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Presenter: Colonel Stephen Twitty, Commander, 4th Infantry Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, Forward Operating Base Marez, Iraq

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DoD Briefing with Col. Twitty from the Pentagon Briefing Room, Arlington Va.

(Note: Col. Twitty appears via video teleconference from Iraq.)

MR. WHITMAN: Well, good morning and welcome. I see we have Colonel Stephen Twitty on the monitor. This is Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon. Can you hear us okay?

COL. TWITTY: I can hear you just fine.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, good afternoon to you, and thank you for joining us again. This is Colonel Stephen Twitty, commander of the 4th Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, back with us again to provide us with an operational update. His brigade began operations in Multi-division North in December of 2006, and his unit's general area of responsibility, if you recall, is centered around Nineveh province.

Now, he's speaking to you today from Forward Operating Base Marez, which is just outside of Mosul. And actually, I'm reminded that this is the third time that he has spoken to us, the last one being in July.

So, colonel, thanks again for being with us, and let me turn it over to you in case you have some brief opening remarks you'd like to make.

COL. TWITTY: Thank you, and good morning. I'm Colonel Stephen Twitty, the commander of the 4th Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division, here in Nineveh province, Iraq. It is a pleasure to speak to you again, and I thank you for this opportunity to update you on ongoing operations and the accomplishments and challenges that we face here in Nineveh province.

During the last press conference in July, I told you that the Iraqi security forces are increasing in their capability, taking the fight to the enemy and overcoming their internal challenges. Both the 2nd and the 3rd Iraqi Army Divisions have done a great job removing al Qaeda and other insurgent groups in Iraq from the province.

On August the 1st, the 2nd Iraqi Army killed Safi, the emir of Mosul, and three other al Qaeda members during a series of combined operations between the Iraqi army, police and coalition forces.

During a cordon-and-search operation on August the 6th, the 3rd Iraqi Army stopped a tanker loaded with 500 -- correction -- 5,000 pounds of explosives. While doing so, they killed three and captured nine terrorists.

And I'm quite sure you're very familiar with the events that took place here on August the 14th. We had four vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices detonate in the Yizidi villages of Khahtaniya and al Jazeera, which are located in the western portion of the province. Both the Iraqi government and the Iraqi security forces rose to the occasion in providing the relief effort for the displaced citizens. To date, 344 Iraqis have been confirmed killed and more than 700 wounded as a result of that attack. I believe the intent of this attack by al Qaeda was to cause sectarian violence between the Yizidis and Kurds against the Sunni Arabs in the province. That plan did not work; the attack united the Iraqis, driving them to support one another.

The provincial governor and police chief visited the site to assess the damage and plan for aid the day following the attack. So far, 52,000 bottles of water, 6,000 meals, several tons of food items, medical supplies, sheets, blankets, tents and stoves have been delivered to the area. The Iraqi government also provided financial support by giving the local leadership 950 million Iraqi dinars, equal to 780,000 U.S. dollars. This was a heinous act against the citizens of Iraq, but once again, the citizens have shown their ability to pull together to defeat this enemy, who does not want to see Iraq a free and stable society.

Another example of the citizens' resolve occurred in Mosul. Six hostages held by al Qaeda were freed due to tips from local citizens. A combined force of Iraqi army and coalition forces found their hostages. They were bound and blindfolded for over two weeks and been held for 100,000 U.S. dollars ransom each.

The rescue also yielded a cache containing weapons and currency that was certainly funding terrorist acts against the populace. Most recently on Tuesday, the 2nd Iraqi Army Division captured a suspected key al Qaeda financier, who was found with multiple checks totaling nearly 8 million Iraqi dinar, which amounts to nearly \$600,000 U.S. dollars. During questioning, he admitted to financing al Qaeda kidnapping operations here in Mosul.

These few examples of the effort put forth by the Iraqi security forces are an indicator of how the security will continue to improve in the province. By keeping the pressure on the terrorists that operate in Nineveh province, we will deny them a safe haven to plan and execute operations against the citizens here. In support of Multinational Division North, Task Force Lightning Operation Lightning Strike 2 were in the midst of a brigade-level operation in order to deny terrorists freedom of maneuvering in Nineveh and the Za'ab triangle of Salahuddin province. Approximately 14,000 coalition and Iraqi security forces are striking targets in Mosul, West and South Nineveh, and in the Za'ab.

The Za'ab triangle is the main effort for our operations. It is an area that has seen very little coalition presence in previous months. As we destroy safe havens in the area, we're setting conditions for permanent presence in the Za'ab for coalition and Iraqi security forces by establishing Iraqi police stations and checkpoints to cut off the terrorists from freedom of movement.

