



U.S. Department of Defense

Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs)

News Transcript

On the Web:

<http://www.defenselink.mil/cgi-bin/dlprint.cgi?http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/2006/tr20060210-12484.html>

Media contact: +1 (703) 697-5131

Public contact:

<http://www.dod.mil/faq/comment.html>

or +1 (703) 428-0711

Presenter: Col. Stephen W. Davis, commander, Regimental Combat Team-2

February 10, 2006

News Briefing with Col. Stephen W. Davis

(Note: Colonel Davis appears via video teleconference from Iraq.)

JIM TURNER: Colonel Davis, this is Jim Turner at the Pentagon. Can you hear me?

COL. DAVIS: I sure can, Mr. Turner. How are you doing today?

MR. TURNER: How are you?

Good morning. Good afternoon. Today our briefer is Colonel Stephen Davis. He is commander of Regimental Command [sic] Team-2, a regiment assigned to Multinational Force-West in Iraq, and is currently operating in Al Anbar province. He is here today to provide us an update on the regiment's operations. Today's briefing is on the record. Please identify yourself when you're asking your question, because he can't see you.

And with that, Colonel Davis, I'll turn it over to you.

COL. DAVIS: Thank you very much for having us this morning, your time, this evening, our time out here. We've been privileged to have your attention for most of the last year out here in western Al Anbar province, where we've been operating out along the Syrian border, the Jordanian border and part of the Saudi border, down to our south.

We've just concluded a couple of days ago an Operation Western Shield down in the city of Rutbah, along our main supply routes, Michigan and Mobile, in which we bermed up the city, and we have now an exclusive walled compound down there, with three entry control checkpoints, that's been getting rave reviews from the population down there because, for the first time in years now, the insurgents can't freely travel in and out of that city -- one more step in making western Al Anbar a prohibitive environment for the insurgents and terrorists to operate in.

Up to our north, along the Syrian border in the al Qaim region, we continue to progress nicely. We stopped our kinetic effects towards the end of November, at the end of Operation Steel Curtain, and we're able to progress now with getting consistent power, free and clean running water for all the villages up there, as well as starting to rebuild the hospitals and the schoolhouses that have suffered over the last three years, where the inter-tribal fighting as well as the fighting between the terrorists and coalition forces have been taking place.

A mark of the progress that's occurred up there is I was able to walk the Syrian border from the Euphrates down to Camp Gannon the other day and then drive from there all through Obeidi and across the river into the Rommana area, something that was absolutely unheard of a year ago.

We continue to work these same efforts in the Triad, the area that consists of Hadithah, Habbaniya and Barwana, over on the Euphrates to the eastern part of my area, very solid efforts there. We have permanent combined presence with Iraqi and American forces now in 15 towns throughout the region, where we had none when we came here a year ago.

So we're satisfied with our progress to date and we're looking forward to doing more.

MR. TURNER: Okay. He'll take some questions.

Q Colonel, Charlie Aldinger with Reuters. Are there any signs that the Syrians are doing more to control cross-border movement? And have there been any shooting incidents back and forth across the border?

COL. DAVIS: (Inaudible.)

Q We can't hear you. Can't hear you.

COL. DAVIS: In fact, when I was up there about a week ago, I was able to stand on the berm that separates the two countries there and with my 3rd Brigade commander, Colonel Ishmael, was able to talk to three of the Syrian soldiers on the other side. There's been absolutely no change in their troop disposition up along the border at any point that we've been able to recognize. The metric that has changed up there, quite frankly, as we've taken all the sanctuary areas away from the terrorists, and they find it a great deal more difficult now to traffic through that area, which was a main pipeline for them coming into this country.

Q So what you're saying is that the movement across the border has slowed because you've made it inhospitable for them, and the Syrians have little or nothing to do with that.

COL. DAVIS: That's absolutely correct. Part of the initiative that was started quite a while ago was the building of border forts all throughout the border region. It's commanded by the Ministry of the Interior. They have what we call the Desert Wolves out there that are based out of these desert forts, and they patrol the areas in between. Again, just an additive layer where this country has been able to take back control of its sovereign borders.

Q Colonel Davis, Lolita Baldor with the Associated Press. There's been a lot of discussion, obviously, about the Iraqi army and security forces. Can you give us a snapshot of the number of Iraqi forces you have working with you, and how that may have compared to five or six months ago?

