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**Presenter: Commanding General Multinational Division, Baghdad and 1st Cavalry Division, Maj. Gen. Joseph Fil**

**December 17,  
2007**

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**DoD News Briefing with Maj. Gen. Joseph Fil at the Pentagon, Arlington, Va.**

BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary of Defense): Sorry about the brief delay, but I think we have both video and audio now. Let me see.

General Fil, this is Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon. Can you hear me okay?

GEN. FIL: I can hear you loud and clear. How are you today?

MR. WHITMAN: Very good. Well, thank you again for joining us.

For those of you who might not know General Fil, this is Major General Joseph Fil, who is the commanding general of the Multinational Division Baghdad as well as the 1st Cavalry Division, as you can see from the patch behind him there, too. General Fil's no stranger to us and to this room. This is his fourth press conference that he's done from Baghdad to you here. And unfortunately for us, this is his final time, as he gets ready to do his transfer of authority and turn over responsibility to the 4th Infantry Division in the coming days.

He's speaking to us today from Camp Liberty in Baghdad. And for his final update, let me turn it over to him and then some questions from you. Again, thank you, General Fil, for joining us.

GEN. FIL: Well, thank you very much for that kind introduction, and good morning everyone. I'd like to thank you all for taking the time to attend this, which is the final press conference for us here in the Iraqi capital as we finish up our time here in Multinational Division Baghdad.

Today four of the brigades associated with the 1st Cavalry Division are in the process or have already completed their redeployment to Fort Hood and Fort Bliss, and in a couple of days my headquarters element and I will also redeploy. We'll be followed shortly thereafter by the two remaining brigade combat teams.

And before I take your questions today, I would like to take a few minutes to talk about what's been accomplished here in Baghdad since we arrived and assumed responsibility for operations during the fall of 2006. Now we came with a purpose: To improve the security situation here in the Iraqi capital and to set the stage for the Iraqi government and the Iraqi people to take charge of their future, and we've had some tough fights battling al Qaeda operatives and criminal militia. But here in the Multinational Division-Baghdad and across

Iraq, the coalition pounded away at the enemy and at their networks, and we've seen positive results from that persistent pressure.

The Baghdad security plan entitled Operation Fard al-Qanun brought in many fresh faces to the command as we surged Iraqi and American forces, which enabled us to move into the Iraqi neighborhoods throughout the capital city to weed out terrorists, extremists, and our proximity to the people allowed us to form bonds of trust with the people of Baghdad who had grown tired of the violence brought on by terrorist groups and criminal militiamen. And across the Iraqi capital, reconciliation efforts nurtured by our soldiers and leaders at the grass-roots level are starting to bear fruit. The temporary barriers around the markets and other densely populated areas have greatly decreased the number and lethality of the brutal terrorist attacks against the people and allowed life to grow.

The number of attacks against citizens in Baghdad has dropped by almost 80 percent since November of 2006. Murders in the province have decreased by 90 percent during that same time frame. The number of vehicle-borne IED incidents has also declined by about 70 percent, and the number of innocent people that are killed with these weapons -- (audio break) -- more. And we're finding more of them before they detonate. The number of roadside bombs has also decreased significantly, and we're finding more and more of them before they detonate.

I also attribute a great deal of the security progress to the willingness of the population to step forward and band together against terrorist and criminal militia. Without sanctuary, the insurgency cannot operate. They cannot plan and they cannot indiscriminately kill at the levels they did previously. Concerned local citizens are being trained to become part of the Iraqi security forces themselves. Iraqi citizens are providing tips to the Iraqi security and to the coalition forces, helping us to flush out criminal militias and insurgents.

The Iraqi security forces have likewise improved significantly since we arrived. The Baghdad Operation Command, a headquarters that stood up, really, less than a year ago, is led by Lieutenant General -- (audio break) -- and he's aggressively taken on the responsibility for leading Iraqi forces in and around the capital.

While the fight against terrorists and criminal elements continues, we're working with local civic and tribal leaders also, so that governance can take hold. And young men and women from throughout our ranks have evolved to become diplomats, ambassadors for peace, and reconstruction and reconciliation experts. In many areas around the city, yesterday's battle zone is today's blossoming communities, thanks to their efforts.

Contractors and local Iraqis are working together to repair sewage lines, and they're implementing trash removal plans, electricity and water programs, all of these under way to refurbish the badly worn infrastructure here.

