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DoD Press Briefing with Lt. Gen. Odierno from the Pentagon

(Note: General Odierno appears via Digital Video Imagery Distribution System from Iraq.)

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BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Good afternoon, General Odierno. This is Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon. Can you hear me okay?

GEN. ODIERNO: I can hear you fine, thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: Thank you for giving us some time this afternoon, and welcome this morning to the press corps here. We are privileged to have with us today Lieutenant General Ray Odierno. He is the commanding general of Multinational Corps-Iraq. He's talked to you in this format before, as recently, I think -- about six weeks ago. As I think all of you in this room are aware, he directs the joint and coalition forces in all sectors of the country in Iraq. And he's speaking to us today from Camp Victory in Baghdad. And he is going to give you an operational overview and has been kind enough to give us more time than our normal format of 30 minutes.

And so with that, general, let me turn it over to you to give us that overview.

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, thank you very much, and good morning, ladies and gentlemen.

I wanted to take this opportunity today to do something a little bit different, and I wanted to try to give you an operational update -- we have some slides; we'll get to those in a minute -- and just to give you a flavor of what's going on, from our perspective.

We're well into our third month in Fard al-Qanun, and although we've made some very clear progress, there's still, as you all know, a great deal of work left to do.

Units that are part of our surge into the theater began deploying in January, about the middle of January. However, the full impact of that surge is yet to be felt. Shortly the final pieces of the surge will soon be in place. In the coming weeks, about the next two weeks, 8,000 troops will begin to move into their assigned areas

of responsibility. Second Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division; the 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit, as well as the 3rd Combat Aviation Brigade, will fill out the combat portion of the surge. And that should occur here as they take up positions in the next couple weeks.

In conventional warfare, mass of troops can have an immediate impact on the fight.

However, in a counterinsurgency, we've quickly learned, they must be immersed into the local populace. And it will take new units anywhere from 30 to 60 days to really get a feel for their sectors so they truly can have an impact on security and stability in their area.

When fighting a counterinsurgency, you have to first understand the environment you're operating in, its people, the enemy, the physical and human terrain and the local dynamics, and only then can you begin to understand what must be done to accomplish your mission.

So my message is that the surge is not yet fully in place, and that it will take time and patience before we begin to realize its effects. Additionally, you must understand that success cannot be achieved just through military means alone. While security is important and creating stability for the Iraqi people remains paramount, ultimately success cannot be achieved without those diplomatic, political and economic endeavors that also make progress. Therefore, it must be a combination of all of those for us to be successful.

On that note, let me first put up the first slide.

You should be looking currently at a map of Iraq, which is the current Multinational Corps-Iraq concept for Iraq. Our top priority right now is to create stability and security to protect the Iraqi people, first and foremost in Baghdad. The population and the government of Iraq are the center of gravity. Creating a stable environment in Baghdad should provide time and space for the Iraqi government to continue to mature as a government and continue to build its capacity.

The areas surrounding Baghdad, which we refer to as the "Baghdad belts," are also key to its security. Attacks occurring in Baghdad often originate in these outerlying regions. Sectarian lines begin to blur in these belts, creating a flashpoint for extremists looking to assert their control over Baghdad. Al Qaeda in Iraq and Shi'a extremists want to control these areas. They surge accelerants to destabilize the government of Iraq and create sectarian tensions whenever possible. They do not want this government or any government to assert their control and to succeed in Iraq.

AQI represents our most significant and volatile threat within Iraq, and will go to any lengths to undermine the efforts of the coalition and the government of Iraq. Their brutal nature is unmatched, with total disregard for human life.

As you all know, in the recent days we found a torture center north of Baqubah where 41 Sunnis were held captive and tortured because they were not in compliance with what was believed to be al Qaeda beliefs. We must defeat these extremists and deny them a safe haven within Iraq.

In Anbar, things have begun to change. Attacks are down and there are signs of normalcy. Citizens are rejecting al Qaeda's barbaric reign in the region. For example, in May the attacks in Anbar in 2006 totalled 811. In 2007, they are just barely over 400. In Ramadi in 2006, there were 254 attacks in the city of Ramadi. In 2007 there have been 30. That's because the citizens are volunteering for the Iraqi security forces in record numbers, aiding coalition efforts and driving out al Qaeda intimidation. Since the beginning of 2007, over 12,000 Iraqi citizens have volunteered for Iraqi security forces in Anbar. In all of 2006, only 1,000 had volunteered.

Engaging with the tribal entities and others has made a huge difference. The partnership with coalition forces and now the reaching out of the government of Iraq continue to have some effect. The citizens of Anbar

are rejecting al Qaeda. We want to exploit that success and now expand Anbar's economical and political progress. But obviously, there's still work to do.

In the north and south we still have issues and some violence, but progress has been made. Iraqi security forces are responsible for security in Mosul and Kirkuk, and seven of 18 provinces are responsible for their own security under provincial Iraqi control.

Coalition forces in these provinces will continue to transition to provide overwatch and serve as a 911 force, should the Iraqis need assistance. Security structures are in place. The 8th Iraqi army in the center of the country, the 10th Iraqi army in the south, and the 2nd and 3rd Iraq armies in the north are performing well and providing security for the populace. But we still know there's much work that has to be done to totally provide security for the Iraqi people, and that has to do with the development of the police forces.