COL. DAVIS: (Chuckles.) Yeah, it's a good news story. When I came out here, we had absolutely no Iraqis working with us. The first Iraqis that we got to partner with were the 7th Division Reconnaissance Company; I think 32-men strong, and that -- they got integrated immediately at that point. Today, I command two Iraqi brigades of three battalions each. We have five battalions of the Department of Border Enforcement folks -- the Desert Wolves I just spoke of -- so we've got -- I prefer to stay away from actual overall numbers for operational security purposes. But we have got considerably more than we ever had before, and they are partnered with all of my infantry and mechanized units throughout the Euphrates River Valley and live with the Marines and soldiers in these towns.

Q Can you give us an idea what level they are at?

Are they at level two, level three?

COL. DAVIS: I'm not sure what those levels pertain to, but they're fully integrated into all of our operations. They conduct operations of their own. The long pole in the tent continues to be institutional, logistic support. But each day we're making progress to that.

We share command and control facilities. They have used their own for their own separate operations in which we essentially send advisers with. So they are making progress. You will not confuse them with United States Marines. But they are making good progress when you consider what it takes, especially to stand up a nation's military essentially from scratch in the course of a year, year and a half.

MR. TURNER: Pam.

Q Colonel Davis, this is Pam Hess with UPI.

I was interested in the number that you started out with, saying that their -- you have ISF presence in 15 towns. How many more towns remain that could stand having an ISF presence? And how many towns do you have bermed up like you do in Rutbah?

COL. DAVIS: Rutbah was the only town that we chose to berm. Off the top of my head, I'd say I can think of three towns right now, maybe four that I'd be able to deploy troops to when they're ready coming out of training. But your major population centers all through the al Qaim region, all through the triad, up in Rawah and down in Hit all have combined partnered presence living in there, and most of them had been in there for three months or longer at this point.

Q And of your ISF, how many are from Anbar province? And how many are brought in from other areas?

COL. DAVIS: It's tough to generalize, but I'd say the composition of the brigades -- probably runs 40 percent Shi'a, 40 percent Kurd and about 20 percent Sunni. One of the brigades that I have the privilege to command is unusual in the fact that the majority of its leadership is Sunni and is from this province.

MR. TURNER: Jeff.

Q Colonel, Jeff Schogol with Stars and Stripes.

You mentioned your troops have helped berm a town. Is this a new tactic in Western Iraq? And do you know where -- does it originate from previous wars, like the French experience in North Africa?

COL. DAVIS: No, I think, as a matter of fact, the United States Army has used it frequently in other places here in Iraq. If I'm not mistaken, Tall Afar is similar to that as is parts of Mosul. Rutbah sits right astride two main supply routes, one coming in from Jordan, one coming in from Syria, and there is an awful lot of smuggling trafficking that runs there.

This town had the unfortunate occurrence of being strategically placed there -- very convenient for smugglers, terrorists, insurgents to operate in and out of there.

And we've been gratified to find most all of the people the live in the town thanking the Marines and the Iraqi soldiers that are working these tactical control points, coming in and out -- thanking them for ridding the town of the bad guys, in their words.

Q Just a quick follow-up question. If there's insurgents actually in the town, aren't you almost trapping them inside with everyone else?

COL. DAVIS: I hope so, because sooner or later, we'll find out who they are. The greatest source of our intelligence are the Iraqi people in these towns. They have no love for the foreign fighters. The foreign fighters have absolutely nothing to offer the future of Iraq. The people know that. And the people are the one who give them up to us. They're the ones that provide that intelligence. As soon as we have actionable intelligence, I'll hit that target.

Q Colonel, Jon Karl with ABC News. Can you give us a sense for what kind of an insurgent activity you've seen over the last several weeks and how much of this is foreign fighters, how much is home-grown insurgents? And I know we had seen weeks ago the fighting between the foreign fighters and the home-grown insurgents. Do you see any more of that?

COL. DAVIS: Yeah, we sure do. We refer to that as red on red, and we're big fans of red on red. Any time we can get those groups going after each other, that puts the Iraqi army and the coalition forces in a much better position.

I think it's instructive, when we look at some of the individuals in particular that we're chasing and targeting right now, guys that are very important to us today were not even making the draft list six, eight months ago. And that speaks to the efforts of the total coalition effort, I think, across AO Atlanta, the 2nd Marine Division, 2 MEF Forward, as well as the rest of the coalition forces in Iraq.

