for the best things to give it to the people. We really started with the manpower with the doctors, and really regarding my issue as the president of the Iraqi Surgical Society and

as the dean of the doctors and the department of one of the big hospitals, I started to look for my friends who left Iraq, and I am still, you know, connecting them, and I brought some of them back, and I'm trying to put the work in the hospital to come back again, to be better.

Regarding the work that was done, it was put through the committee, the JPC Committee, which was put after we started the work, and we, through this Joint Planning Committee, we put our ideas first, then we put it on maps according to the areas, and then we put it really on the ground for reconstruction, sending it to the JROC people to do the job.

We have really the Iraqi and the Americans, and really I represented the government to go with my friend, the Americans, and we visited so many projects regarding different issues for services, but we emphasized on the health care. General Walsh told you about the different areas where the projects built.

Regarding Baghdad, where now we are having the security plan, we have took some care for the areas which really was having some violence, and we went there and we visited those projects and we power them, they are going on and everything is -- the people are happy about that. And the hospitals and the public health clinics, which were built by the friends, the Americans, really are taking into life. The people are visiting the clinics, and I was that happy because, you know, they were built in a very nice map to put the people -- to get the services in the right way.

We asked the Ministry of Health to have their representative with us in order to help with the follow-up for the clinics and the hospitals. We had so many areas where reconstruction and renovation were done, especially the Al Alwiya Children's Hospital, where so many important rooms were added to the hospital. And so we found that the hospital was crowded. And we visited that hospital with my friend just one month ago.

Still, our strategy is to continue using the American money for the health care, to give better services in the future. My strategy for being as the president of the Iraqi Surgical Society one; and two, as an adviser for -- (word inaudible) -- of prime minister, who is responsible for the services, I am putting the steps and I am just wanting with my friends to give better health care for the people. Really, at this moment, I want just to present my really thanks and gratefulness to my friends, the Americans in the JPC and the JROC for what they have done and for that they are doing now.

Thank you.

GEN. WALSH: Certainly the work in Iraq is challenging and difficult, and the reconstruction efforts are a vital component to Iraq's progress. Ultimately, however, it's up to the Iraqi people to rebuild and secure their country. The U.S. government and the government of Iraq continue to work together to ensure for that success.

We're now ready to take your questions.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, gentlemen, thank you for that overview. We do have a few questions here. Let's start with Pam.

Q Hi. This was Pam Hess with United Press International. Dr. Quraish, can you tell us more about the doctors who have left and who have come back? How many doctors left Iraq, say, during the occupation, and how many have you been able to attract back?

DR. ALKASIR: Regarding the doctors who left Iraq, I don't blame them. (Off mike.) I am a doctor; I am an old doctor. I haven't left, you know? You would ask me, why? I said to that in the CBS News, I said, it's my country; I should serve them.

But the problem of security, which put the people to leave the area for time being, I think they have and

strictly and contacted us. I can't tell you how many in numbers, because you know that some of them are abroad. And some of them are still hiding, and the people think that they are abroad.

I'm really in contact with the people. I want to contact with the doctors, not because I am the government but because I am the president of the Iraq Surgical Society. I am the man who is looking for the science to be given to my people, and just to follow my colleagues and not to leave them. We are waiting to have better situation in Iraq, in order to let the people who are really abroad to come back. And they are waiting, and they are waiting for us as a government, as the coalition forces, to stabilize the country, and then to come back.

It's not a big problem. We are putting -- (word inaudible) -- advertisement that all Iraqi doctors left. I do not blame them. They went because of the violence, and the violence came from the criminals. And once we get rid of the criminals, they will come back again, definitely.

Q How many doctors are currently at work in Iraq?

DR. ALKASIR: Regarding, you know, we have, you know -- doctors are of different ages and specialties. Regarding all specialties, we have lost at least more than 30 percent of the specialties. But the people really are doing -- the left people are doing their job now.

I'm sure you are looking daily for the violence and the ambulances taking the patient to the hospital. They are not going to hotels; they are going to hospitals. And who is treating them? They are the doctors.