The endstate is to have a permanent presence in the Za'ab that is able to provide for the security of its people. Ongoing operations have proven to be very successful. So far, we have killed 25 and detained over 50 terrorists, found multiple caches to include a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device factory here in Mosul. Finally I will tell you that we will continue to target al Qaeda aggressively, assist the Iraqi security forces and to enhance their ability to provide the necessary security for the province. I will now take your questions.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you for highlighting some of those operations, and we do have some

questions here. Let's start with Kristin, and then we'll go to Courtney.

Q Sir, it's Kristin Roberts with Reuters.

In August, you talked about the significant logistical problems of the Iraqi government and the lack of spare parts and equipment that were hampering progress in the Iraqi army. Hoping you can bring us up to date on that. Have you seen any progress over the past month in those areas?

COL. TWITTY: Yes, we have seen some progress, and I will continue to say that the progress is slow. However, they are focusing on their areas of sustainment. They have received their support battalion and support company, the company that is designed to support the divisions. Both in the 3rd Iraqi Army Division and the 2nd Iraqi Army Division, we now have those companies resident in that force.

What we're not seeing is the repair parts to fix the vehicles. We're assisting with that effort. We are getting some in, but it's not at the level to sustain the force, particularly a force that is fighting every day here in Mosul.

Another area that we're seeing a lack in is the fuel area. The fuel problem has increased in terms of not getting enough fuel to conduct sustainment operations on a monthly basis. Let me clarify myself when I say that. They continue to get fuel coupons monthly and they continue to ration their fuel.

We're conducting so many operations up here, by the time the end of the month comes, they're out of those fuel coupons in order to get more gas to continue operations. We are working to increase their fuel allocations. Between the time that they stop operations and the time the next month occurs, I am providing them fuel. I have seen those days go down to somewhere between three or four days where I'm not providing -- where I am not providing them fuel through that time frame, but for the most part, we continue to have those problems.

I hope I answered your question. I know it was a little confusing. But the bottom line, they get rationed fuel, it's on a monthly basis, they tend to run out somewhere around the 20th, the 21st, based on the operations that we're doing here, and I pretty much pad them fuel to continue operations through the remainder of the month.

Q Colonel Twitty, this is Courtney Kube from NBC News. If I can just follow up on that, I mean this has been a problem for several months now. Is there anything -- is the Iraqi government doing anything to correct this? And in your estimate, beyond just the issue of fuel and some repair parts, I mean at what point -- how many more months or even years do you think it will be before the Iraqi security forces in your area are able to sustain themselves and operate fully independently?

COL. TWITTY: Well, I got to tell you, I have seen it get better here. There was a time we were only operating on basically a 15-month supply. As I just told you earlier, we have increased in those supplies. There was a time when we were not getting parts in here, and now the part flow is coming. So it is getting better. I think when you really look at the problem here, it is the amount of operations that are being conducted here throughout the province, and it is putting a strain on the Iraqi parts flow and fuel flow. It has gotten better but is not at the level that it needs to be.

I do think over the next couple of months here that we'll even get better. I've seen a vast improvement since we've gotten these sustainment companies up here. They are actually fixing the vehicles for the Iraqis. If you remember back when we first had our interviews, we were basically fixing all the Iraqi vehicles. We are no longer doing that. So they are fixing their own vehicles now. They are providing their own fuel up until a point they run out of fuel, and then I come in to assist that. And that has

increased in numbers by them, as well. So we're getting there.

In terms of figuring out how long it's going to take them to be able to stand up themselves, here in Nineveh province, the Iraqi security forces are in the lead, both the Iraqi army and Iraqi police. And there's no doubt that they're taking the brunt of the attacks here.

The things they're lacking: they lack in the engineer capability. That has increased. We have trained them to be able to deal with the explosive ordnance now. They're conducting their own route clearance now, and that capability is increasing daily. It is not up to the level that I would like for it to be, but it is increasing.

When it comes to air support, as you know, the Iraqis do not have attack helicopters. We're assisting them with their attack helicopter effort, and very little, once again, with the sustainment piece now. So we've seen some growth both in engineers and logistics in both the Iraqi army and the Iraqi police. And in terms of when we can turn it over to them fully, I think we got to look hard at the aviation piece. And once they get their aviation piece squared away and their engineers up to the capability, I think here in Nineveh province, these two divisions can be self-sustainable.

Q Colonel, if these divisions are as self-sustainable as you say, what do you think would be the impact in your area of a moderate drawdown of U.S. forces?