We came here to disrupt and interdict. We have managed to target the networks we're looking for, taking out the facilitators, the financiers, the operations guys. We especially target anything that's AQI-related. The foreign fighters are a considerable problem. That's not necessarily to imply that there's considerable numbers of them here anymore.

We have killed a bunch of them. We have detained a bunch of them, and they're in Abu Ghraib. And the fact that those guys are no longer with us or no longer on the street has definitely degraded those networks the ability that they have to operate.

Now, people will say, "Well, you kill them and you capture them, and they just replace them with somebody else." To some degree, that's true. However, the guys that replace them are not as well organized. They are not as well networked. They don't have the experience, and they don't have the ability of the people that we have taken out of the play of this problem. That's progress. And you can see it in the quality of the bomb making. You can see it in the number of suicide bombers that we've had, a considerable reduction in denigration of both of those.

Q Just to quickly follow-up. One guy that was high on the list, and I imagine still is, is Zarqawi. Any sense if he's in your area at all?

COL. DAVIS: No, I mean, there's historical evidence that he has certainly operated out here in western Al Anbar before. Is not [sic] a target we'd love to take him off the street, but the point with Zarqawi is that he is an individual. Some day he will meet his demise. We will celebrate that. But it is still his networks that are the target that we need to go after and dismantle because that is what is standing in the way of this country getting back on its feet and getting back into the world of nations.

MR. TURNER: Charlie?

Q Colonel, I'm trying to -- Charlie Aldinger again -- I'm trying to get a picture in my mind of these

berms. Is this town, village, whatever, surrounded by berms? Are these real high dirt mounds? And is this -- are these in part to kind of channel traffic, perhaps vehicle-borne IEDs? And are they partly to mitigate blast effect?

COL. DAVIS: Yeah, your picture of those berms is right. They are mounds of earth that's pushed up with our D-9 and D-7 bulldozers, and it does channelize traffic right into checkpoints, where we have Iraqi soldiers and Marines manning those things to make sure that none of the illicit material or individuals that we're looking for can transit in and out of this town.

Q It's Pam Hess from UPI. I have two questions. The first one is about the Sunni brigade that you talked about. Do you notice anything different about the way they operate or how the people respond to them because of their demographic makeup, or are they tougher or not as tough as the other brigades? Is there anything different there?

And the second question is, with all of the work that you've done, are you seeing progress manifested in the number of attacks going down, in your casualty numbers? Could you give us some metrics there?

COL. DAVIS: I don't believe I referred to the brigade as the Sunni brigade; 3rd Brigade, 7th Division is who they are. They just happen to have a certain percentage of their leadership that happens to be Sunni. We have other Sunni leaders and commanders out there as well. It just seems to be much greater in this particular brigade.

Performance-wise they're a solid brigade. They've still got learning curve to go, but they are operating. They're operating independently in small-unit actions, and they are operating with us. They have taken casualties, and they continue to remain steadfast. So again, it's not a Sunni brigade; it's an Iraqi army brigade that's part of 7th Division.

Your second question about the effect that we have, it's tough to give you a cause-and-effect ratio here, because the minute I do that, somebody will make a liar out of me. So I think we can definitely point to progress. When you look at the number of suicide bombings that were taking place in Baghdad back in the April-May time frame and you compare them to what's happening now, I think that's a direct correlation to what we've been able to cut off coming through the Western Euphrates River Valley as well as efforts down in different areas of operation -- Ramadi, Fallujah and in Baghdad itself.

Q Colonel, it's Lolita Baldor again with AP. You mentioned that you can see the difference in the suicide bombs and in the attacks. Are you seeing fewer suicide bombs and fewer attacks, or are they simply less lethal, less effective? And particularly regarding the bomb-making.

COL. DAVIS: What we're seeing, and it's tragic, quite frankly, we're seeing young kids that are being sent out as suicide bombers, kids probably the age of 15, 16, 17. Some of the remains we're able to recover and you're able to put age to these kids.

And it's really unfortunate that the terrorists are picking on that vulnerable section of a society where they pump these kids full of visions and they bring them to a place like this, ultimately and generally, to harm fellow Iraqis and fellow Arabs. The bomb-making -- clearly we're still getting hurt by IEDs. But we are much more sophisticated about how we counter those right now, and we're encouraged by those trends.

