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DoD News Briefing with Lt. Gen. Chiarelli

BRYAN WHITMAN (Pentagon spokesman): Good morning. And good afternoon to General Chiarelli. General Chiarelli, this is Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon. Can you hear me okay?

GEN. CHIARELLI: Yes, sir, I can.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you for joining us this morning. I think most everybody in the room knows you. This is Lieutenant General Peter Chiarelli. He is the commanding general of Multinational Corps Iraq. He assumed command earlier this year, January 19th, and as such, directs the operations of 133,000 or so joint and coalition forces in all sectors in Iraq, working with the Iraqi security forces.

This is his second tour back into Iraq. He previously served as the commanding general of the 1st Cavalry Division and was responsible for Baghdad from about March of 2004 to March of 2005.

This is his first briefing back to you as the Multinational Corps Commander, and he is at Camp Victory today. And this is via DVIDS, so of course, you can see him but he can't see you. And he's got a few remarks that he'd like to make before we get into some questions.

And I guess with that, I'll just turn it over to you, General. Thank you again.

GEN. CHIARELLI: Bryan, thank you for that fine introduction. It's certainly a pleasure to be here today.

Happy St. Patrick's Day to all of you. I'm sorry they gave you an Italian rather than an Irishman, but as you know, I wear green every day.

Seriously, though, I appreciate the opportunity to share some of my thoughts with you today and answer your questions. I never turn down the opportunity to talk about what a superb job our Iraqi security forces, our soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines and coalition forces are doing in Iraq.

There has been a lot of talk lately about the post-Samarra violence, and whether it means Iraq is descending into a civil war. Quite frankly, the talk of civil war is nothing new. I've heard people debate the topic for three years now.

I don't want to downplay the tragedy of the violence that has occurred; however, it may be unfair to

characterize every post-22nd February event as sectarian in nature.

The possibility of civil war may be higher today than it has been in the last three years, yet I believe we are still far away from such an event. Where there are groups of individuals polarized at each end of the spectrum, there are a vast majority of Iraqis in the middle who don't see the divisions that are being highlighted. Many Iraqis are part of mixed marriages and lived in mixed neighborhoods and consider themselves Iraqis first.

I can tell you that in the first few days following the bombing, we did indeed see an increase in sectarian violence. That has since tapered off, and what we are seeing now are the same types of attacks we were seeing before the mosque bombing, and actually at a slightly lower number, except now all events seem to be characterized as sectarian in nature. In some instances, it's perceived that way.

Now, some of those events are sectarian, but far fewer than are being reported. Most of the events are a combination of the work of al Qaeda in Iraq, insurgent attacks designed to prevent progress in building the government and pure, unadulterated crime.

I want to lay out some facts and figures for you just to put this in perspective.

In the days immediately following the Samarra bombing, the press was actively tracking and reporting every single mosque attack, but the vast majority of the reporting was off the mark. I recalled reports of hundreds of mosques attacked and 30 mosques burning in Baghdad in one night. These reports were terribly inaccurate.

As we received reports of mosque attacks, we sent forces out to physically check the mosques for damage. We received 81 reports of mosques being attacked from sources other than our subordinate units. Of these 81 mosque reports, 17 had light damage, such as bullet holes or broken glass, and six had medium damage, repairable within six months. Only two mosques were completely destroyed, and none were burned.

Keep in mind, these reports are for a country that has thousands of mosques. Yet as I watched the news, I thought that every mosque in Iraq was being attacked.

Again, I'm not making light of the tragedy of the violence that has occurred. But I remain convinced that the resiliency and optimism of the Iraqi people will keep Iraq moving in the right direction.

Yesterday was an historic day for Iraq with the seating of the Council of Representatives, a significant step toward a democratic, unity government.

This is clear progress in the area of governance, which is just one of the several non-kinetic areas we are focusing on.

Other non-kinetic areas include economics, infrastructure and communications. All have to be worked simultaneously to move Iraq forward.

The progress I see in the Iraqi security forces since I arrived 11 months ago is absolutely amazing. The Iraqi army is increasingly taking the lead in operations and taking over responsibility for battlespace. They did a phenomenal job in providing security around the country following the Samarra bombing. They demonstrated a true understanding of their role in a democratic government. They were Iraqis first, dedicated to securing their country without regard for their religious or tribal affiliation.