I'm sure, we can't tell the names. We can't tell the number, because, you know, some of them maybe for a while, for a month or two month, and we should bring somebody to stay instead of them. So we can't tell a strict number. But all hospitals in general are giving the work which is, you know, the minimum work which is needed for the people.

MR. WHITMAN: Hey, Joe, go ahead.

Q My question is for Dr. Alkasir. This is Joe Tabet from Al Hurra.

Doctor, I would like, if you could explain to us, details about the public health care policy regarding the Iraqis.

The Iraqis need to have, like, the medical insurance to have access to your service?

DR. ALKASIR: You know -- sorry. I couldn't get your question because, you know, the sound is getting harsh, you know.

GEN. WALSH: Could you repeat your question?

Q I will try again. Dr. Alkasir, my question is if you can explain to us the public health care policy in Iraq, what the Iraqis need to have access to the health care services. Would they need medical insurance? Is your service for free for the Iraqis? Maybe if you can explain for us more details on your policy.

DR. ALKASIR: I got part of the question I could understand. But regarding the policy of health care, in the deputy prime minister department we have a big department, really -- I created that -- which is full of brilliant people. That they are now putting the strategy how to really help with the health care in Iraq -- we have an operating room -- regarding the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education, to give their problems and to correct and to put the strategy for the future. It's not the long future, no; it's the future, near future.

We really -- we are thinking of the drugs, the problem of drugs. We are thinking of the renovation, as our

friends, the Americans, are doing it. The policy, really, our policy is to have the minimum doctors to do the work and to secure the other people. I don't want to have all doctors to stay in hospitals in order to be called. I will let them go in a secure place in Baghdad, in their houses, in some secure places waiting. You know, not all doctors left the country. My policy is to have the minimum doctors to do the job and then to have the equipment to be handed to the hospital needed at this moment.

Right now I am not looking for call cases. I am just dealing with emergencies. Call cases can be then in different areas of Iraq. But regarding Baghdad, we are, as you see, we are just looking to help the people for the violence, for trauma. So our policy was -- to say it -- I will not tell anybody what I am planning because I haven't finished that plan, and I want to be secret for time being. And if you knew how many doctors are hiding in Baghdad, in their houses, you will be surprised. And you will say none of the doctors are -- (inaudible).

MR. WHITMAN: Perhaps I can help with the second part of the question, which you may not have heard. I think that there is some interest in understanding the access to the health care system and whether or not all Iraqis have access to that health care system, if insurance is required, if it's all public funded, those type of things, if you could give some characterization of how the health care system is currently operating.

DR. ALKASIR: You know, regarding -- you know, although I couldn't get the whole question, but I think you meant about the funding of the health care system or the people's payment to the hospital -- we have free treatment in the hospital.

And regarding the funding, we got a lot from our friends here. And we have our -- you know, really money from the petrol. We have put the plans, and I think we are doing the work, the right work at this moment.

MR. WHITMAN: Okay, Doctor. But I think that did address specifically what we're looking for here.

Let's go to Jim.

Q This is Jim Mannion from Agence France-Presse. Could you say how many people are treated each day in Baghdad as a result of the violence? And generally, what is the scale of the requirement for health care? How many people have to be treated who are not being treated now?

DR. ALKASIR: You know, regarding the patients that they are -- you know, the hospitals are receiving, you know, there are different -- (inaudible word). You know, we daily receive in our hospitals in Baghdad for the violence you see in the media, you know -- let's say at least the injured -- 50 to 75. They are divided in different hospitals.

Regarding the equipment -- by now, you know, the surgical needs are present for the time being, and I think we are helping the Ministry of Health in getting the needs with the help of our friends here, the Americans. When sometimes we need them, they send up part of the equipment from the army. And sometimes we'll bring the patient to the Green Zone and the American hospital and the Iraqi- American hospital.

Regarding the hospitals, I will, you know, tell you the truth. We are having a shortage. We are not fully equipped. We are in a war against terrorism, so we expect to have some shortage, but we are doing the minimum work to being -- for the people.

We haven't left a patient without surgery because of anesthesia. We haven't left a patient having an open wound without suturing. We haven't left a patient without (inaudible) for an injured chest.

