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Presenter: Commander, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, Col. Bryan Owens

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DoD News Briefing with Col. Owens from Iraq

MR. WHITMAN: Well, good morning again. I see that I have an image here of Colonel Owens, and let me see if he can hear us.

COL. OWENS: I can hear you.

MR. WHITMAN: Very good. Colonel Owens, this is Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon, and I'm here with the Pentagon Press Corps, some who are busily working on our first briefing of the day, with Secretary Gates and the chairman, but are also interested in the 3rd Brigade Combat Team of the 82nd Airborne Division, which our briefer today, Colonel Bryan Owens, is the commander of.

His brigade is part of the Multinational Division North, and today he's coming to us from FOB Speicher in Tikrit. His unit began operations in September of this past year, and he has been gracious enough to give us some time to talk about what his unit's been doing and field a few questions from us.

So with that, let me turn it over to you, Colonel Owens, and give you an opportunity to give some brief opening remarks and we'll get into the questions.

COL. OWENS: Okay. Good morning, everyone. I'm Colonel Bryan Owens, commander of the 3rd Brigade Combat Team of the 82nd Airborne Division, the Panthers. Last August my paratroopers and I left our homes in Fort Bragg, North Carolina, once again to make a difference in Iraq. This is not new to the Panther team. We were here in 2004, and in 2005 we deployed on short notice to New Orleans, where we were your all-Americans helping Americans, and now we are your all-Americans helping Iraqis.

We took responsibility for Salah ad Din Province north of Baghdad. Our mission is threefold -- sustain and partner with the Iraqi security forces, with special emphasis on the police force; to conduct counterinsurgency operations; and to work with the State Department's Provincial Reconstruction Team, the PRT, to improve the governance, rule of law and the economy in the province.

On September 18th, the Iraqi army division in this province transitioned to control by Iraqi ground forces command and began taking the lead in all security operations. We've continued to partner with them, and as they further develop their capabilities and assume more and more responsibility, we will transition to more of a

supporting role.

Before I go into the demographics of Salah ad Din, I'd like to take a minute to discuss our role in the operations in Baghdad. As U.S. and Iraqi forces in Baghdad clear and hold neighborhoods, we, along with our Iraqi partners, will work to limit the movement of militia and al Qaeda forces to and from our area into Baghdad. We are accomplishing this by establishing robust checkpoints along the major highways, conducting hasty traffic control points, and by locating and denying insurgents safe havens.

The Iraqi security forces are in the lead. And as a recent sign of their success and self-reliance, three days ago the Iraqi police emergency service unit conducted a unilateral operation and raided an al Qaeda training camp outside the city of Baiji. They apprehended 59 suspects and killed two senior al Qaeda leaders. Two of their courageous policemen lost their lives during this raid.

Now a little bit about the demographics of Salah ad Din. Salah ad Din encompasses an area equivalent in size to that of the state of Vermont. Over 1.2 million Iraqis live in this region. It is mainly Sunni Arab but has a small minority of Shi'a Arabs and Kurds. There are four major cities -- Tikrit, Samarra, Baiji and Balad. The Tigris River and the main highway which connects Mosul to Baghdad runs from north to south in the province and connects all the major cities. As you know, Tikrit was the hometown of Saddam Hussein, and many former senior members of the Ba'ath Party still reside in this city.

Some of these former regime elements are actively leading the insurgency, while a great majority of them are hopeful that the central government will seek reconciliation by changing the de- Ba'athification laws so that they can re-enter government service.

Samarra's Golden Mosque is the burial site of the 10th and 11th Shi'a imams. Last year's bombing of the Golden Mosque started a violent cycle of sectarian reprisals throughout this country, and the protection of this mosque remains a priority.

The city of Baiji is the home of the largest oil refinery in Iraq, which is capable of producing 75 percent of oil revenues and has the capacity to process 300,000 barrels of oil a day. Baiji also has the second-largest power plant in Iraq, which is capable of providing 40 percent of the power to northern Iraq and 15 percent of the power to Baghdad.

