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Presenter: Commander of Multinational Division-North and the 25th Infantry Division
Maj. Gen. Benjamin Mixon

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

BRYAN WHITMAN (Pentagon spokesman): Good morning everybody. Good afternoon, General Mixon. This is Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon. Thank you for joining us again. I don't think he really needs an introduction after his -- this is his fourth session with us in this format here, but this is Major General Benjamin Mixon. He's the commander of the Multinational Division-North and the 25th Infantry Division. Actually, this is his fifth time; he's done it four other times with us, most recently in July.

And today he's at Contingency Operating Base Speicher, which is outside of Tikrit, and coming towards the end of his tour, actually. He took command and responsibility for ongoing security operations in MND-North in September of 2006, and so I think your transfer of authority is actually coming up very soon, and this is probably our last opportunity in this format to have an opportunity to get an operational overview of what your forces have been doing and to ask you a few questions.

So once again, welcome, General Mixon. Thank you for all the time that you've given us back here at the Pentagon, and let me turn it over to you.

GEN. MIXON: Well, thank you very much. This will be my last opportunity to address the press corps as a commander of Multinational Division-North, and I appreciate that opportunity as we come to the end of our 15-month tour here in Iraq. I want to keep my comments brief so that I can allow as much time as possible for questions.

Now, the first here I want to address is security. From day one this has been our most important task. Just as stated in our Task Force Lightning motto, "one team, one mission," security for Iraq's people. When we arrived in Iraq in August of 2006, all of Iraq's army divisions in Multinational Division-North were operating under coalition control. In other words, I had command of those divisions. By contrast, today all four Iraqi army divisions are under Iraqi control, and they now routinely conduct unilateral and joint operations.

The best example of this is in Nineveh province, where the 2nd and 3rd Iraqi Army Divisions are conducting security operations largely independent of coalition forces. This has allowed me to reduce our day-to-day security presence in Nineveh's capital city of Mosul to just one Infantry Battalion. Just a year ago, we had three times this force operating in Mosul. Another example of Iraqis taking security lead is the establishment this year of the operations center in Samarra and Baqubah.

These Iraqi-controlled centers serve as command and control nodes for Iraqi army and police forces and the integration of civilian agencies. These fully functional centers operate 24/7 and have proven to be invaluable as hubs for information and security operations in these two key cities.

Other signs of Iraqi security force growth include 20,000 policemen and 27,000 army soldiers were trained and added to the ranks of the security forces; 52 new Iraqi police stations were established; and Iraqi security forces have increased their mobility and protection with the fielding of more than 900 vehicles and 130 Light Armored Vehicles. Logistics and administrative support for the police and army is still not where it needs to be.

Iraqi units continue to struggle with the flow of repair parts, insufficient tools and maintenance technicians, along with lingering problems with pay and promotion. We are seeing some progress in these areas, but much more needs to be done, primarily at the Defense and Interior Ministry levels.

Our combined tactical efforts with the Iraqi security forces have dealt the enemy, particularly al Qaeda, a serious blow in northern Iraq. The addition of two surge brigades in our area helped us regain the initiative from al Qaeda in the northern Baghdad belt and in Diyala province, which, as all of you know, was our most volatile province. Large offensives such as Operations Turkey Bowl, Arrowhead Ripper and Lightning Hammer I and II aggressively targeted the enemy and his strongholds and safe havens. These operations liberated Diyala's capital city of Baqubah and drove al Qaeda from the Diyala River Valley in the Za'ab triangle area, denying them safe haven and support zones in areas where they have historically had a great presence and we have had limited presence.

Complementing our offensive campaign has been a relentless pace of intelligence-driven raids which have captured or killed dozens of terrorist cell leaders and disrupted financial networks in Mosul and Samarra. In all provinces, the enemy is off-balance and unable to plan, finance or execute coordinated operations to near the level it had prior to the surge. Not surprisingly, total number of attacks in Multinational Division-North have dropped for three consecutive months and are on track to drop again for the month of October. These security successes have restored the confidence of the Iraqi people, who are now stepping forward in many communities, setting aside tribal and secular differences and sharing a common duty of fighting terrorism and rejecting extremism.