This is also the year of the police, where we are providing police training teams and unit partnerships and mentoring to help develop the capability of the police force, much as we have with the army. Once trained,

these police forces will take responsibility for securing urban areas, allowing the army to move out of the cities for more of a focus on national security.

We are working with the Iraqi government to assist in building ministerial capacities so that the government can provide the necessary essential services for all Iraqis. We are developing provincial reconstruction teams to work with provincial governments in developing economic systems and building infrastructure so that the Iraqis can have clean water, electricity, fuel, proper sewage systems and trash removal. All of these non-kinetic aspects are being worked simultaneously to move Iraq forward as a country.

While the emphasis may be on the non-kinetic aspects of our operations and renewing Iraq, the kinetic fight has not been forgotten. Operations such as Operation Swarmer yesterday and the ongoing Operation Scales of Justice to reinforce security measures around Baghdad by repositioning forces and bringing a battalion task force from Kuwait demonstrate our commitment and ability to bring forces to bear in tracking down and capturing or killing insurgents, insurgent supporters, foreign fighters and the members of al Qaeda.

Finally, last month's allegations that possible violations of rules of engagement were brought to the attention of U.S. officials by a reporter. I immediately initiated a preliminary investigation into the events surrounding insurgent attack in Haditha on November 19th, 2005. On that date, Marines assigned to the Marine Expeditionary Force responded to an IED and small-arms fire on their convoy.

The initial findings of the preliminary investigation were presented to me on March 9th, and I directed further review of the incident. We take these allegations of potential misconduct seriously, and they will be thoroughly investigated. I really can't comment any further on this incident because of the ongoing investigation.

I'd now be happy to take your questions.

MR. WHITMAN: General, thank you for that overview. And we'll get right into some questions here.

Mr. Burns.

Q General, this is Bob Burns from AP. I'd like to ask you a question about Swarmer. Is there a reconstruction, economic development piece that goes hand in hand with this operation or is it strictly an offensive operation? And also, has it, at this early stage, revealed anything to you about the Zarqawi operation in that area?

GEN. CHIARELLI: There's a -- we work all lines of operation in every single operation we conduct, and I think Swarmer will be no different from any other one. We consider that an essential part of what we're doing. And I think you can tell by Swarmer it was conducted in the desert, for all practical purposes, in an area about 10 miles by 10 miles. It was a large operation consisting of Iraqis and U.S. forces. Again, it's one of those changes that has taken place since I came back to Iraq. Had we tried to accomplish a mission like this 11 months ago, it would have been primarily U.S. forces. But in this case -- I think you've all seen the numbers -- is we have primarily Iraqi forces supported by U.S. and coalition forces. And I can tell you that we will work all lines of operation, including reconstruction, in support of the Iraqi people in that area at the completion of the operation.

Q Could you address the second part of my question about whether you've learned anything additional about the Zarqawi operations as a result?

GEN. CHIARELLI: I think every single one of our operations takes us a little closer to putting that puzzle together, and this operation is no different. This operation was a follow-on to additional operations that had been conducted prior to this in that general area. We conducted one about three weeks ago called Katrina,

which gave us a lot of information about some of those cells and those operations. And we will continue to conduct those operations in that area and anywhere else in Iraq where the intelligence leads us to possibly being able to work the al Qaeda issue.

Q General, it's Tom Shanker from The New York Times. You mentioned the Iraqi security forces. And certainly the weeks since the Samarra Mosque bombing have been an extreme test of them. I'm just curious what you've learned about the Iraqi army and the police -- their performance -- that will influence how they're deployed in the weeks and months ahead, and maybe ways that they shouldn't be deployed in the weeks and months ahead.

GEN. CHIARELLI: Well, for me this is probably the greatest change I've seen. I know you know, Tom, I was here in April of 2004 when in Baghdad we have seven Iraqi national guard battalions. And I will tell you, those battalions, after the events of 4th of April, went from a strength of 800 down to 100 in a matter of days, and we literally had to begin again rebuilding those battalions. That whole process for us began in almost the 1st of May of 2004, and since then, we've seen this steady progress.

As I left Iraq -- I can only speak of Baghdad. And in fact, I think Baghdad was the only location in Iraq in March of 2004 where we had actually turned over battlespace to Iraqis. We had a brigade headquarters and two battalions inside Baghdad. I come back to Iraq with what you all see every day -- us turning more and more battlespace -- it's hard for me to even keep track of it on a daily basis -- over to Iraqis to the point where by this summer, about 75 percent of Iraq will be in -- that battlespace will be owned by Iraqi units.