Finally, the city of Balad and Dujail are Shi'a cities surrounded by predominantly Sunni population.

Now a few of the successes we have achieved and some of the challenges that we face. Working closely with our PRT, we have established vo-tech schools which produce over 2,000 graduates a year for employment in the textile mill, eraser plant and other industries.

Also, private banks have started opening branches in the province, and this will allow for much needed capital for the smaller businesses.

We've seen progress in transparency and accountability in the provincial council proceedings. They even invite the media to these sessions now. Despite the potential for great violence in Salah ad Din, the provincial leadership, working with Iraqi security forces, have prevented large-scale violence. This partnership and cooperation was displayed after a short bout of violence in Balad when the governor of Salah ad Din called all the leaders from across the province together and obtained a promise from all the tribal sheikhs and the religious leaders to stop sectarian reprisals. Since October, the Iraqis have worked diligently in stabilizing the situation in Balad. And though there are sectarian tensions, the sectarian violence has ceased.

There are many obstacles to establishing a safe and secure environment in this province. The two main groups that threaten security in this region are former regime elements and the al Qaeda in Iraq. They

continuously work to degrade the capability of the local security forces, attack coalition forces, and hamper the provincial government's ability to govern and provide services. De- Ba'athification and disbanding the Iraqi army in 2003 had severe impacts on Salah ad Din's population. In Tikrit alone, the unemployment rate is 86 percent -- mostly former army and civil leadership.

Another challenge for the Iraqis is combating corruption at the Baiji oil refinery. By most Iraqi accounts, there are several million dollars of oil revenues lost every day because of corruption. The Iraqi government has just ordered the 4th Iraqi Army Division to stop all the illegal activities at the refinery. This will lead to increased revenues which will provide a great stimulus for the Iraqi economy.

Currently, there are about 12,000 policemen in Salah ad Din, and through our Police Transition Teams, we continue to develop these forces.

A credible Iraqi police force and the rule of law is our number one priority.

We continue to develop the Iraqi army by providing oversight through military transition teams, and we are currently partnered with the 1st Brigade 4th Iraqi Army Division and the 2nd Strategic Infrastructure Brigade. Besides partnering with the Iraqi army every day on patrols and combined operations, recently we helped the Iraqi 1st Brigade establish a Noncommissioned-Officer Professional- Development Course to enhance their small unit leadership. Success for Salah ad Din will be achieved through not only the enhancement of the local security forces, but also through political reconciliation with the Sunni community, mainly the former members of the Ba'ath Party.

The governor of Salah ad Din has been working with the central government to make this reconciliation a reality. The Panthers are making progress every day in our goal to transition security over to the Iraqi security forces in Salah ad Din. Our team is dedicated, and our soldiers, sailors and air men are truly our nation's greatest treasures. They are motivated, understand their mission and embody the very best of America.

Thank you. I'm prepared to take your questions now.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you for that overview, and we'll get right into it.

Julian, go ahead.

Q Yeah, Colonel, with the Iraqis in the lead, you would no longer have unity of command. And given that this is an issue that they've talked about in Baghdad -- having Iraqis command Iraqis and Americans command Americans -- what are the challenges with working with Iraqi units that are under their own command, and how have you dealt with that?

COL. OWENS: Well, we call it handshake-con. It's -- we've developed such good relationships with the Iraqis and the Iraqi army and Iraqi police that they communicate with us daily. When they conduct their operations, they let us know what they're doing. Also, as you know, we have to provide some of the enablers -- like the air coverage, quick reaction forces and some of the other enablers that they cannot provide for themselves. So when they put together their plans, we have the MiTT teams, which is the military transition teams, that work very closely with them.

And so there's nothing that we don't know that they're doing. They communicate with us. We communicate with them. Even though we're not giving them the direct orders -- they're getting that from their division commander and through IGFC -- we continue to be their coach.

Q Sir, it's Pauline Jelinek of the Associated Press. I apologize, I came in late. But I thought I heard you say that you were going to be involved in the new security operation for Baghdad in that you will be setting up

checkpoints and things in the north. Is that correct? And can you elaborate?