We currently have more than 15,000 participating concerned local citizens in northern Iraq, who are taking active security measures and assisting coalition and Iraqi security forces in their respective neighborhoods. This fairly recent development is perhaps the greatest sign of progress during my time in Iraq. As we all know, an insurgency is all about the people, and you have to have the people's support, and their support is swinging in our direction.

We have also seen progress in the areas of governance. A year ago, I reported to you that the provincial governments in northern Iraq were mostly dysfunctional and stood far apart from any interests from the central government in Baghdad. Today the provincial governors routinely travel to Baghdad to conference with ministerial officials and have hosted numerous reciprocal visits by Prime Minister Maliki, Vice President Hashimi and numerous other senior government of Iraq officials.

In other positive developments, all the provinces are executing their respective capital budgets, major crime courts have been established, and they are trying cases under the rule of law, no longer paralyzed by the enemy's intimidation.

The final area of progress I'll highlight is reconstruction.

By use of the Commanders Emergency Response Program and working closely with our Provincial Reconstruction Teams, we have invested more than \$160 million on projects and programs designed to rebuild

the infrastructure and to benefit the Iraqi people. This list includes 121 health-care improvements, 390 water and sanitation projects, 130 energy projects and 171 education projects. We have also initiated a micro-grants program that has awarded more than 240 grants to enterprising businessmen, totaling more than \$490,000.

In the important area of oil and natural resources, production, distribution and exporting are all on the rise. Since January, the number of petroleum product tankers originating from the Baiji oil refinery to designated fuel points has more than doubled, largely due to enhanced efficiencies at the refinery and enhanced security provided by the 4th Iraqi Army Division. Similarly, more oil products have been escorted from the northern oil fields to international markets in the past two months than in a previous 10 months combined.

Now I'd like to close with some thought about the future about the northern Iraq. Despite the successes and signs of progress, rising production trends and declining attacks that I have mentioned, serious challenges remain. Successful operations in Anbar and Baghdad have driven more enemy forces into the northern region, which remains a coveted terrorist sanctuary and breeding ground. Long, porous borders with Iran and Syria offer easy access for foreign fighters. Severe unemployment creates an enormous disaffected military-age male population. In short, Multinational Division North remains a fertile ground for an active insurgency if we allow it to continue.

Thus, northern Iraq stands at a crossroads. While some areas, some as Nineveh, are ready for transition, others, such as Diyala, will require robust coalition presence for the foreseeable future. Our efforts, particularly during the surge, have brought precious time for the Iraqi government to move forward in the political processes and to make even greater improvements in the Iraqi security forces.

Now is the time for them to act, not later.

A key to success will be the government's ability to capitalize on the current concerned citizen movements, leveraging them as a bridge to Sunni inclusion and reconciliation. Enduring national issues such as corruption and financing of terrorist criminal activity are historic norms that must be curbed, if not eliminated, in order to further the legitimized government and to keep pressure on the enemy. A key step in 2008 will be provincial elections in the northern provinces as the nation builds towards a representative government.

In conclusion, the 25th Division and Task Force Lightning have been honored to serve in Iraq for the past 15 months. We stand proud of our accomplishments and those of our partnered Iraqi security forces. My soldiers know that we have made a difference and that our sacrifices have not been in vain. I am especially appreciative of our soldiers' families and all their sacrifices, and they have made many sacrifices during this 15 month tour. I will now take your questions.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you general. And we have several to start with. Go ahead, Pauline.

Q Sir, it's Pauline Jelinek at the Associated Press. On the question of Turkey: Diplomatic efforts aside, have you seen the Kurdish authorities in your area do anything during your time there to rein in the PKK, and what would that be if you have?

GEN. MIXON: I have not seen any overt action. I know that they have pursued the diplomatic line, but those are the types of activities that are managed and coordinated at higher levels than my own.

Q (Off mike) -- the PKK supply lines running through your area, or any logistics lines that the Kurds could do something about?