MR. TURNER: Jeff.

Q Colonel, Jeff Schogol with Stars and Stripes again.

Are you dealing at all with insurgents who launch attacks in Iraq and then retreat to safe havens in Syria?

COL. DAVIS: That has been a pattern that I think we've seen in the past. I don't believe that they've got the ability to freely transit like that anymore. Once we were able to take the al Qaim region away from them as a sanctuary, that pretty much put an end to the ease at which they can do that. There are still indications that there's trafficking in that region, and that clearly that is a pipeline coming into Syria. It's just much degraded over what we've seen in the past.

MR. TURNER: Charlie.

Q Colonel, you -- earlier, you -- this is Charlie Aldinger again. Earlier, you gave breakdowns of Sunni and Shi'a in different outfits. Do you see -- there's an assumption that there's tension there. Do you see any tension between the Sunnis, the Kurds and the Shi'a in these outfits? Or is the military training and observing -- U.S. troops beginning to override that?

COL. DAVIS: I think that the mentoring and the association with the Marines and the Army soldiers that I have working within Regimental Combat Team-2 provides an outstanding example of how to set those differences aside. I have not seen differences in the brigades between people of different tribal, ethnic and religious backgrounds like that. It is clearly something that we keep a sharp eye on when they deal with the people in the towns that are 99-percent Sunni, but that has not created any overt friction that's become problematic to this point.

Q It's Pam Hess. When does RCT-2 transfer out of there, and what advice or guidance are you going to give your successor?

COL. DAVIS: The -- well, now, I don't want to pin down the dates or anything, but when it comes time for us to redeploy and hand over the area of operations to our successors, I think they're very well prepped at this time. They're good close personal friends. They've been following our time over here, and they're well prepared to step up to that plate.

We're very proud of what we've been able to accomplish. We are very proud of what we inherited from Regimental Combat Team-7 back a year ago. They did a heck of a job out here to start rebuilding this province and moving it forward. We'd like to think that we moved that ball further down the field, and I'm sure our successors will do the same thing.

Q I know that there's operational concerns with pinning down exactly when you're leaving, but you guys are transferring out this spring. It would be safe to say that, yes?

COL. DAVIS: That is safe to say. If you would like to look at a metric for success out here, a year ago in January when they had the election, there were virtually no votes in western Al Anbar province. On October 15th, we were able to garner 7,500 votes out here, and in the election that was just held on December 15th, to include the area of operations that includes Hit, that number was over 72,000 votes. I think that that's a fair metric of progress out here.

Q And why do you bring up Hit in particular?

COL. DAVIS: Right now, Hit has been -- had different units operating in that -- under their operational control. So at times it technically has not been part of Regimental Combat Team-2's area of operations.

MR. TURNER: Any more questions?

Well, Colonel, thank you very much. We appreciate you visiting in the Pentagon press room, and we hope to see you again soon.

COL. DAVIS: We'd like to see you back there real soon ourselves. Thanks very much for your time.

(C) COPYRIGHT 2005, FEDERAL NEWS SERVICE, INC., 1000 VERMONT AVE. NW; 5TH FLOOR; WASHINGTON, DC - 20005, USA. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. ANY REPRODUCTION, REDISTRIBUTION OR RETRANSMISSION IS EXPRESSLY PROHIBITED.

UNAUTHORIZED REPRODUCTION, REDISTRIBUTION OR RETRANSMISSION CONSTITUTES A MISAPPROPRIATION UNDER APPLICABLE UNFAIR COMPETITION LAW, AND FEDERAL NEWS SERVICE, INC. RESERVES THE RIGHT TO PURSUE ALL REMEDIES AVAILABLE TO IT IN RESPECT TO SUCH MISAPPROPRIATION.

FEDERAL NEWS SERVICE, INC. IS A PRIVATE FIRM AND IS NOT AFFILIATED WITH THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT. NO COPYRIGHT IS CLAIMED AS TO ANY PART OF THE ORIGINAL WORK PREPARED BY A UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT OFFICER OR EMPLOYEE AS PART OF THAT PERSON'S OFFICIAL DUTIES.

FOR INFORMATION ON SUBSCRIBING TO FNS, PLEASE CALL JACK GRAEME AT 202-347-1400.

<http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/2006/tr20060210-12484.html>