So -- but we don't have the best beds. We are not having the best ICU. We are not having the best Doppler or ultrasound. We are doing the work with the machines that we are having. And we planned really for the future to have the best instruments. And we are having the group or committee in the Ministry of Health. We

prepare them to importate (sic) and to select the best for the Iraqi citizens in the future.

MR. WHITMAN: Carl?

Q My name is Carl Osgood. I write for Executive Intelligence Review. My question's for General Walsh. We've seen reports from the special inspector general for Iraq reconstruction, from congressional testimony, that by and large the reconstruction in the health sector, at least as performed by contractors, has largely failed; that there was a contractor that was supposed to build 150 clinics in Iraq and they've succeeded in finishing eight; that the Basra children's hospital is way behind schedule.

And so I'm wondering. Has the Corps of Engineers taken over for -- what these contractors were supposed to do and failed to do? Or what is the story there?

GEN. WALSH: Right. The primary health clinics were -- the prime contractor was a U.S. firm that was not able to get all the work done. So the Gulf Region Division asked them to stop their work, and we re-awarded the work that that firm was supposed to do to their subcontractors. Since we've re-awarded that work to the Iraqi subcontractors, they've been doing some excellent work. As I've just mentioned, about -- many of them are over -- over 90 percent will be turning them over in the next couple of months.

In regards to the Basra children's hospital, again, that was being done by another Western firm that was not doing good. And that contract was terminated, and we went with a Jordanian contract to finish on that.

And so, as I mentioned, there's about 700 construction workers that are on that job day in and day out now, and things are moving along much better than they were a year and a half ago.

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead.

Q Sir, Fred Baker with American Forces Press Service. When you say they're 90 percent ready to be turned over, when they're turned over, are you talking full operational staffing and funding by the Iraqi people, or will those still be augmented by American forces?

GEN. WALSH: No, that will be -- what I meant by fully turned- over turnkey means that they will have X-ray machines in it, they'll have dental chairs, they'll have the facilities that they need to run a primary health clinic.

We will be taking some of the staff and training them how to operate some of those systems. But then it'll be turned over to the minister of health, and the minister of health will be operating them, staffing them, bringing consumable supplies in.

MR. WHITMAN: Let's go back to Pam.

Q Dr. Quraish, this is Pam Hess again. Could you talk to us specifically about the problem of security at the hospitals and clinics in Baghdad? We see on the news that there are people who are afraid to go to the closest clinic because it's a different sect or it's in a different neighborhood ethnically, or a different sect of the -- you know what I'm saying -- (laughs) -- different sect, Shi'ite or Sunni. At any rate, could you please address the security situation specifically with regard to sectarian violence at your clinics?

DR. ALKASIR: Yeah. Really, regarding the security of the hospital, you know, it was a difficult situation just before the start of the security plan. All people knew that. And really, I was one of the doctors who ran from the hospital because of the problem of the violence. Once we started with a security plan, we put a strategy for the security for different hospitals. Really we sat with the main commanders of Baghdad security plan and with the prime minister himself, and really -- and with the Americans, and we selected the right people to secure the hospital in different regions in Baghdad.

I will tell you the truth, before the start of the security plan, we can say that the minimum people that reached the hospitals, you know, they were pushed to go there because of their injuries and problems, you know. But by now, you can come here and see people start to go to hospitals. I don't want to say as before because, you know, we have secured so many areas, and we have the people came back to work in the hospitals. And we put people there from the army, plus the Americans, because I want to tell you the truth again, that the people believe in Americans more than the Iraqis.

This is an issue we should have accepted by now, you know. And they call it as a buffer, you know, the Americans. So by now in any hospital we can see the Iraqi or the police people because the Americans are securing the area and the people coming to the hospitals now; more than 70 percent of the people are going to hospitals regarding their illnesses, in comparison with the previous situation before the start of the security plan.

Q And a follow-up. Would you tell us how many hospitals and clinics there are in Baghdad that are being protected? And tell us a little more about your experience -- what hospital did you leave and why?

DR. ALKASIR: Yeah. You know, I will let you know about my hospital. You know, my hospital is Al Qalam Teaching Hospital, which is present in one of the hot areas where I live, is Haifa Street. All of them -- all peoples knew about Haifa Street. This is where I live. This is where my clinic is. This is where my hospital is.