COL. TWITTY: Yes. One of the things you must realize -- we have reduced forces here since the last time I spoke to you. When I spoke to you back in July, I had four battalions operating here in Nineveh province, four coalition force battalions. Now I have three coalition force battalions.

And the reason why we've been able to reduce the coalition force battalions: number one, the Iraqi security forces have increased in their capability, and they're in the lead once again; and number two, the security situation here has gotten better.

And if you remember when I talked back then, we averaged somewhere between seven and nine attacks a day. We're still hovering around that same number. And every once in a while, those attacks will increase, but because we're hovering around those seven to nine or 10 attacks, it has allowed Major General Mixon to move a force out of here and put it elsewhere. And we have not seen any bad results as a result of that move.

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead.

Q Colonel, it's Mike Mount with CNN. To that same end, what is the level of the Iraqi army, in terms of their operations, compared to the U.S. operations there?

And is this lack of equipment or the equipment shortage, is that having an effect on the security? Do you think those attack levels you were talking about would be lower if they were more up with their equipment and fuel?

COL. TWITTY: I don't want you to focus on the equipment and fuel because once again the Iraqi police and Iraqi army are leading operations here, and if you think about Mosul, it is the second largest city in Iraq. Where in Baghdad you have 27 coalition force battalions, here in Mosul you only have one coalition force battalion. So we really depend on the Iraqi security forces to take the fight to the enemy here. All total we have 40,000 Iraqi security forces, 20,000 Iraqi police, 20,000 Iraqi army. So there's not an issue with them fighting here. They're fighting every day.

What we're doing as part of the coalition, number one, we're assisting in the training effort here, and it is paying huge dividends. Number two, we're going after al Qaeda very aggressively here. We

coordinate our efforts between the Iraqi security forces. I have a meeting once a week with the Iraqi army and the Iraqi police chiefs, and we coordinate the targets that we're going to go after. And we're pushing those targets very hard. The HUMINT ability and capability here, we've seen a huge increase in it. When we first got on the ground here, we focused more SIGINT-based. The people are now coming to us, and we're focused now more HUMINT-based. So we're enjoying the luxury of people turning these terrorists in, and we're striking them hard. And the Iraqi army is doing the same, so their OPTEMPO here -- today alone they conducted 18 raids throughout the province today alone and paying great dividends for us.

Q Colonel, it's Al Pessin with Voice of America. Yesterday, General Jones' committee was very critical of the Iraqi national police. Can you tell us how that organization's performing in your area? Do you agree with the commission's criticisms or is your area different? And also, I noticed that you arrived -- your brigade arrived there in September, which means you would have been getting ready to go home now if not for the extensions. So I wonder how the troops are doing as they go into this extra three-month period now.

COL. TWITTY: The first question -- here in Mosul, we do not have national police.

The national police is basically in the Baghdad area. Here in Mosul, we have a provincial police, and the provincial police here -- they are equipped well, however, they have equipment problems just like the Iraqi army. They are fighting alongside the Iraqi army here.

The problem with the Iraqi police here is not so much them being corrupt and not so much these forces not wanting to take the fight to the enemy; the problem is we see a lot of corruption here -- we see a lot of corruption, we see a lot of extortion, we see a lot of kidnapping here. So as security gets better here, we need to transition the police from a fighting force, which right now is pretty much an extension of the Iraqi army, to a force that is enforcing the rule of law here, a force that is walking these neighborhoods, walking the beat, a force that is investigating the kidnappings and extortions and using forensic scientists and crime labs and so forth. We have not gotten to that level here yet simply because the Iraqi police have been assisting the Iraqi army in fighting this insurgency.

We are starting to transition the police in several other neighborhoods throughout the province to more of a police force versus an armed force similar to the Iraqi army.

The second -- you are correct. Next month we would be going home. And our soldiers are fully aware of the mission that we have here. The great thing about Nineveh province is we are truly seeing progress here, not only fighting the insurgency, but through the governance and the projects that we're doing and the increased effectiveness of the Iraqi army and the Iraqi police. So the soldiers are still motivated because they see this progress.

December we'll be going home. We have about 90 days left here in theater. And I constantly remind my soldiers that Nineveh province and the Za'ab triangle -- they are still bad places and we still have terrorists that want to kill Americans.

And speaking of that, I just had three soldiers killed last night. So these soldiers are still on it, they're still motivated and they're still taking the fight to the enemy and training the Iraqi security forces.