These regions are not without problems. In Mosul, AQI is attempting to reestablish itself. And in the south there's political maneuvering between controlling Shi'a parties, which at times results in violence.

Can we please build; go to the next slide?

On the bottom of this slide there's a bullet on reconciliation. And I really do want to spend just a few seconds here to discuss reconciliation.

We have organized ourselves to be more aggressive in this area. We believe a large majority of groups within Iraq are reconcilable and are now interested in engaging with us, but more importantly, they want to engage and become a part of the government of Iraq. Based on initial success at Anbar, we now see opportunities for further engagement across Iraq with other tribes and entities to include mainstream Sunni and Shi'a insurgents. Formal reconciliation is a government of Iraq responsibility.

We have also become more aggressive with informal engagement at all levels of command, especially at the battalion and brigade level. We are attempting to create confidence-building measures among these various groups where they will ultimately reach out to the government of Iraq, who is working hard to establish a reconciliation strategy. This involves dialogue, provincial security forces, and overall maintenance of public order. There will be those who are irreconcilable, and these hard-core extremists must be captured or killed, and we will work with the government of Iraq to assist them in accomplishing this.

The goal is a self-sustaining security with progress towards political inclusion and participation across all sectarian lines.

Next slide, please.

You should have a slide here of the coalition combat forces in Baghdad and the support zones. This slide shows our approach to securing Baghdad as part of Fard al-Qanun. This does not include the last brigade of the 3rd Infantry Division which will fill the last spot in and around the Baghdad belts in order for us to complete our forces in and around Baghdad.

As the chart indicates, we have 12 coalition brigades and 44 combat battalions operating in Baghdad and the belts. This equates to approximately 50,000 combat troops. Our enemy is focused on establishing footholds outside the city, and we are focused on denying them sanctuary to plan these terrible attacks that brutally terrorize Iraq's innocent civilians. Our forces within the 10 security districts, along with the Iraqi security forces, are working on securing the population. Parts of the city are more secure than others, but there's still, as you all know, a great deal of work to do.

Our soldiers' close interaction with the population is paying dividends.

Just last week we received tips from concerned citizens that led to the discover of 26 IEDs in on night in an East Rashid neighborhood. The mission of our forces in the belts around the city are denying accelerants, interdicting the enemy's lines of communication and also protecting the local citizens.

If you could go to the next slide please, this chart is a snapshot of the Iraqi army, national police and police operating in and around Baghdad. Some have deployed to Baghdad from other parts of the country. Iraqis have also surged and are performing bravely.

The Iraqi security force continues to develop and grow, assisted by embedded transition teams. Yes, there are still problems within the Iraqi security forces -- some sectarian, some manning and some to do with equipping. But progress is being made, and it's steady. The Iraqi security force plans, coordinates and conducts missions either alongside or often independent of coalition forces.

Ultimately it will be the local Iraqi police that provide the security for the people, and we still have much work to do along this line. But we are working to improve the local security provided by the police force. You see that there's over 79,000 Iraqi security forces currently operating in Baghdad.

Next slide, please -- you've heard us talk a lot about the joint security stations and our combat outposts. This is all about establishing 24-hour, seven-day-a-week presence inside the city of Baghdad, and protecting people where they sleep. Currently we have 28 joint security stations and 28 combat outposts operating throughout greater Baghdad area.

The concept is to have a very real and visible presence where Iraqis live and work and go to school. It provides a place for Iraqis to go for help, a place to provide tips, which they do continue to do.

Coalition soldiers live, work and patrol with their Iraqi counterparts, developing relationships with each other and building the trust of the local residents. That is our goal.

In addition, we hope this will help to build confidence of the populace in their own Iraqi security forces. We believe overall this will provide confidence and hope to the Iraqi people. People are thanking us for driving away gangs, criminals and terrorists, but we have not completed the mission.

It also allows us to identify those Iraqi security forces who have not been operating according to the rules, who continue to have sectarian agendas and who must be replaced. We have systems in place to do this with the government of Iraq, and we try to execute those vigorously.

Next slide, please.

I wanted to give you some operational results. This first slide is from 15 January, which is when the first brigade of the surge first got on the ground in Baghdad, which was the 2nd Brigade of the 82nd Airborne. By no means do these statistics represent absolute success, but we are experiencing some success just the same.

Since the first unit of the surge arrived, we have conducted 235 battalion-size operations throughout Iraq. These operations have inflicted significant damage to the insurgency, detaining almost 18,000 extremists, killing and wounding more. And we maintain our aggressiveness, but it is controlled and precise, which is a credit to our soldiers. Since 23 January, we have captured and killed over 1,700 high-value targets. Iraqi citizens see the constant presence, they see the close partnerships we have forged with their brave Iraqi security forces, and they are starting to gain some confidence in their security.

The 29 car bomb factories; over 2,400 caches we have found, compared to just over 2,600 in all of 2006; the six IED cells that we have broken up -- and what I mean by "cell" is a network of individuals that have

conducted IED operations -- could not have happened without the help of Iraqi citizens who are tired of the violence that surrounds them every day.

Next slide, please.

This next slide specifically focuses on Baghdad, inside the city. We've conducted 98 battalion operations, and in Baghdad alone, four of the six IED cells throughout the country were broken up. In addition, over 6,500 have been detained, and many killed and wounded.

And these are only ones that we can confirm.