GEN. MIXON: That would be speculation, to be honest with you. I don't track the specific locations of the PKK, so you'd have to ask somebody else that question to get an accurate answer.

MR. WHITMAN: Joe, go ahead.

Q General, I think -- this is Joe Tabet with Al Hurra. As the commander on the ground, are you planning -- as the U.S. military -- are you planning to do anything to take any steps to counter the PKK movements and activities in the north?

GEN. MIXON: Absolutely nothing.

Q Just a follow-up.

MR. WHITMAN (?): You may follow up. (Laughter.)

Or we can come back to you.

Q Don't you think you have the responsibility to make anything to avoid the Turkish incursion in the north?

GEN. MIXON: I have not been given any requirements or any responsibility for that.

MR. WHITMAN: I think we're on the same topic.

Go ahead, Julian.

Q General, Julian Barnes from the Los Angeles Times. Do you have -- are there enough U.S. troops in MND-North that could go into the Kurdish region to provide some stability and assure Turkey that something is being done for the PKK if that was ordered by General Odierno or General Petraeus?

GEN. MIXON: That's a hypothetical question that -- I mean, I haven't studied it. I haven't been given any instructions that would even vaguely resemble what you just mentioned, so I don't see any sense in talking about it.

MR. WHITMAN: Let's go over here to Tony.

Q Sir, Tony Capaccio with Bloomberg News. More broadly, the PKK, can you give us a snapshot of why they're considered so tenacious and effective? We keep hearing there are very small group of people, like 3,500. Why are they so effective and considered such a threat by Turkey? Can you at least give us a feel for that?

GEN. MIXON: I have no idea. You'll have to ask somebody in the Turkish government.

MR. WHITMAN: Okay, let's go to Garamone.

Q Sir, this is Jim Garamone with American Forces Press Service. Let me just sort of back up and ask you to look at your 15- month tour there, and if you could tell me what affect air power may have had for all of your operations there, which are essentially counterinsurgency. How does air power work with what you have to do on the ground?

GEN. MIXON: Well, it's been very important, and we run joint operations, of course. Most significantly, it was very important in our operations in Diyala province and operations in and around Baqubah, and we used a lot of close air support and precision munitions to go against this particular enemy.

So in all cases, we take advantage of all of the assets that are available to us, and I'm just glad that we

had fixed-wing aircraft available to support us during our operations.

MR. WHITMAN: Okay, we'll go to Barbara and then Andrew.

Q General, Barbara Starr from CNN. I have to take you back to the PKK Turkish question because I'm confused. Since your area runs all the way -- the responsibility runs all the way to the border -- you're so adamant that you're not involved or looking or thinking about the PKK question -- so my first question is: Has somebody told you specifically don't worry about it, stay away from it, it's not yours? And if you have this terrorist group operating in your region, why aren't you looking at it? Do you want to do something about it?

GEN. MIXON: Well, let me put it to you very clearly. The three Northern provinces are under KRG, provincial Iraqi control. They have a security force, which you're all familiar with, known as the peshmerga. It's their responsibility to ensure the integrity of their particular provinces.

Q (Off mike) -- someone told you to stay from even looking at the PKK question?

GEN. MIXON: No one's told me that specifically, but I haven't been given instructions to do anything about it either.

MR. WHITMAN: Gordon. Oh, I'm sorry. I said Andrew was going to be next, and then we'll --

Q General, Andrew Gray from Reuters. You've talked in previous briefings about some problems with the Iraqi police, particularly a sectarian problem within the police force. Can you tell us how prevalent that problem is now; have you made progress, and what remains to be done?

GEN. MIXON: I believe we have made progress. We do see some instances of that depending on the police station and where it's located. We deal with that. But the problem we're dealing with now is what appears to be still sectarian divides in the Ministry of Interior that is responsible for the support to the police.

There's still a lot of work to be done down there to do away with the sectarian decision-making that occurs in the ministry of interior in Baghdad.

Q (Off mike) -- some examples of that? What are the problems that that's causing for you? What's not being done that needs to be done?