Representatives from the governmental ministers are also getting out amongst the population into the communities to assess for themselves what needs to be done, and are working together with local leaders to institute long-term -- (audio break).

Commerce has returned to many of the marketplaces, and many Iraqis now can shop without fearing for their lives. The Dura Market in southern Baghdad is one prime example, where in January, less than a handful of merchants had their shops open for business, and now over 500 shops are open and it's flourishing.

Now, I want to be absolutely clear that while we have seen significant progress during our tour here, we are very mindful that it is fragile and that there is very tough work ahead. Al Qaeda is down, but it is by no means out. It remains a very dangerous enemy that maintains the ability to conduct attacks against the innocent, and we must continue to pursue them, to attack their networks even as they're trying to regenerate. Likewise, militia and criminal networks are still very potent threats who are continuously seeking to regain power and authority -- (audio break).

Now together, with continued pursuit of terrorists, criminals and militia, we must continue to assist the Iraqis to get sustainable, essential services and employment to their people here in this city. We also need to continue to improve the capacity of Iraqi security forces. They are making great strides, but we need to continue to help them to move forward as well.

We depart with a sense of accomplishment but also with the haunting sense that our work here is not yet complete, that momentum is not yet irreversible and there is still much to be done.

But with that, I'm prepared to take your questions.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you, and we have many here.

So let's start with Kristin.

Q General, it's Kristin Roberts with Reuters. You touched on this, but I'd like to draw you out a little bit more on the strength of al Qaeda and also the strength of what we've been told are being called special groups, the Shi'ite militias that are either not associated with JAM or not abiding by JAM's cease-fire. Can you give us an idea of their continued strength in the Baghdad area, and what parts of Baghdad they might still be controlling?

GEN. FIL: First of all, I would say that they are not controlling any part of Baghdad. There's no place where al Qaeda is able to walk free, no neighborhood, not even any street at this point, nor do the special groups control terrain in the city. But I will say that there are many parts of the city where they are lurking in the shadows, where they are working quietly, secretively and, I think, very determinedly to regain power and to still continue their attacks.

And so while the attack levels are down there, we're still seeing car bombs -- (audio break) -- still seeing small arms attacks and still seeing some incidents of indirect fire attacks, and these are the marks of both al Qaeda and these special groups.

The areas in which we continue to pursue them most strongly -- the special groups still are primarily on the eastern side of the city, although their attacks spread around wherever they can find vulnerable targets, against coalition and against Iraqi security forces. But they are primarily coming out of the Sadr City area, and that is where they frequently, we believe, are conducting their planning and their preparation.

Al Qaeda has no quarter in the city although they are still around, as I say, lurking in the shadows. And we continue to pursue them primarily in the western portions of the city, down south and some neighborhoods of East and West Rasheed, where we know they are still resident and still hiding, and in some areas up in the western part of Mansour and over on the other side of the river, and some small portions of Adhamiyah.

Q General, is there a danger, looking ahead, of withdrawing U.S., coalition forces too quickly over the next year or so? And what would happen if, or what happens as we begin to withdraw forces out of Baghdad? And what is the risk of going too quickly?

GEN. FIL: I think there's absolutely a risk of going too quickly. There's no question that although the incidents of violence are down significantly here, they're down because we have a force presence that is almost throughout the city. And there are now Iraqi security forces working in conjunction with coalition forces nearly everywhere in the city, and they're supplemented by concerned local citizens.

I think it's clear that pulling out too quickly, before the Iraqis are truly able to take over these areas independently, would be very risky. And there are some areas in the city where, at this point, it would fail. They're simply not ready to stand entirely on their own.

It is our belief therefore that although we are ready to begin, is the forces of the surge eventually return to the United States that are not replaced. I'm very comfortable with the proposed glidepath. There are some areas in the city where we'll move forces around to accommodate that.

But I would -- the plan that we believe makes the most sense at this point, and that we're embarking upon, is one of simply thinning the ranks, if you will, in areas that are going well, retaining some coalition presence there, to continue to work with the Iraqi security forces and these security volunteers, but retaining enough presence so that there's tactical overwatch or operational overwatch, if you will, and retaining strength in the areas where we're still working hard.

There's no question in my mind that an immediate pullout too quickly would be a real serious threat to stability here in Baghdad.

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead, Thom.