Already we have far surpassed the number of weapons caches found within the Baghdad security districts all of last year. For all of 2006, we found only 266 weapons caches. So far this year, up through May, we have found 441. This is a direct result of our increased presence. This is a direct result of our ability to go in places in Baghdad that we have not been able to go before.

The increased presence is having an effect, and it will continue to be felt in the weeks to come. We still have not reached, again, the end of our surge. Every day we are making progress, and every day we continue to drive the enemy from their safe havens, but they are still out there fighting us every day.

Next slide.

I do want to talk a little bit about the humanitarian and civil efforts that continue to on-go across the country. Whenever I travel and talk to Iraqis, which I do on a regular basis, there are three things they ask me for. They want security, they want essential services, and they want a government of Iraq that is operating, functioning and caring for its people.

We developed several markets and protected them in Baghdad. They've come back to life. Abu Nuwa Street, Al Sherji market, Al Sidra market, Kifa market, Ashorja market, Sarri Books market, Dora market and Sadr City market. In the beginning of the surge there were six -- there were zero retail operators in Dora market. Today there are 250, and it continues to grow.

Jobs, defined by the USAID as person days of employment, the goal is 40,000 by the end of June. We are on track with that, as you can see, that we've produced 32,000 jobs. We have loans that are USAID microlending program, and we have grants that are done through the USAID Community Stabilization Program. All of these are coordinated with the units within the battlespace and the Iraqi populace.

Multinational Division-Baghdad has spent \$200,000 on agricultural projects, \$730,000 on civil cleanup, \$270,000 on educational supplies, \$100,000 on health care, \$230,000 on law and order projects, \$940,000 on humanitarian efforts, supplies, soccer fields and other things for children. Yesterday I just saw a brand- new children's sports center where they can play a variety of sports downtown in Karrada, in a district in Baghdad.

Two hundred eighty thousand dollars has been spent on improving the roads and rebuilding the railroad systems, \$360,000 on water and sanitation.

My initial assessment of the enhanced provisional reconstruction teams is extremely positive. They are embedded with the brigade combat teams and they are working very well. Their expertise adds and extra dimension to the brigade operations. Through their close working relationship to the brigades, they have garnered a new expertise and ability to travel throughout Baghdad and other parts of Iraq.

This allows them to circulate across Baghdad and become much more effective.

This concludes my comments, and I'll be happy to answer any questions that you might have.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, General, thank you for that comprehensive overview, and we do have a few questions here, so let's go ahead and get started.

Lolita?

Q General, it's Lolita Baldor with the Associated Press. You started out talking about some of the progress but also suggesting that it may take 60 to 90 days before you can see what impact the surge is having. At that pace, do you think you will be able to make an assessment within that 60-day window or do you think it's going to take longer to assess whether or not the surge is having an impact?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, of course some of the forces have been here since February, so some of it will be able to be assessed. But the full impact of the surge, in my mind, will not be able to be assessed until about August timeframe, and that's when they'll be in place 60 days. So that'll be the first time I'll be able to make a real initial assessment of the true effect of the surge.

So after that point, we'll see. And the assessment might be is I need a little more time, the assessment might be I've seen enough and it's effective or I've seen enough and it's not going to be effective. Right now if you asked me, I would tell you I'd probably need a little bit more time to do a true assessment.

Q Can you say how much longer?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, that's hard to figure right now. I mean, I'll have to wait to see what's going on on the ground. This changes very quickly here.

Now, I explain to my commanders and my soldiers when I talk to them, it's kind of like a teeter-totter; you work your way up the teeter-totter, and when you go past the tipping point, it happens very quickly, and we've seen that out in Anbar. We're still going up that teeter-totter, and I'm not sure how long it's going to take us to get to that tipping point or if I believe or assess that we can't get to that tipping point. And that's why I got to just look at it.

I can't give you an assessment of when I think and how long it will be before I can make an accurate assessment. I'll have to continue to do that over time as I'm able to get out and continue to get feedback from all my commanders.

MR. WHITMAN: Jennifer.

Q General Odierno, Jennifer Griffin with Fox News. Yesterday, White House Spokesman Tony Snow said that he saw a situation possibly where we would have forces in Iraq like in South Korea, that could be up to -- if it were South Korean style -- 30,000 troops. Do you think that that is realistic? And if we were to draw down, what number of troops do you see that would be needed to train and go after al Qaeda and carry out counterterrorism operations, as suggested in the ISG report?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, I think this is something that we have to develop over time. To be honest with you, I'm not ready to do that yet. There are so many factors that go into that assessment. The factors are the capability of the Iraqi security forces -- how much training will they need, how many assets do they have, how long do we assess it would take to train them and how many people would it take to train them? It also -- I have to do an assessment of what the threat is at that time, what is the threat of al Qaeda at that time? Is it much less than it is now? Then it would take less soldiers, less Marines, less special operational forces.

So it's very difficult to make that assessment now, but at some time, we're doing to have to do that, and

we'll have to make an assessment on what that number is. I'm not willing to do that right now. I will do it in time, when I believe the time is right and I'm able to give a good, accurate assessment. Anything I would say right now would be just looking into a crystal ball and trying to predict what it will look like six months from now, and I can't do that.

Q Do you agree that we will likely have a South Korean-style force there for years to come?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, I think that's a strategic decision, and I think that's between us and -- the government of the United States and the government of Iraq. I think it's a great idea. I think it would be very helpful to have a force here for a period of time to continue to help the Iraqis train and continue to build their capabilities, but that would be based on them asking us to stay.