GEN. MIXON: Well, the hiring of police, for example, in Diyala -- we've been trying to get an additional 6,000 police hired in Diyala for the last several months. It has been approved by the prime minister, but it appears to us that there's some foot-dragging going on in the ministry of interior that needs to be stopped. We need to hire a balanced force so that we can improve the security situation in Diyala. That's the most glaring example I can point out to you.

Q (Off mike) -- very briefly, are those mainly or entirely Sunni police officers that you're looking to hire?

GEN. MIXON: No, we're looking to balance the force in Diyala, so it would be a combination of Sunni, Shi'a, and we do have Kurds that also live in Diyala. So we'd like to achieve a better balance particularly by neighborhood.

Q Sir, Gordon Lubold from the Christian Science Monitor. I want to make sure I understand something, and then ask you to talk about it.

Is it that you will lose one brigade, and that the follow-on brigade is going to assume a broader AOR? Is

that -- do I understand that right basically?

GEN. MIXON: Well, that's not exactly right. It's accurate to say that I will have one less brigade headquarters, which is the equivalent of about two to three battalions. There will be some changes in the boundaries that will occur. I'm not going to discuss the details of that. But after it is all set and done, and the dust settles, I will have a little less force. But we've made adjustments to deal with that, understanding that we have dealt the enemy some pretty significant blows over the last several months, and we believe we can handle the issue.

Q So my question is, can you talk a little bit more? Given what you've said about it's still a fertile ground for insurgency, one, is this kind of a test bed to kind of test this idea of reducing U.S. forces and increasing the follow-on forces' responsibility? And is this a good time for that, given what you said about the kind of increasing movement of insurgents from Anbar and north of Baghdad?

GEN. MIXON: No, it's not really a test bed, if you will. We're -- I'm sure the operations will remain intelligence-driven. My point in bringing that up is that now is the time that the Iraqi government is going to have to act to do those things, to include the Sunni and the greater population, to take any advantage the enemy may try to take of this particular time.

We've bought time for the government to act. They need to act and include the concerned local citizens and their security forces, and we need to move down the road with all the political things that we have been talking about for the last many months. We'll be able to handle the security situation and continue to improve the Iraqi security forces, and I believe over time we got to give the Iraqi security forces more and more responsibility and for us to begin looking at how we can change our mission and reduce forces in northern Iraq.

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead. Let's cross back around here -- Ken then Carl.

Q General, it's Ken Fireman from Bloomberg News. You mentioned the CERP Program and how successful and important it's been in your area; the latest special inspector general's report said that there was -- that CERP teams were often working at cross-purposes with PRT teams, that there was poor coordination between the two and that there were times when CERP teams were doing work that the PRT teams should be doing. Can you speak to that point in your area? Have you seen any evidence of that?

GEN. MIXON: I've seen absolutely no evidence of that. And I would invite any of those inspectors to come into Multinational Division-North to first of all take a look at the coordination between my tactical commanders and the Provincial Reconstruction Teams and how we have attempted to integrate the Commanders Emergency Program with the PRT priorities and also the provincial government's priorities. I think that's a good news story, and I would invite anybody to come in and look at it and to tell us if we're making some mistakes -- we'll correct it. But I think it's a good news program.

Q General, I'm Carl Osgood with the Executive Intelligence Review. In view of all of the challenges that you've described that remain in your area, how robust do you think the progress that you described in the -- at the outset of your remarks is? What has to be done to shore that up? You know, how much fragility is there still in the situation?

GEN. MIXON: Well, I think what we have to do is to continue to focus on the Iraqi security forces. I mean, the fact of the matter is this thing is going to be resolved by the Iraqis. We are giving them an opportunity to resolve these issues and to move forward; that opportunity is now almost going to come to an end. We are going to continue to work very hard with them to improve their security forces, to improve their logistics capability, and if we stay focused on that, then I think that we can be successful.

MR. WHITMAN: Jim?

Q General, it's Jim Mannion from Agence France-Presse. I wonder if you could be more specific about why you think that there is foot-dragging on the part of the Interior Ministry on adding police in your area. What is it that they've done that leads you to that conclusion?