We're finding Iraqi units, with our support, can be used in just about any operation we do in a counterinsurgency role. This is a force we have built and the Iraqis have built for that counterinsurgency fight, and I think they're particularly well-prepared, well-trained, and have the ability to do that in just about any area, both in the cities, and as you saw in Swarmer out in the middle of the desert where there's little population and we're looking for other things such as caches -- weapons, and some of the things we've found out there.

MR. WHITMAN: Barbara?

Q General Chiarelli, Barbara Starr from CNN. Sir, I understand your reluctance to discuss ongoing investigations. But is there any way you can help us out by simply placing the Haditha matter into some sort of context and perspective? In other words, how serious is this situation? Although I understand your reluctance to discuss specifics.

GEN. CHIARELLI: Well, I'm glad you understand that because I really can't say any more than I've already said, ma'am. And I appreciate the question, but I'm just going to leave it at what I indicated in my prepared statement. This is an ongoing investigation, and it is only fair for all parties that I leave it right where I put it in my prepared statement.

Thank you.

Q General, this is Will Dunham with Reuters.

Regarding your comment you just made about 75 percent of Iraq being handed over to the Iraqi security forces, could you give a more precise timetable, if you have it?

And also, in your opening remark, you expressed your thoughts that a civil war didn't seem likely. Could you just explain why you're so confident about that?

GEN. CHIARELLI: Well, when I said, "I think," I said, "We're a long ways away from it."

I think, and as mentioned in my statement, we're probably closer to it than any time since I've been in Iraq. But at the same time, when I go out and talk to Iraqis and visit the locations that I visit, I'm always totally put in a good frame of mind based on their optimism and their feelings and their movement ahead.

I think the thing that I see when I go out and talk to Iraqis today that they're most concerned about is the formation of a government, and yesterday was a big step forward for them. The seating of the Council of Representatives was big. It marks the beginning of this process, and I know all Iraqis will be happy to see a national unity government in place, a government that can start tackling some of the problems that all Iraqis want fixed.

And I'm sorry. I -- I forgot the first part of your question.

Q It was about the -- you said 75 percent that the Iraqi security forces would be controlling by summertime -- do I have that right? And could you give a more precise timetable, if you have one?

GEN. CHIARELLI: Yeah, if I said summertime, I meant the end of summer. That's currently when we're looking at that occurring. That is kind of that mark.

I think that all indications are we will make that. But again, I don't want to be so precise as to put myself into a box. These are individuals, these are units that we're training. We're doing a very, very good job, and the Iraqis are doing a great job moving forward. But I think the end of summertime is about as far down as I can nail that.

MR. WHITMAN: Joe.

Q General, this is Joe Tabet with Al Hurra Channel.

Would you please give us more details about the Swarmer operation? What kind of resistance are you facing in Samarra?

And my second question is we've heard this week a lot of accusation against Iran, that the Iranian government is supporting the insurgency, and there is some infiltration from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. Do you have any information on that?

GEN. CHIARELLI: Let me handle the first part of your question.

First of all, Swarmer was an operation out in the desert. It really marks a change, and it marks an evolution -- our ability to get outside many of the large metropolitan areas and begin to do and conduct operations based on intelligence we receive both from U.S. sources, from Iraqi sources in areas where we think insurgent networks are operating. And that's really why the size of the operation was the way it was, is that it was a huge area -- 10 kilometers by 10 kilometers (sic) [10 miles by 10 mile]. We had intelligence that -- we had anti-coalition terrorists and foreign fighters working in that area, and it took a lot of Iraqi soldiers and U.S. support to get into the area that we wanted to work.

We'll be in there for a couple of days searching for caches.

The amount of resistance we had was very, very light. I think the last count I had is that we have 31 individuals that we have detained, but we found caches of just about everything that you find, everything from 120-millimeter rockets to 107-millimeter rockets, 130-millimeter projectiles, mortars, some SA-7 components, and munitions. So we found what you would expect to find and what we expected to find out there. We'll

continue to look for caches and any other terrorists and foreign fighters that might be in the area.

As far as Iran, we watch developments that are happening in Iran all the time. And I really don't have any other comment about that except to say that that's something we're looking at all the time to see what impact they're having inside Iraq.

Q General, Jim Mannion from Agence France-Presse. You said that the sectarian violence has tapered down, but on the other hand, there have been these spates of killings of civilians. People have been shot, strangled and left in mini-buses or on the side of the road. So who is behind that? Are the security forces involved in that?