If that occurs, we would definitely take a look at what we believe the size of the force would be and what they might ask us to do. If they want us to continue, stay here and fight al Qaeda for a period of time, we certainly will do that and develop our force accordingly. I think that would be nothing but helping the Iraqi security forces and the government, to continue to stabilize itself and continue to set itself up for success for years to come, if we were able to do that.

MR. WHITMAN: Joe.

Q General, this is Joe Tabet with Al Hurra.

On the reconciliation issue, what do you think the Maliki government should do or should act on this issue? And do you believe that Jaish al-Mahdi or al Qaeda are reconcilable?

GEN. ODIERNO: I'm sorry. I was having trouble understanding you, if you could just repeat that question, please.

Q My question is about the reconciliation issue. What do you think the Maliki government should do to push forward the reconciliation in Iraq? And do you believe that Jaish al-Mahdi or al Qaeda are reconcilable?

GEN. ODIERNO: At the end I caught about something the government of Iraq has to do about Jaish al-Mahdi and al Qaeda, but I didn't -- I couldn't hear everything before that. I apologize.

MR. WHITMAN: Let me see if I can capsulize it for you.

The question was, what is it that you think the Maliki government needs to do to push reconciliation forward? And are there elements of the society there, Jaish al-Mahdi and al Qaeda, that are simply just not reconcilable?

GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah, thank you.

I believe there are elements that are irreconcilable, but I believe the large majority are [reconcilable]. The figures I use, I believe, about 80 percent are reconcilable, both Jaish al-Mahdi as well as Sunni insurgents. I believe little, very few of al Qaeda are reconcilable, but there might be a small portion.

So the bottom line is, there are -- there will be always people that are irreconcilable. And we will have to continue -- the Iraqi government with our support will have to continue to conduct operations against those forces.

Prime Minister Maliki and the government of Iraq have to continue to reach out to all these groups, and I think they are attempting to do that to include Jaish al-Mahdi as well as Sunni insurgents. They have reached out

to the tribes in Al Anbar, and they are working with them in order to continue their movement towards the political process. And that's what this reconciliation is about. It's about bringing these groups into the political process so we can deal with their differences in a peaceful way instead of in violent ways.

So I think it's possible, and I do think that the government is willing to reach out to them. And I think there is some opportunity to do that, but we'll see. It takes two sides to do that. Not only does the government of Iraq have to reach out, Jaish al-Mahdi will have to be willing to reach out, and we'll have to work and see if that's true.

So the key thing is to start to build confidence-building measures between them and the government of Iraq. We are trying to help in doing that as we reach out on the ground with our forces, and we're hoping that we'll be able to assist the government of Iraq in ultimately reaching their goal of reconciliation. It's absolutely necessary to have long-term stability in this country to have reconciliation.

MR. WHITMAN: Barbara.

Q General Odierno, Barbara Starr from CNN. I wanted to go back and clarify one thing and then ask you a question. You said that you might need a little more time to do a true assessment. Is it your anticipation that you and General Petraeus will still be ready to provide the president with your assessment come September?

And then, my question actually goes to: Can you give us your latest overall assessment of the activities of Iran and Syria inside Iraq?

GEN. ODIERNO: First, I think because of the new supplemental, the way I understand it is we're going to be required to provide an assessment in September, so I will provide my assessment to General Petraeus, who will then take that forward. The only comment I would have is, do I feel it's been enough time to make an appropriate assessment or not, and that will be part of the assessment that I make. I'm not willing to say that's true yet. I've got to wait and see. We still have a long -- we still have three months, 90 days until that time -- 90 to 100 days until Labor Day. So I have to wait and see what happens, and if I think I might need a little more time, I will give an assessment, say but I'd like to have more time. If I don't think I have -- I need more time and I can make an adequate assessment that's accurate, I will do that.

In terms of Iran and Syria, we still see interference by Iran here in Iraq.

We still see them shipping weapons, money, and conducting training for extremists here in Iraq. It has not stopped.

Syria has done some things inside their own country, but in my mind, there are still many foreign fighters coming across the Syrian border every month into Iraq. So I still think there's more that they could do. And I think it's important for them -- if they want stability in the region, they certainly can help.

So we -- I think we need to reach out to them and continue to talk to them and tell them that as partners, if they want to be partners, that they need to help us in Syria.

In terms of Iran, again, politically, we're talking to them. And I won't get involved in that. But what I would say is, the message we have to send them is, they got -- they must stop interfering with providing support to the insurgency in Iraq. It's very clear that they're doing this.

MR. WHITMAN: Mik.

Q General, Jim Miklaszewski with NBC. We often hear from military leaders that they attempt to avoid timetables because it reduces the military's flexibility and in some cases gives the enemy an opening. Yet you face this timetable in regard to this assessment. Do you believe that the enemy is going to do everything it can in

the weeks leading up to that assessment to make it appear that there has been little or no progress in the surge? And by that I mean increase the number of those spectacular IED attacks that we hear about so often.

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, Jim, I would just say they are masters of the communication. They do a lot of work on the Internet. They're very savvy when it comes to that. So you know that they're monitoring what's going on in politics in the United States. So my guess is, of course they understand we have to do an assessment.

And of course they understand that if things aren't going well, a recommendation might be made to reduce our force presence here in Iraq, so my guess is that they will attempt to influence that. So in my mind, of course they're going to try to do that. There's no doubt in my mind. And so I think we've seen a little surge here over the last few weeks, actually, from them.