GEN. MIXON: Well, I'll give you a timeline.

We began meeting with a special committee known as the Diyala Support Committee last May-April time frame as we began to formulate plans for the operations that were going to occur in Diyala as a result of the surge. We were talking about increasing the police forces at that time, back in the May-April time frame. We're sitting here today now in October with an approval for 6,000 hires by -- assigned by Prime Minister Maliki with no movement. In my book that's foot dragging. I can't be any clearer than that.

Q Have they given any indication as to, you know, what the delay is? Have they given you a reason?

GEN. MIXON: I don't have any visibility specifically of what's going on down there. We sent teams down in there to look at lists. We did do some initial hiring, but it appears to be, from my perspective, certain individuals may be trying to influence exactly who's being hired. I've asked for assistance in this matter from my higher headquarters, and I'm sure I'll get that assistance.

Q Sir, it's Justin Fisher with Fox News. Currently, how many coalition forces or troops are there in the Kurdish region, and have you moved any additional forces there in recent days? And also, you said the number of attacks has dropped in the northern region for the past three months. I was hoping you could give us some numbers on that.

GEN. MIXON: Yeah, I can do that. I've moved no additional forces up to the Kurdish region. I have a very small number of forces, specifically Civil Affairs, I think it's in the neighborhood of 15 or 20 maybe, and I have small team that works with the border elements that are up there. So it's not a combat mission, and I haven't moved any additional forces up into that area.

Q (Off mike.)

GEN. MIXON: Improvised explosive devices, attacks are down by those -- at least incidents -- by over 400 for this month, and our U.S. casualties in Multinational Division-North, although we regret any casualty, they're at the lowest numbers they've been since we assumed responsibility for this particular part of Iraq.

Q Can I ask you to repeat those numbers again? You cut off there, and we couldn't hear you.

GEN. MIXON: Yeah. As far as improvised explosive devices are concerned, we've had about 400 less this month than we had last month. That's a four-month trend. And I think, generally speaking, numbers of attacks - we've had about 30 percent to 40 percent less. I can get somebody to send you the specific numbers, but in all areas, the trend line is down.

MR. WHITMAN: We have time for just about one more.

Barbara?

Q General, could we go back to the insurgent forces that you do see in your area? You spoke about Iran and Syria. What's your current assessment of the numbers of foreign fighters in your area, and specifically Iran's influence in operations and fighters in your area as well?

GEN. MIXON: Yeah, the foreign fighters that we believe move in from Syria -- we estimate it's about 30 to

40 per month. But I've been running some significant operations along the Syrian border. We've greatly disrupted that movement through my battlespace.

But over the time that we have been here, less than 1 percent of the individuals that we have captured have been foreign fighters. Now, there could be a lot of explanations for that; a lot of the foreign fighters are the ones that blow themselves up. That's what we believe, and so that may be the reason for that.

Now, moving over to the other side, I have not killed or captured anybody that we can positively identify that is from Iran. But we have found weapons systems, IEDs and so forth that clearly came from Iran.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, General, we have reached the end of our time. It goes by quickly. And I just want to once again thank you for all the time that you've given us in your many appearances here back in the Pentagon briefing room. And perhaps next time we do this, we can have you in person some time when you're in Washington.

But before I close it, let me turn it back to you in case you have any closing remarks you'd like to make.

GEN. MIXON: Now, I appreciate the press corps and the questions that you've asked. They are important questions for sure.

But nothing is more important than what we're trying to do here in Iraq. I believe we're at a crucial stage here as we begin to transition over to my counterpart at the 1st Armored Division. We've had an excellent transition with them over the last couple of weeks, and I am sure that their soldiers would do an excellent job here.

And lastly, obviously, to the families that are out there, our greatest amount of appreciation for you and your sacrifices.

We greatly appreciate our families, and we're thankful that we have such strong families to support us while we've been over here.

Thank you very much.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you. And we all wish you and your unit safe and speedy travels as you redeploy.

GEN. MIXON: Thank you.

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