COL. OWENS: Yes, I will. Because of the pressures in Baghdad, we believe that the threat forces will try to move to Salah ad Din and find safe haven and try to wait out the operations down in Baghdad. So what we've done is we've put in some hardened checkpoints that the Iraqi police and the Iraqi army are manning, and they are checking for -- checking vehicles. And also, we have -- like I said -- the hasty traffic control points which allow us to interdict any vehicles that are taking routes that are not main avenues where we have our checkpoints. And the last thing we're doing is we are going out with operations into known and suspected safe havens to try to find these threat forces.

Q Follow-up. The checkpoints, can you say when you started doing this and what you're seeing in terms of the possible flow of people down towards Baghdad?

COL. OWENS: I'm sorry, I didn't understand the question.

Q When you started the checkpoints that you're talking about for -- in concert with the Baghdad operation. And have you seen an unusual or new type of flow of people you think were, you know, on their way to Baghdad to make trouble?

COL. OWENS: Well, we started our operations several days ago. And I wouldn't say we've had a significant flow from Baghdad, but we continue to work and monitor that according to our plan.

Thanks.

Q Colonel, it's David Wood from the Baltimore Sun. The Defense Department inspector general recently released a report that talked about shortages of gear among soldiers, U.S. soldiers deployed in Iraq.

What we got was the summary. The actual numbers were classified.

Are any of your soldiers short on any kind of communications gear, personal protective gear, armored vehicles, night-vision devices, thermal sights or anything at all?

COL. OWENS: No. I'm very happy with the way we've been equipped. The Army has bent over backwards to supply us with the latest technologies and also the latest protective gear. We continue to fabricate some protective armor pieces, and I won't get into the details of that for operational security reasons. But we continue to try to protect our troopers and our soldiers as best we can.

MR. WHITMAN: Tony, go ahead.

Q Hi, sir. Tony Capaccio with Bloomberg News. You said something I thought was pretty extraordinary, that sectarian violence has ceased in Salah ad Din. A year ago it was the bombing of the golden mosque in Samarra that exploded the country in sectarian violence.

What factors have come to play that have allowed -- that have caused sectarian violence to cease, as you say?

COL. OWENS: I'm going to have to ask you to repeat that question again. It came through very garbled.

Q You said sectarian violence has ceased in Salah ad Din. What factors -- what do you attribute that to, since a year ago, when the bombing took place, that precipitated sectarian violence throughout the country?

COL. OWENS: Yes. In Salah ad Din, as you know, we have 96 percent primarily Sunni population here in

the Sunni heartland, and so where we see our sectarian tensions right now is down in Balad and Al- Dujail. As you know, Al-Dujail is the town that had the witnesses against Saddam Hussein during the trial period. And so that's where we see our sectarian violence -- or our sectarian tensions right now. As I stated, the governor took charge. We saw good leadership out of our governor, and he pulled in the sheikhs and the religious leaders, and he was able to calm down the situation down in Balad and Al- Dujail.

As far as Samarra and the golden mosque, after the incident last February, which did incite sectarian violence throughout the city -- or throughout the country, we have not seen that type of violence in Samarra, and we've got national police that came up from Baghdad that secure the golden mosque and the area around it.

Q A separate question. The special inspector general for Iraq last year issued an audit criticizing the logistics -- the progress the Iraqi army was making in improving its logistics capability. It identified this shortfall as a major problem.

From where you sit, how much progress is being made by the Iraqis on that front?

COL. OWENS: Okay. That is not a good news story. The -- we need some help from the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Interior in getting equipment and supplies to their soldiers and policemen. Currently, we know of warehouses down in Taji and other locations that have equipment, and the bureaucracy is worse than I've ever seen to try to dislodge that equipment. We are working with the embassy through the PRT team leader, Stephanie Miley, and we will continue to try to dislodge that equipment.

But again, we do need some help, and I have not seen the progress from the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Defense.

Q Are those shortages critical at this point or simply irritating for the long term?