And as a part of that question, during the operation -- after the February 22nd operation, some of the security forces allowed militia- men to go through their lines in Baghdad. What has been done about that?

GEN. CHIARELLI: Well, the Iraqi army's performance has, like I said, been absolutely magnificent. I don't know in every case who is conducting these. I think some of them are conducted by al Qaeda in Iraq, some of these events, to make it look like it's sectarian, but there's no doubt in my mind there's retribution being taken by both sides, by groups of individuals. Some of them may be militias, some of them just may be angry young men who go out and conduct some of these horrible attacks.

And I in no way want to downplay this violence. It's absolutely deplorable. And we have kicked off Scales of Justice to give Iraqis confidence that the Iraqi security forces and coalition forces, particularly in Baghdad, are there in larger numbers, are there, they see them on the street a lot more, and I think that operation is having the effect we want inside Baghdad. So I see that as a positive thing. And I will tell you that the attacks that you speak of have tapered off in the last few days, and we hope that will continue that way, but I also know that we could see more, and I expect to see more.

But Scales of Justice is working. Operations like Swarmer, where we're able to get out of the large areas and get out into some of the locations where we have not been able to focus forces, and take down many of the locations where terrorists and foreign fighters and insurgents are both operating from and holding their supplies, are very, very important in working to stabilize Iraq and make the opportunities for violence less.

MR. WHITMAN: Lisa and then Lisa.

Q General, this is Lisa Burgess with Stars and Stripes. I believe you spoke last week to the Shi'ite commander of Iraq's 5th Army Division, and he told you at that time that the Public Order Battalions for the Ministry of Interior was his worst problem. And he said, I quote, "When the minister of Interior's forces come, the people say the Shi'ites are here to kill the civilians. If the Iraqi security forces are going to be key to preventing civil war, they're going to have to be seen as neutral brokers.

If a Shi'ite commander is himself identifying that as an issue, how do you see that happening?

GEN. CHIARELLI: Well, first of all, those are, as you know, national police units, and this is the year of the police. And we'll be working very, very hard with many of those units. I think what that commander told me was the perception was, and I thought that was a very important point. He didn't actually accuse those forces of doing that. He said the perception was that these largely Shi'a units, and many of them are; many of the national police units have a large percentage of Shi'a in their ranks -- that these organizations were perceived by people in a time of heightened sectarian conflict like we had and particularly the area where this was taking place -- in and around the Narwan area -- were creating that kind of perception.

And I, quite frankly, saw that as a very important statement from him. He did not accuse Iraqi security

forces or Iraqi national police of, in fact, doing that, he indicated the perception of some of the people. And I think that's a natural phenomenon that's going to happen.

But we will be working very, very hard with all the police, both the local police, that I think are sometimes forgotten over here, the critical place that they have in securing the metropolitan areas, the large urban areas and some of the smaller villages that have regular police, and in addition to that national police units who we will be working with all year long in a way that we have not been able to before.

Q This is the other Lisa, Lisa Meyer, from AP Radio. I've got two questions about Operation Swarmer. I'm wondering if you could describe what the composition of the leave-behind force will be once the operation is completed, whether it will be Iraqi or American, both; whether it will be police commandos, whatever. And also about the timing of it. Could you explain to us -- there are some people that say that there's a political subtext here, and I'm wondering if you could describe whether in fact there was a long period of time that transpired between conception and execution.

GEN. CHIARELLI: I really can't -- I can't figure out why people did the analysis that they did. I think that anybody's who's been on the ground -- and there are a lot of folks that have been on the ground -- I think today we had some people up there -- will see that this is a largely uninhabited area that is 10 miles by 10 miles; it is a huge area where we had some direct intelligence but where we felt what we needed to do was really look through that entire area, look for these caches. There's a science to hiding this stuff, and we went out there with that in mind.

As for stay-behind forces, again I don't want to comment on follow-on operations. I can tell you we'll be working in there for a number of days, and we'll continue to work in there again at a later date if intelligence indicates that we need to go back in there. But we will be working with the people, the small population that is in there, to work some of the non-kinetic lines that I mentioned earlier.

But there was no attempt on anybody's part back here to time this to anything other than the intelligence that was coming in. It was an operation that we had been working for a couple of months. And quite frankly, one of the biggest problems I have over here sometimes is -- all the days seem the same -- is remembering what day of the week it is and also the actual date. But I do remember today's St. Patrick's Day.