Q Yeah, this is Kernan Chaisson with Forecast International and also the Journal of Electronic Defense. A bit of a detailed question. Have you been receiving any of the new MRAP vehicles? And if so, how long is it taking to transition them from receipt to operations, and are they coming fully equipped with things like the IED jammers and that sort of stuff?

COL. TWITTY: Sir, for some reason, I did not hear anything you said. You came in very low. Can you say again your question?

Q Yeah. This is Kernan Chaisson. I'm with Forecast International and the Journal of Electronic Defense. I have kind of a detailed question about the MRAP vehicles. Have you been receiving any of those? And if so, how long is it taking from the time you receive it until they can actually go into operation? And are they coming equipped with all of the necessary protective equipment, like IED jammers and that sort of thing?

COL. TWITTY: We are anxiously awaiting this equipment. Yes, we do have some equipment, but I will tell you that we need more of the MRAP vehicles here in Nineveh province. And I know our senior leaders are working to get the equipment here. But as you know, that equipment is a phenomenal piece of gear that saves soldiers' lives. And the soldiers every day, particularly here in Mosul, are under improvised explosives attacks every day. And that equipment has been tested and we know that it is very useful here throughout the province.

And on the jamming equipment, I don't want to talk too much about it because both those pieces of equipment are sensitive. But both pieces of gear are very valuable to our team here. We are getting it in. Although not to the rate that I would like to get it in, we are getting it.

And I hope I answered your question. I still could barely hear your question, but I hope I answered it.

Q Can I do a follow-up?

MR. WHITMAN: Sure.

Q Hopefully you can hear this. What I'm trying to find out is, from the time you receive a vehicle until it can actually go into operation, how long a period is that taking? I know there's been some questions about what it is taking to get actually to the soldier once it arrives.

COL. TWITTY: Sir, I'll give you an example. We received an MRAP two days ago.

That piece of gear is in operation right now in the Za'ab triangle, so we're not having problems with, once the equipment arrives at our location, getting it into the fight. I don't see anywhere that that equipment has been held up anywhere. It is the same thing with the countermeasure systems that we're using. I have not seen anywhere that that equipment has been held up and we could not get it in the fight.

Q Sir, this is Jim Garamone with American Forces Press Service. When do you expect Nineveh province to transfer to Iraqi provincial control?

COL. TWITTY: This province is tentatively scheduled for October to go under the provincial control. And we think -- we think we're headed in the right direction. Once again, the attacks here in the province have been lowered. We've reduced the number of coalition force battalions here in the province. The government is established and taking care of its people. There are projects that are ongoing by the government. The Iraqi security forces are doing the things that they need to do.

And once again, yes, there are still problems in the Iraqi security forces, but both the Iraqi army and the Iraqi police are fighting every day, so I see no reason why this province cannot move forward and go to provincial Iraqi control.

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead, Jeff.

Q Colonel, you had mentioned that -- the last time we spoke you had four battalions and now you have three. You also mentioned last time that one unit had been converted into a MiTT team. Is that the fourth battalion you were speaking of?

COL. TWITTY: That is the battalion I'm speaking of. We took that battalion, we increased the capability of the Iraqi army, we got them to a training level where we think that they're -- they've been trained proficiently to do the counterinsurgency stuff that they need to do. We took that battalion and took it away from being a super-MiTT, and moved that battalion to the Tall Afar area. And then, as you know, there's some units here that are being relieved so the battalion that was out in Tall Afar was relieved by the battalion that was the super-MiTT, and we do not plan to regenerate another battalion up here as a result of the natural reduction of that battalion going home.

Q As far as outside your area of operations, is that correct?

COL. TWITTY: That is correct.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, colonel, we have reached the end of our allocated time here. I do want to give you an opportunity --

COL. TWITTY: Yeah, I just want to say that we're doing some high-tempo operations in the Za'ab triangle as well. The Za'ab triangle is in the Salahuddin province. Because of the security situation in Nineveh province now, I have also been given more battlespace. So not only did we reduce a battalion here, we also picked up more battlespace, and it is the Za'ab triangle in the Salahuddin province.

And we're conducting operations in that area to go after al Qaeda. We do know that they use that area for safe havens, and our intent is to target them hard. So you'll see 14,000 Iraqi security forces, as well as coalition forces, fighting in that area over the next several weeks.

I would also like to send my condolences out to the families. We lost three young soldiers last night, and I would like to send my condolences out to those families.

Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, again, thank you, Colonel, for taking some time this evening to be with us. And we continue to wish you the best in your operations. And hopefully we'll talk to you at least one more time before you leave.

COL. TWITTY: Okay. Thank you very much. It's been a pleasure.

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