So, yes, they're very aware of it. They're very savvy of what goes on in the United States, all the Middle East is. They watch very carefully what goes on in both the United States and the United Kingdom. So, yes, of course they're watching us, and we're very aware of that. That's a thing that we have to deal with, and we will.

Q Follow up very quickly -- General Petraeus had said that oftentimes these spectacular IED attacks unfortunately overshadow any progress that is being made. And since that September benchmark is just as much political as it is operational, how difficult is it, no matter what the progress, is it going to be for the U.S. military to break through that kind of violence and publicity it garners?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, I think what we have to do is continue to do -- what I'm going to do is what I did today, I'm going to try to give an update on about a -- every 30 to 45 days, three or four more updates until September, to you to try to give you an idea of some of the things we are accomplishing, to make sure that in fact people do see we are making some progress.

Sometimes I feel -- you know, I felt compelled to talk about the number of operations we've done and some of the other statistics, because sometimes I feel that gets blurred in the fact that we are so tied up in the fact that we had an IED go off here or we had a bridge blown up here; we spend so much time on that, and we don't realize that there are many other things going on. In fact, we are making some progress inside of Iraq. And so that's one of the reasons why it's incumbent on us to talk to you all to try to get this message across, and we will continue to do that.

You know, this is about -- the Iraqi, I mean, excuse me, the American people, I have utmost confidence in them, and I have utmost confidence that if they understand what's going on, we present them the facts, and if they think we're making progress, they will support our continued effort here. If they think we're not making progress, they won't. And so it's incumbent on us to do that, and we'll attempt to do that.

We've made small progress here. We have not made the progress that I think is necessary yet. But I hope over the summer that we will continue to make progress. Civilian deaths are down in Baghdad. Sectarian deaths are down; it's gone up in May from what it was in April, though, but it is still down from what it was when we started the surge operation in January in Baghdad. There are some positive signs. I showed you that we are in fact finding many more caches than we were before; that's a positive sign to me.

But it's not enough. We still have much more to do.

Again today we had a suicide vest in Fallujah on IPs. So why did we have that? Because they want to attack what's threatening al Qaeda most, which is the success of the Iraqi security forces. Frankly, we had Iraqi security forces doing their job. They stopped a suicide vest attack at a checkpoint. Unfortunately, we had some Iraqi police killed. That's what this job is about when you're facing a ruthless enemy who does not care about who they kill. All they care about is the end, and the end is they want to establish a caliphate state here in Iraq or somewhere in the Middle East.

MR. WHITMAN: Pamela.

Q Sir, this is Pam Hess with United Press International. On the issue of reconciliation, I understand that the political work needs to be done, but what about the military side? Are you negotiating cease-fires or amnesty? Are you telling your high-value targets that if they stand down, you'll back off?

GEN. ODIERNO: I won't go into any specifics, but yes, we are. We have refocused our commanders at all levels. I'm empowering them and trying to give them some tools to reach out, because there are insurgents reaching out to us, which is the most important thing. So we want to reach back to them. And we're talking about cease-fires and maybe signing some things that say they won't conduct operations against the government of Iraq or against coalition forces. It's happening at small levels.

Now again, it's just beginning, so we have a lot of work to do in this. But we have restructured ourselves to organize ourselves to work this issue, to reach out to the tribes, to reach out to some small insurgent groups, to reach out to religious leaders, to reach out to political entities throughout the country and see what we can do.

But again, ultimately what we try to do is, again, form that bridge to the government of Iraq, because ultimately it's the government of Iraq that's got to do this. And so we're working with the government of Iraq closely on this, and we'll continue to do so.

But again, we have a lot of work to do on this, but I'm encouraged by some of the great work that's been done by our young commanders out there. They're incredible young men, company and battalion commanders, who are reaching out to some of these groups.

And I am encouraged by what I see. But again, I will not be too optimistic. I will wait and see. I've been here too long to be too optimistic about anything we move forward with. But I do see this as an opportunity. And it's clear -- and I've said this to our Iraqi counterparts -- we're all tired of Iraqis dying. We're tired of Americans dying.

And if we can reach out and conduct reconciliation, and come across in a peaceful way, and move forward with the government of Iraq, that's a much better way to do this. And so let's -- that's how we want to do this. And we think a large part are reconcilable. So let's try to reach out to them and do it.

But again, this is a very complex situation here in Iraq. There's many different lines, many different agendas, and it makes it very difficult to do.

The success we've had in Anbar is tremendous, but that actually is one of the simpler places in Iraq. It's a Sunni area. It's not a Sunni-Shi'a mixed area. It's not a Sunni-Shi'a-Kurd mixed area. So -- but it's a good start, and we've got to build off of that.

MR. WHITMAN: Gordon.

Q Sir, Gordon Lubold from the Christian Science Monitor. Given everything you've said here, to what do you attribute the rise in American deaths this month in particular? Is it the strategy? Is it the surge of the insurgency? Is it -- to what degree is it a combination of both?

GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah, thanks. I think it's probably a combination of both. But I think it has to do a lot with the fact that we are going into places we have not been before. We are in many areas, both inside of Baghdad and outside Baghdad -- for example, in Diyala province, and in and around Baqubah, and in -- up the Diyala River Valley.