Q Sir, it's Thom Shanker with The New York Times. We routinely get updates about the growing numbers of Iraqi security forces and the small unit capability. I'd like your assessment of the capacity of the higher headquarters that you work with. What's their ability to plan missions, execute missions, and bottom line, when would an Iraqi division headquarters be able to take over the job that your level's doing today?

GEN. FIL: Thanks, Thom. Good to hear your voice.

It is -- it's been amazing, I think, how very quickly this headquarters, the Baghdad Operations Command, has stood up and become really very effective. They are now conducting some, I think, sophisticated sort of overarching planning not only for the day-to-day operations of their forces -- and we're involved in this planning as well because much of what they do we're joining them for -- but also of the long-term plan for Baghdad, the security of the entire province.

And I've been profoundly impressed with how quickly they've gotten up to speed with the very good judgment of their commander, General Abud al-Qanbar, a man for whom I have -- he's a man who I think would be -- you know, could perform superbly in any army and who represents the nation of Iraq, I think, very, very well; and the ability of the division commanders who are working for him and supporting him, both on the army side and on the national police side as well, in both the Karkh Command and the Rusafa Command on either side of the river.

They are -- they are standing up.

They're making good tactical decisions. They are planning true operations that involve multiple forces, combined operations that are frequently intelligence driven. And they're responding, I think, in a very immediate, decisive and successful way to events as they emerge, and as they inevitably do around here, as the enemy strikes back in unexpected ways. So all of those, I think, are really positive signs.

(Audio break) -- operations without the immediate -- in other words, independent operations -- without the immediate joining of coalition forces, although that's still the exception as opposed to the rule. And I think that that's the way it should be for this phase in the campaign.

I would expect that, you know, in the months ahead that the divisions that support the Baghdad Operations Command likewise would continue to mature. And we're seeing, again, the same sort of ability to plan and conduct operations more and more effectively, more and more independently and more in coordination and collaboration with the coalition forces as opposed to coalition force-led.

So I think all of that -- (audio break). So I think all of that -- (audio break). And again, I've been really very,

very impressed with the rate at which they've improved and also the level to which they've improved.

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead.

Q General Fil, this is Guy Raz from NPR. I wanted to ask you about the CLCs. And looking ahead now, now that you're on your way back to the U.S., at what point, you know, does this program begin to unravel unless these groups are integrated into the Iraqi security forces? In other words, how long can they exist as a kind of a parallel security force -- (audio break) -- to overall stability?

GEN. FIL: That's, I think, a fair question. There is no intent for them to remain permanently a parallel force -- (audio break) -- increasingly joining the Iraqi security forces themselves. We've had some 635 of the local -- concerned local citizens in the Baghdad area alone already join the Iraqi police force, and there is a list of more than 2,000 that were recently approved by the minister of Interior likewise to go to school and become Iraqi policemen. This is going to continue, and there are some 10,000 of the 25,000 that we currently have in the program in the Multinational Division Baghdad area -- some 10,000 of them aspire to be Iraqi policemen and are signing up.

There are also a number of them who desire to join the Iraqi army.

I would say that there are also a large number of them who want to join other forms of employment, including the -- (audio break) -- that are being developed, and I think the end state is that there would be a higher ratio of these citizens joining those forces than actually joining the security forces. You know, perhaps two-thirds of them would join these public works organizations.

So I think that the program has been very powerful, it's been very helpful. It's allowed us to provide a supplemental security force that is part of the population in many areas of the city and even outside the city -- up in the northwest, outside of Abu Ghraib and the Taji areas -- that has been very, very helpful to us working in close coordination with coalition forces and where the Iraqi security forces are just beginning to thicken their lines to work with them. And it's been a powerful force. I do not believe it's a permanent force -- (audio break) -- heard any plans to make it so.

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead, Pauline.

Q Pauline Jelinek of the Associated Press. General, to follow up on that, there have been reports that some of the awakening council in Baghdad has been sort of freelancing. I think one specific example was pushing Shi'a out of neighborhoods like Dura. Are you seeing that, and how big a problem is that?

GEN. FIL: We're actually seeing very, very little of that. There are -- there's a very careful vetting process before these concerned local citizens are allowed to actually join these forces. They take an oath; they go through a biometrics system, BATS and HIIDES are what they're called, but where they have their fingerprints done, retinal scans. (Audio break) -- careful process to do background checks and also to have local citizens vouch for them. So there's been -- it's a pretty well-screened group that's joined these organizations, and they are watching -- they're being watched very closely by not only the coalition forces, but more and more by the Iraqi forces because in many parts of the town we're moving them under the control of the Iraqi security force authorities who have responsibility for that district. In fact, we've done that in Ghazalia, we're doing that in Jihad, we're doing that in parts of -- other parts of West Rashid.