You know, I was saved by the Americans, I want to tell you this, and -- because of the terrorists and part of the militias. And the hospital that I was working for the previous 17 years -- and I am the head of the department of surgeons there -- is Al Qalam Teaching Hospital. It was closed for two months, you know, before the security plan started. By now, you can go there and you can see for yourself, it's easy to go there and to visit the whole department. And at least 70 percent to 80 percent of the specialists are working, and they come to their department daily to cope with the patients.

Another one that was really dangerous to go in was Al-Kadhimiya. By now, you can go to Al-Kadhimiya, even if you are from the Sunni group, because the army there -- or the Shi'a can go to Al-Kamaliyah because the army, the Americans, the Iraqi army are securing the whole ways that get you there.

So other hospital is Al-Numan in Adhamiya. Now it's secure. You can go there and you can take your advice from the doctor.

So many other examples are present, and really, within the following few months I think will secure the -- all hospitals in Baghdad.

Q How many hospitals are in Baghdad?

DR. ALKASIR: Sorry?

Q How many hospitals are there in Baghdad?

DR. ALKASIR: What other hospitals in Baghdad?

You know, we have the Al Yarmouk Teaching Hospital. We have the Medical City, the big Medical City. We have two hospitals in al-Sadr area. We have hospital in Abu Ghraib. We have another hospital in Al-Shu'la. We have many other hospitals in the periphery of Baghdad, in al-Madain, in Hamandiyah. You know, they are all -- those areas are related, you know, and they have -- and you know, are related to Baghdad.

Q A number?

GEN. WALSH: Yes, actually what we were -- the reporter was looking for if you had an actual number, a total number of the hospitals operating in Baghdad?

DR. ALKASIR: All the hospitals there are war-torn. We haven't had, you know, a hospital to close their doors completely. Yes, there is limitation of work, but all hospitals are working.

GEN. WALSH: And I think, you had listed a number of the hospitals.

DR. ALKASIR: Yeah, you know, in Anbar we have one, two, you know. There are so many big hospital and many local clinics, you know? We have five, six big clinics on the west, on the east of the river. And we have five big hospitals on the west of the river, beside the 45 equipped clinics in both side of the river in Baghdad.

MR. WHITMAN: Yes, that's -- thank you. That was helpful for context.

We have reached the end of our time, and I want to be respectful of the time you've allocated for this and give you an opportunity, in case there's something that we haven't addressed or some closing comments that you'd like to make. So let me turn it back to you before we bring it to a close, and offer you that opportunity.

GEN. WALSH: Do you have any closing comments?

DR. ALKASIR: You know, my comment, really just to tell the whole world that this is Dr. Quraish, the Iraqi doctor, and this is General Walsh, the American general. We are telling the people, all of the world, that the army is not here for only fight, or only they are presenting the weapons. They are -- they started the reconstruction since they arrived.

But you know, I blame the media. They presented the violence, but they didn't present the reconstruction. I said it once, and I said it in America when I met His Excellency President Bush. I told him, you know, we are going to put the seeds. And really, we put it during the meeting when I told him, we are starting to build a children's hospital in Basra, and that was only 15 of December 2003. He said, why you are building that hospital there?

I said they are in need, and I said we put it -- now we are just collecting the fruits. So this message for all people in both societies, Iraqi and American society, that we are here for fighting terrorism besides reconstruction.

Thank you.

GEN. WALSH: Thank you, Dr. Quraish, and thank you for joining me here.

I would also just like to end that there are lots of good stories that are out there. There's more than 3,200 projects that have been completed throughout Iraq. More than \$8.5 billion worth of infrastructure work has been completed by the Army Corps of Engineers, and there's another \$3.5 billion that we have on work right now. Certainly it's very important work, and we work hand in hand with our friends in the Iraqi government to provide services to the people of Iraq.

Thank you.

DR. ALKASIR: Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: Well thank you, gentlemen, for your time this morning. And hopefully we'll get an opportunity to do this again in the new future.

GEN. WALSH: You bet. Looking forward to it.

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