MR. WHITMAN: Jonathan.

Q General, Jonathan Karl with ABC News. If you don't mind, two questions. One, focusing on the first part of your statement about civil war, you said you think we're closer now -- or may be closer now than we ever have been to a civil war.

I'm wondering what makes you say that. What are the indicators you're seeing?

And secondly, can you just clear up for me -- there have been all these confusing and conflicting reports coming out about this alleged plot on the Green Zone, with the Interior Ministry saying one thing, the Defense Ministry saying another. In the end of the day, what actually happened? Were there actually people fired in the Defense Ministry for this? And did these guys get pretty close to infiltrating?

GEN. CHIARELLI: I have no solid reports of the report that occurred inside the Green Zone. I've read what has been said, and I will tell you that's an unconfirmed report, as far as I'm concerned. And that's about all I can say on it.

As for anything that happened in the Defense Ministry, that is something that's handled above my pay grade. And I have heard of none, nor do I believe that there were any.

But again, I have -- the Green zone is a very, very important -- the International Zone is a very, very important area. I spent a year down there myself working to ensure that that was as secure as possible. We take all threats on the International Zone as very, very seriously, and we investigate all threats on the International Zone and work them very, very hard. But I have no reports that would lead to some of the things that I've read in the press about this particular incident.

I will tell you on civil war I tried to make it clear that I still think we're a long ways away from that. My point was that, you know, whether I think or anybody else thinks that it's sectarian violence, the perception by many is, is in fact it is. And perception is what is important here in a community and I have to be concerned about that, as we all are concerned about that, not only inside Baghdad but throughout all of Iraq.

I still say, and I stand by that, that we are a long ways away from that. And I think operations like we're conducting now go a long way into moving us further to the left and further away from that, wherever that tipping point might be. I can't tell you where that is, but I think we've got things moving in the right direction at this time.

Q General, this is Bob Burns. I just wanted to ask one more thing, about your comment on Iraqis having control of 75 percent of their territory by the end of summer. What is it today, for comparison purposes?

GEN. CHIARELLI: Oh, boy, that's hard for me to -- I've never looked at it as a percentage. I think I'd have to get back to you on that. I would say it's somewhere in the vicinity of -- in total land mass, under 50 percent. There's large areas out in Al Anbar where that's not the case.

So it's somewhere under 50 percent.

But what's important here is this is tremendous progress that has been made. Again, I left here and there were two battalions and one brigade controlling battlespace in Baghdad, and yet now there's not a single province that I can think of where we don't have Iraqi security forces who are owning battlespace and doing just a fantastic job.

Q General, Al Pessin from Voice of America. I wanted to follow up on the second Lisa question. When we heard about the series of operations in northern Iraq last year, the idea was that you were leaving Iraqi forces behind to secure the areas. Are you not doing that this time? I understand it's at least the second time that this particular area's been assaulted. So are you planning to then leave it and perhaps end up having to do this again?

GEN. CHIARELLI: I'm not going to comment on what forces we're going to leave or any kind of operational matters of what we're going to do in the future. The issue is that we had good intelligence so we needed to go out in this area. We needed to look at this area. We needed to conduct operations in this area. Some focused on very specific targets. Others focused on targets that we saw throughout that 10-mile by 10-mile area, and we conducted those operations. There's -- I can tell you there's not an intent to stay out in all 10-miles by 10-miles, but I'm not going to comment on exactly where we're going to be at the conclusion of this operation -- just that we're not going to leave until we've done everything we need to do out in that particular area of operations.

MR. WHITMAN: (Off mike) -- last minute right now. Perhaps I should turn it over to you to see if you have any last thoughts that you'd like to make before we run out of time here.

GEN. CHIARELLI: It's a great opportunity. I think operations like Swarmer are operations you're going to see more and more of as we turn over more of the large urban areas to Iraqi forces. We're going to get out into some of these areas -- they're very manpower intensive -- to take a look and to look at intelligence that

we've gotten, areas that we may not have been able to get to before, areas that the Iraqis are particularly, given their capabilities, good at moving into and helping us find the kind of things we found on Swarmer -- that we'll continue to do these kinds of operations.

I thank you for your questions, and happy St. Patrick's Day, everyone.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you for being with us this evening, and we hope to talk to you again soon. And thank you for making your other subordinate commanders available to us in this format each week.

GEN. CHIARELLI: It's our pleasure.

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