There are, though -- there are rumors that are generated and that sometimes even persist about them being sectarian in their works, and I can tell you that we and the Iraqi forces jump on that immediately. I have found -- (audio break) -- to be true inside of the city of Baghdad, in the downtown regions, and we have -- we've jumped on it immediately every time we hear about it.

I think there's a -- you know, it's natural that there would be concerns any time a group of citizens is brought together in a program to provide local security.

But I think that in order to mitigate that, the program that we've worked with the government of Iraq on for these concerned local citizens is one in which they don't do offensive operations. They provide security -- static security, if you will -- at entrance control points, on critical infrastructures, on mosques, on facilities. They provide an intelligence network in which their tips are provided to Iraqi security forces and to coalition forces. And any movement that they've done -- (audio break) -- is done in conjunction with organized Iraqi security forces, national police, army, or with coalition forces. So again, although I've heard about these reports and we occasionally get them and we investigate them immediately -- we jump right on it -- none of these so far have proven to be true.

MR. WHITMAN: Do you want to follow up on -- (off mike)?

Q I think he just answered the question I was going to ask. The previous -- we lost the audio, and you had said, at one point, something about true. But what you're saying is, there are rumors, there are reports and it's not happened that they've, for instance, pushed Shi'a out of Dura.

GEN. FIL: We have -- again, we occasionally get reports of this. We have investigated them every time, and so far we have never found the legitimate CLCs -- concerned local citizens, we call them Iraqi security volunteers -- that are under our contracts and that are being organized by our forces conducting any of these evictions or offensive sectarian operations. It's -- again, it's a concern that I think any -- it's natural that there are -- in a conflict such as we've had here in Baghdad, which is so sectarian in nature, it is natural that there would be concerns about this and that there might even be rumors about it. But so far, again, we've had no such incidents that we've been able to find.

I will say there are -- there was an incident up in -- oh, several weeks ago, where some unit, some groups that included some concerned local citizens were outside of the Baghdad area and they were attacking al Qaeda independently. So this was members of this awakening group who had banded together with some units or some individuals from concerned local citizens who were involved in an attack against al Qaeda, but it was not against -- certainly not against Shi'a and it was not inside the city.

MR. WHITMAN: (Off mike) -- Tom, and then we'll go to Jeff -- (off mike).

Q General, it's Tom Bowman with NPR. I wanted to stay in the concerned local citizens for a minute, if I could.

Back in January, President Bush was told by Prime Minister Maliki that political or sectarian interference will not be tolerated with the Baghdad security plan. But in the neighborhood of Saidaia, the concerned citizens were pulled off the check points. And also as you know, there's a real hard time getting the concerned citizens into the Iraqi security forces. There's a lot of political resistance, if you could address that point.

And also there was supposed to be 18 Iraqi army and national police brigades in Baghdad for the security plan. I understand that's dropped to 14. Could you tell us why that is, and what effect that's had on the plan?

GEN. FIL: First of all, on Saidaia, we have a program that we've worked there actually for several months with the Iraqi security volunteers and this CLC program, and the first group was primarily Sunni. (Word inaudible) -- and other citizens of Saidaia were concerned that it should be a mixed group, that the security volunteers should represent both Shi'a and Sunni. And so they were -- at the request of the Iraqi government, we did suspend them from operations -- (audio break) -- since then been recruiting Shi'a volunteers as well.

And the number of -- at last count -- I think this may be a couple days old now -- we had 41 Shi'a volunteers who have been vetted, and that would be matched by 41 of the original over 100 of the Sunni

volunteers that would be vetted. And I think that we'll continue to work -- the rules ought to obviously be the same for the vetting and the procedures to get them hired. And I'm confident that in the days ahead, we'll be able to work through that and come to an agreement where we have a 50-50 mix, which is what the agreement has been there, in the town of Saida, to have these volunteers. I can tell you that the violence in Saida went down when we had those initial volunteers on the job, and we're anxious to get them and the Shi'a that will be mixed with them back on the streets, no question about it.