COL. OWENS: Well, in the short term, I lend equipment to our Iraqi brothers, but I can't give it to them to keep. And so we continue to work the system to try to get the combat service support and the supplies to our Iraqi brothers. We also have problems with the maintenance side of the house, and so we have to continue. And I think that is the area that if we could just dislodge that bottleneck, we could really make some leaps and bounds with our Iraqi army and our Iraqi police. They are willing. They've got the will to fight. We also have taught them and given them skills to fight, and so now we just need to get the equipment and the supplies flowing.

MR. WHITMAN: Carl.

Q Colonel, I'm Carl Osgood with Executive Intelligence Review. You made a connection in your opening remarks between the disbanding of the army and de-Ba'athification with the unemployment in Salah ad Din province, if I understood you correctly.

How important do you think it is to roll back the effects of these measures to actually dealing with the insurgency and the problem of violence?

COL. OWENS: I think it's very important. If you take a look inside Tikrit, you have many former generals, very educated teachers and politicians, and so I can't go down the street without bumping into a former general officer. And all of them have been members of the Ba'ath Party, but there's a difference between an active member and just a member of the party. And I think that the central government realizes that and they're continuing to work on reconciliation.

But I think it's moving pretty slow. And right now our Sunni population here are very patient, but I don't know how long they're going to hold out on that. As I stated in my opening statement, some of these former Ba'athists are really pro-Saddamists, and those individuals have been actively involved in the fight against us.

MR. WHITMAN: Ann.

Q Colonel, I'd like to just follow up on the question of the problems getting equipment for the Iraqi army and police. I mean, that has happened in other predominantly Sunni areas such as Anbar, and it's been felt that they were discriminated against by the Shi'a government because they were a predominantly Sunni area. I mean, is that part of the problem with this bottleneck you're having?

COL. OWENS: I heard you say Anbar, but I'm going to have to ask you to -- the volume was a little too high.

Q Okay. To what do you attribute the difficulties in getting supply and equipment for your Iraqi forces? There was a similar situation in Anbar where police and others were not getting paid, and it was believed that it was because the Ministry of Interior was Shi'a dominated. Do you believe that there are sectarian discrimination involved in your inability to get those supplies for the Iraqi forces?

COL. OWENS: I think there's a little bit of that involved. I've had a -- my battalion support -- my brigade support battalion put together a log team, logistics team to go out and take a look at where the problems really lie.

And what we've found is there is some sectarian issues there, but what we've really found is a bureaucracy where typos on a memo will get turned back. Now, whether you attribute that to sectarian, I don't know. But I will tell you that the bureaucracy to try to dislodge supplies and equipment is not -- is pretty large there.

So we're trying to work through that with our MiTT teams at my level, and also at the brigade level -- I mean the division level, and also MNSTC-I, and we'll continue to work through all the levels to coach our Iraqi brothers to do the right thing and make sure these supplies and equipment get down to the lowest level.

Q Follow-up on that. Can you give a sense of the overall strength of your Iraqi units? When I was last in Samarra -- but that was a while ago -- there were difficulty getting the numbers, you know, actually on duty. There might be quite a few on the books, but very few were actually showing up. Can you give me measurements of strength of the Iraqi army and police in terms of on-the-books versus those who are actually working day to day?

COL. OWENS: Normally our units run somewhere around 90 percent strength. As far as present-for-duty strength, there's a number of variables that go into that. One of them is their leave policy. And I've been talking to the commanders on the ground to try to get them to understand that the Iraqi army needs to fight for their country. We're helping them, and they need to help themselves. Currently, the division here has a leave policy of 10 working days and then five days off. The Ministry of Defense policy is 21 days on, seven days off. But if you talk to the commanders on the ground, they'll tell you that because of the issues that the chairman and the secretary of Defense talked about -- and that's having to get paid in cash and go home and get the pay to their families -- those issues will cause those soldiers to quit if they don't get home frequently enough to pay their families. So what it really becomes is, right now we've settled with a 10 and five, which does reduce their combat present-for-duty strength.

But I will caveat that by saying that in the operations that they've conducted, what would take me a company to execute, they'll put two companies against it, they've got the skills, they've got the will to fight, and they are getting after it out on the -- in the area.