And what we're finding is, the insurgents and extremists use IEDs as their own little security and support zones. And they use large buried IEDs in areas we have not been before. And some of them have been somewhat effective, which has raised our death toll.

We are working very hard to counter this, and we'll continue to do that. I have confidence that we'll be able to do that over time.

But it's going to be some hard sledding here. We got some hard work to do in Diyala province. We have moved some additional forces up there, and we'll probably move a few more up there here in the next couple weeks.

So we got some additional work we've got to do there, and so we'll have to wait and see.

MR. WHITMAN: Tom.

Q General, it's Tom Bowman with National Public Radio. I understand that General Petraeus' staff is working on a new campaign plan and part of that is to increase the size of the Iraqi army. Can you talk about that a little bit? How much larger should the Iraqi army be? How long will it take, and will that require more U.S. trainers?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, first off, there's two things we have to do. Our assessment is -- and again, this is a better question for General Dempsey; he's conducting the assessment -- but my opinion is, first, there's two things we have to do with the Iraqi security forces. First, we have to improve the capacity of the current forces, the quality, and what do I mean by that? What I mean is we have to ensure they're manned at the right levels -- 100 percent. We've got to make sure they're equipped the way we expect them to be, and they are improving with the equipping, but there's still some to do. We've got to finish that first.

I also believe in order for them to have the ability to fight a counterinsurgency for a long period of time -- because I think there will be some level of insurgency here for a while -- that they do need to increase their force structure, and I'm not going to say how much; I'll let those who have been working on it do it. But I believe that there has to be some increase in their force structure in order to deal with this. And ultimately, they will have to deal with a bit of an insurgency as well as, remember, they have to have external security forces.

We have 150,000 coalition forces here right now -- or, excuse me, 150,000 U.S. forces here right now, and they're going to have to -- they don't need 150,000, but they're going to need some -- a number above what they have now. So my guess is they're going to have to increase the size of their army in order to accomplish the mission.

Q Given that, I mean, do you think they'll require more U.S. trainers to do that? And how long will it take?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, I think the bottom line is, we would like to have more U.S. trainers with them. We'll work that over time. As long as we have to amount of force we have in there now, we can partner with them, which in my mind is a very effective way to do this.

We still have enough sites here to continue to train them over time, so we have the basic training set up. We have the leader training courses set up. They have academies. They have their intermediate officer training; they have their senior-level officer training all set up. We have their basic training set up; we have non-commissioned officer academies set up. NATO is helping us do that here.

So those are all in place, and I think those are robust enough to increase the size. But what we really need is the collective training, which is when they come together as units. And we can do that through

partnership as long as we have forces -- the amount of force we have on the ground now. Once we begin to reduce, we're going to have to increase, in my mind, the number of trainers that we have, in order to assist them so they can continue to improve.

Q A very quick follow, general, you again said, you need more time. That's been a constant theme throughout this briefing today. But isn't the political reality that you're running out of time there in Iraq?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, I would just say again, I'm assuming we're not going to go from where we're at now to zero overnight, no matter what the decision is. So when it comes to training Iraqi security forces, we will have forces on the ground over a period of time, and we can conduct training. Ultimately though, when we talk about the surge and how much time we need to surge, that's a different question. And that has to do with how long we need to ensure that we have security and stability on the ground here that is sustainable by a reduction in U.S. and coalition forces, along with the capacity that the Iraqi security forces have. That's the assessment that I have to make.

In addition to that, I have to understand, how are we doing in reconciliation? Are groups starting to reconcile? Is the enemy starting to reduce through reconciliation? Are we making that political and diplomatic progress?

So it's a complicated assessment. So it's not easy just to say, everything says, you need more time. Well, it depends on how we've made progress, and I can't predict what progress we're going to have made by August or September.

(Cross talk.)

GEN. ODIERNO: (Off mike) -- assessment of what we need to do.

MR. WHITMAN: (Off mike) -- General, I'm sorry. I cut you off.

GEN. ODIERNO: No, go ahead.

MR. WHITMAN: We missed your last sentence there because I inadvertently cut you off. Could you -- do you remember what your last sentence was?

GEN. ODIERNO: (Laughs.) I don't actually.

MR. WHITMAN: They asked if you recalled it, but we'll move on then.

Julian.

Q General, Julian Barnes of the Los Angeles Times.

I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about whether you've gotten -- how many people there are in the PRTs, if you've gotten the resources from the State Department and other government agencies to fill those slots, and how that might impact your ability to do an assessment of the surge in August and September.

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, all the PRTs within Baghdad are full. We just finished getting the rest of them in the last couple of weeks.

We had an initial flow, and they've been filled up. So I feel pretty confident that they'll be there working with us, the enhanced brigade PRTs. So I feel very confident that they will help us as we make this assessment.

We are going to continue to supplement them with additional people as we define requirements and needs. And each brigade will define those, because you need certain expertises sometimes that come up. For example, in some areas they might need an agriculture expert, in some they might need a retail expert, in some we might just need someone who's an expert in setting up local councils that they don't have. So as we define those, we'll put those requirements in and get those in. I feel that the system's been pretty responsive, so I feel somewhat confident.

The things they're doing, though, does take longer. It does take some time. And I'm not sure -- you know, again, I go back to I'm not sure how much we'll see in three months. I think we'll see something, but we won't see the full impact of what they're doing in three months, I know that for sure.