And I think that this program that is developing, with the committee for reconciliation, is one that really is logical and makes sense for the entire city. And that would be that most of these volunteer groups would have a relative representation of both of the sects. And that representation would be somewhat likened to whatever the relative population mix is for that particular district. And so we're working with the Iraqis on that. As you know, originally it was a program that attracted primarily Sunni, and we now seek to have the Shi'a come in as well, who are interested in providing security in the neighborhoods and perhaps in eventually joining the Iraqi security forces permanently.

(Cross talk.)

Yeah, right now we have some -- there are 15 army and Iraqi national police brigades that are in the city and 9, I think, of the army and 6 of the national police brigades, which provides -- those mixed also with the coalition brigades that we have is, I think, providing, you know, adequate forces. It comes to about, if you mix the national police, the Iraqi army and the Iraqi police together in the city.

It's some sixty-two-and-a-half thousand Iraqi security force personnel.

Q (Off mike.)

MR. WHITMAN: The question -- the follow-up question, General, was do you know why it went from 18 to 15?

GEN. FIL: There has been some movement of the brigades to the areas around Baghdad to the belts that are outside of the immediate city but that support the fight in this -- Operation Fard al-Qanun. For example, there is a very tough fight that we've got going on right against an al Qaeda threat down in al-Madain area, which is in the southeast, down the Tigris River, and there have been some forces that are down there working closely with our 3rd Infantry Division, our sister division that is on our southern flank. And there have been some forces that have been moved up to the belts to the north as well. So although they may not be immediately in the -- (audio break) -- supporting the fight here. And that is -- that's precisely where they've gone.

MR. WHITMAN: Jeff, we'll have to catch next time. We have reached the end of our time here, and General, we do want to thank you once again for all the time that you've spent in updating us with respect to what's going on in Baghdad and taking our questions from back here and giving us the kind of perspective that only a command on the ground is able to do.

But before I bring it to a close, let me throw it back to you in case you have any final words you'd like to say to us.

GEN. FIL: Well, thanks very much. Always a pleasure. And I thank you all for your attention on what I understand is a pretty early morning there in Washington, D.C. on a Monday, and I thank you for that. I would say that -- you know, in closing, that we recognize this is a very tough fight, and it is -- (audio break) -- it is by no means complete. The progress that we've made thus far is fragile and not guaranteed.

But the 1st Cavalry Division was here in Baghdad back in January of 2005 when democracy was born, during the first national elections here. And as we now prepare to return to our loved ones in central Texas with

similar feelings of accomplishment after the second tour of our efforts here in the Iraqi capital, we have seen improvements across the security front, but we depart that the knowledge that we've made has been -- we depart with the knowledge that the improvements we've made have been a positive impact on the lives of the Iraqi citizens.

We also know that many of our troops gave all and that a grateful nation does mourn these fallen heroes with their families and their loved ones. And we will never forget them, their sacrifices -- (audio break) -- that the situation here is fledgling and very fragile, not guaranteed, and there is much work ahead.

In a couple of days, our division colors will be cased in a brief ceremony here in Baghdad and they'll be returned to Texas. And my good friend, Major General Jeff Hammond will unfurl the colors of the mighty 4th Infantry Division as our brothers and sisters from Fort Hood, Texas, take on the mantle against multinational -- again, as the Multinational Division Baghdad headquarters. And I don't have any doubt that they'll continue to generate and experience forward progress here.

Our families are our strength, and our family readiness groups have been instrumental in keeping the 1st Team family informed and involved. The volunteer spirit is alive and well in central Texas, and we should all be very proud of the work that's been done by our rear detachments and by our own family -- (audio break) -- taking care of each other. And our friends in central Texas communities have also been very supportive for over five years now, and they too embody America's finest, and they have our heartfelt thanks for all they continue to do for us and for our families.

I close by saying we're the finest fighting force in the world. Our soldiers are proven warriors who have faced the fires of enemy hatred and beaten it back with a purposeful professionalism, and they've achieved great success in many of their endeavors here in the Iraqi capital. These young men and women are from all walks of life. They're from all across our country and they've truly been my inspiration during this tour, and they are truly the standard bearers of freedom and they understand fully the meaning of the words "sacrifice," "honor" and "commitment."

Well again, it's been my pleasure to speak with you all today. I thank you very much for joining us, the 1st Team.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you, General. On behalf of everybody here, we wish you and your unit a safe and speedy redeployment.

GEN. FIL: Thanks very much.

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