And so though it does affect them, the commanders have been working very hard around those issues.

I think it will improve once they get the pay situation more automated, and they figure out how they're going to do that.

MR. WHITMAN: Mike.

Q Colonel, Mike Emanuel with Fox News. A third U.S. military helicopter went down today, the third in the past couple of weeks. As a U.S. military commander in Iraq, how much does this concern you? Is there a way to counteract this? Any assessment from being close to where this is happening?

COL. OWENS: Yes, that's a very good question. The great thing about our military and our Army is that after every event we do after-action reviews, and we try to find out if there's better ways for us, better techniques, tactics or procedures for us to execute, or if we just found there was a mistake made. And so I fully expect that the commanders -- it didn't happen in my area -- but I fully expect that the lessons learned from the tragedy of the helicopter crashes will be passed onto me so that we can take action in our area just to make sure that we are putting our -- not putting our soldiers at undue risk, and we protect them the best we can.

MR. WHITMAN: Let's try to get the other Mike.

Mr. Mount.

Q Colonel, it's Mike Mount with CNN. If I could go back on the equipment issue you've been talking about, can you tell us a bit about what the equipment shortages are that the IA and the IP are having, and what kind of equipment are you actually lending to them? And what's the -- and the shortage problem -- what's the effectiveness or the lack of effectiveness that's happening, that the Iraqi troops are having with this shortage?

Maybe I can put that in English next time.

COL. OWENS: Some of the shortages are not apparent in the near term, but they do affect their ability to fight in the long term. For one thing, is training ammunition. It's very difficult to get training ammunition, and we're working through the system to do that. Armored humvees, armored vehicles -- that is -- they do not have the armored vehicles that they should have, and we lend them our humvees, our armored humvees for operations so that they will be protected.

But there are some other shortages -- weapons shortages, which we're working through, especially with the police force. As you know, the original mandate from CPATT was to equip 5,830 policemen in Salah ad Din. Now that was based on the population of Portland, Oregon, which is about 1.2 million.

Well, as you know, the security situation in Portland, Oregon, is a lot different than it is here. And so in Salah ad Din, we have close to 12,000 policemen, and they are only being equipped by coalition forces to the tune of 5,830. And now the government of Iraq has started to equip them, but as I've stated, we really need to get the minister of Interior to start pushing equipment and supplies down to these policemen.

Q Can I do a quick follow-up on that?

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead.

Q Colonel, as a quick follow-up, is the borrowing of equipment, is that having any effect on your day-to-day operations? Is that causing operations to suffer on your end?

COL. OWENS: If I understood the question correctly, is the shortages of equipment having an impact on day-to-day operations? Is that correct?

Q Well, on your end -- if you've got to give some of your equipment to the Iraqi troops, is that having an adverse effect on you all being able to carry out operations?

COL. OWENS: No, it is not. As you know, not all my troopers leave the wire at any given time, and so -- but the equipment can. And so we continue to maintain the equipment and rotate it, but it is not affecting our ability to protect our soldiers.

MR. WHITMAN: All right. I can see with the time we have that you allocate for this -- and we know that you've already adjusted your schedule to be here with us this morning -- so let me bring it to an end by throwing it back to you and letting you finish with any final comments or thoughts that you might have.

COL. OWENS: Thank you very much. It's been a good morning.

I just want to say a couple of things.

First of all, it's an honor and a privilege to serve with and to lead some of the finest men and women that America has to offer. And even though there is political debate on whether we should be in Iraq, these men and women are hard-working, they're dedicated, they are courageous, and every single day they're making a difference here. And so I'm very proud of them, as I know you are.

And secondly, I just want to say thanks to our families back home and for their sacrifices. They're shouldering more than their fair share of the load while we're over here fighting for our country in Iraq. And so I just appreciate what they're doing back home.

And that's really all I have to say. Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you again. And thank you for everything that you're doing. And hopefully, we'll get another opportunity to have a session like this with you in a few months.

COL. OWENS: I'd like that. Thank you.

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