Q Sir, Jim Garamone from AFPS. Going back to Gordon's question about May being a deadly month, you travel around, you talk to the troops, what are they telling you? Has this affected their morale in any way?

GEN. ODIERNO: I missed the first part. I got the part about is it affecting troops' morale, and I travel around. But I missed the beginning part of your question.

Q Sorry, sir. May has been a deadly month for U.S. troops. In your travels around when you talk to the troops, has this affected their morale in any way?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, I think -- when I go around and talk to them, very positive attitude. They understand what they're doing. They're aggressive in how they do things. But of course there is these deep buried IEDs and other IEDs. They're concerned. They continue to work their tactics, techniques and procedures on how to defeat them. Of course they are; you know, to answer any differently would be unnatural.

Now, I don't know if it's the increase in deaths that's -- because the deaths have been spread around the whole country, they're not in any specific areas. There's not been a specific rise. It's been mainly in the belts in Baghdad.

But again, I would say that I've not seen anything -- anybody questioning or concerned, overly concerned about it. But every day out there -- the one thing I've started to talk about is, you know, these soldiers go out every single day for a year. That's a long time. And in this case, 15 months.

That's a lot. That's a lot of pressure over time.

Even in World War II and other times when we stayed off long period of times, we would pull forces off the line and bring them back on. Here we don't do that. They are out there consistently every single day.

So you have to be mentally and physically tough, and they are. And different things affect you.

But that's what leadership is about -- leadership at my level, leadership at brigade or battalion level, leadership at company level. We got to continually talk to these young men and women who are out there doing these very tough jobs.

But for the most part, they understand why they're here, and they do see some progress. As long as they realize there's a purpose, they see progress, they will continue to do this. And they will do it to the best of their ability. And they will adapt. We have some of the best noncommissioned officers -- we have THE best noncommissioned officers and soldiers in the world, and they will adapt to this. And they will continue to do their job.

MR. WHITMAN: Bill.

Q General, Bill McMichael with the Military Times papers. You mentioned that you're going to be moving some forces up toward Diyala in a couple of weeks. Is that in response to the request by your commander up there, who told us a couple of weeks ago that he needed more forces up there? How many forces are you moving up? And what are your concerns about the violence in Baghdad spilling over to Diyala and how intense that's become up there?

GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah, well, first, General Mixon and I have constant communication. So -- and when he talked to you all, he told you that we have had several conversations about this. This is -- we've been planning and talking about this for months.

So is it in response to that press conference? Absolutely not. Is it in response for me having a normal discussion with my division commander? Absolutely. We talk about these things all the time. And as assets become available, then I make decisions on where we should put forces.

Baqubah is a part of the Baghdad area that has significant influence on Baghdad. It's also an area of Sunni-Shi'a fault line, where you have al Qaeda, who, I think, I believe, is trying to attempt to make that a center of their operation. And you also have Shi'a extremists, who obviously come in from Iran, since Diyala goes out to the eastern border. So you have several things going on.

You have al Qaeda trying to establish a safe haven, you have Shi'a extremists who are working with Iran trying to bring weapons in from Iran, and then you have the Sunni-Shi'a infighting that goes on there, so it's a very complex environment, and it does influence Baghdad. And that's why it's important -- first of all, it's important to provide security and stability to the people of Diyala, but in addition to that, it does affect the security in the capital. Baqubah is very close to the capital, and many people who live in and around Baqubah work in Baghdad or used to work in Baghdad, so it does have an effect. So we are focused on bringing that security and stability there.

We have recently moved three battalions of a Stryker brigades with two battalions, and then we previously moved another Stryker battalion up there. I'm going to move an additional force up there probably in about another 10 days or so, 10 days to two weeks. And after that, we will conduct aggressive operations to secure and stabilize Diyala province.

Q Follow question on numbers. You showed a couple of slides a little while ago, one was operational results since January 15th and the second slide was for Baghdad. Does the Baghdad numbers and figures, were they included in the first slide or were they separate or in addition to those numbers?

GEN. ODIERNO: It is a subset of the first slide.

Q General, this is David Morgan from Reuters. Can you give us a rundown, please, on what's being done to secure the release of the five Britons who were kidnapped earlier this week? And can you tell us who you think it is that's behind the kidnapping?

GEN. ODIERNO: First, we are doing everything we can. We treat any coalition partner like we do a U.S. soldier that was kidnapped, so we're working very hard. All coalition forces that are available are working to find and free these five individuals -- four security guards and one USAID worker. We will continue to do that until we find them.

Who's behind it? It's hard to say exactly.

I would just say that this is very similar to a couple of other incidents we had which have reflected back to some of the special groups related to Shi'a extremists. So if I was a betting man, I would bet that it's Shi'a

extremists that conducted this operation.

MR. WHITMAN: We didn't get -- (off mike) -- okay. Barbara, you had a follow-up.

Q General Odierno, Barbara Starr again. I had a follow-up question. You made a reference a couple of times to deeply buried IEDs. Are you now seeing IEDs placed differently, more deeply buried, tougher for U.S. troops to detect? And I think you also talked about IEDs as sort of perimeter security that you see the insurgents setting up to protect themselves.

Also, very quickly, we do want to ask you, any developments on the two missing American soldiers? Do you have any continuing hope, as General Petraeus said many days ago, that they might still be alive?

GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah, of course, I have hope for the two soldiers. We have hope. We continue to get tips; we continue to go after them aggressively as we get them. I think it's been put out, but I want to make sure I do reiterate the fact that the one body that was found, the DNA was checked, and it has nothing to do with any of the soldiers that are missing. In fact, it does not match the DNA of any U.S. soldiers that we have on record, so I want to make sure that's clear. I think that's probably been put out already.

But we continue to work every lead we have for the two soldiers. As time goes on, it gets tougher, and that's the bottom line. The longer time that goes on, the harder it gets, but we're not going to give up, and we will stay very focused in trying to find those two great young men.

In terms of the IEDs, the problem is they're getting bigger and bigger, and it has a lot to do with because we were not in these areas, so it gave them time to make bigger IEDs and bury them. As we get more presence in these areas, it'll be more difficult for them to do that, and that's kind of what I was referring to as they develop what we call a little security zone around their positions by developing these. I don't want to talk too much more about that, but that's what I was referring to.

MR. WHITMAN: All right, about one more. Let's go all the way to the back there.

Q Thank you. General Odierno, it's Nancy Youssef from McClatchy newspapers. I'd like to go back to your decision to send more troops into Diyala province. As you know, as troops are moved into one area to quell violence, insurgent groups have moved into other parts of the country. How do you move those troops into Diyala without seeing the violence then spread to another part of the country?

GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah, well, the thing about Diyala is, of course, it supports what we're trying to do in Baghdad, and I think this will help us in order to help not only Diyala province but the security in Baghdad.

The other thing is, we still have Iraqi -- the Iraqi security force in Diyala have not matured enough yet where they're able to conduct significant amount of operations independently, where in a lot of the other areas, the Iraqi security forces are. So that's another reason why it requires us to send coalition forces there. But again, I think it's very supportive of what we're trying to accomplish in Baghdad because Baqubah is, in fact, part of those Baghdad belts.

So I think it's consistent with what we want to do. I think it will help not only, again, Diyala province but Baghdad itself, because I believe some of the impacts in Baghdad come from the southern part of Baqubah and in Baqubah, which is the capital of Diyala.

Q (Off mike) -- spread, perhaps, violence into Mosul or Kirkuk or some of those neighboring areas?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, again, I would say we have confidence that the Iraqi security forces up there are -- we have units up there. We have not moved units from Kirkuk or Mosul. We have the same units there that we

did before. We also have what we consider to be a higher level of training of the Iraqi security forces in those areas. So we feel confident that we can do what we need to in those areas.

MR. WHITMAN: General, we have reached the end of the hour here, and we want to be respectful of your time. We know that you're very busy. This has been -- on behalf of everybody in this room, though, this has been very valuable to us and we appreciate all the time that you've given us this afternoon -- this morning, here.

But before we close, let me just turn it back to you in case there is something that you wanted to add or close with.

GEN. ODIERNO: There is. I would like to make just some closing comments.

Just this week, as you all are well aware, we took time to honor the men and women who have given the ultimate sacrifice for our country and our beliefs. Memorial Day has always come to symbolize the sacrifices for many who truly believe in our ideals. Today for us over here in Iraq, this holiday has become more personal for the men and women in uniform and their families as we celebrate the sacrifice of friends and families and fellow brothers in arms who have given the ultimate sacrifice.

Our friends, compatriots and family members have sacrificed everything for the freedom of our country.

We all can put a face or a name to this holiday, and it truly makes it more personal for us. We can honor the memory and the sacrifice of these brave individuals by carrying on the legacy, their legacy, here in Iraq. And we certainly hope we get to finish what they've started. They gave all to secure a better future for not only their own countrymen, but also for the future of the long oppressed Iraqi people. The soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines serving this country humble me every single day with their selfless sacrifice and dedication to duty. Every last one of them has volunteered to defend their country. Each one of them are heroes in their own right, and they represent all that is best in our country.

I'd like to take a moment to recognize one of these heroes -- Specialist Cory J. Walter. Specialist Walter is a dismounted rifleman assigned to Bravo Troop, 6th Battalion, 9th Cavalry, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division, stationed in Diyala province. While providing security at observation posts, Specialist Walter and his platoon sergeant came under heavy and sustained direct fire from approximately six insurgents. During the attack, Specialist Walter's platoon sergeant was severely wounded, sustaining multiple gunshot wounds. With total disregard to his own personal safety, Specialist Walter began to move his wounded platoon sergeant back to safety while under intense fire. With only his personal weapon and several hand grenades, he was able to repel the coordinated attack for over an hour before they were able to transport his platoon sergeant and the rest of the patrol back to their base, saving his platoon sergeant's life. His actions were instrumental in recovering his wounded platoon sergeant, and through his actions, Specialist Walter truly epitomized the warrior ethos by never leaving a fallen comrade behind. His courage, his leadership and dedication to the mission exemplify the values of countless others who serve our great nation in combat. As I said before, they humble me each and every day. America can be very proud of these young men and women, their soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines. It's an honor for me to lead them.

And I want to thank you today for giving me the opportunity to speak to you. May God bless all our brave soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines defending our country at home and abroad, and God bless America.

Thanks.

MR. WHITMAN: Thank you, General, and thank you for sharing that with us at the end there. We appreciate your time, and we appreciate you making your subordinate commanders available to us on a regular basis every week. It's very helpful for us back here, and we do truly appreciate it.

Thank you.

GEN. ODIERNO: You're welcome.

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