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Presenter: Lt. Gen. Peter W. Chiarelli

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DoD News Briefing with Lt. Gen. Chiarelli from Iraq

BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): General Chiarelli, this is Bryan Whitman. Can you hear me okay?

GEN. CHIARELLI: Yes, sir, I can.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you again, General, for joining us -- no stranger to our folks here in the Pentagon. We're privileged to have General -- Lieutenant General Pete Chiarelli, who is the commanding general of Multinational Corps in Iraq. He's been there -- he assumed command in January of this year, and he's talked to you before from Iraq. And he obviously directs the operations of the joint and coalition forces in all sectors of Iraq.

I think the last time you were with us was in March, General, and we appreciate the opportunity not only to speak to you again but for you making your division commanders available each and every week, and some of your brigade combat team commanders, in order to give us a good, accurate picture of what's going on in Iraq.

So with that, let me go ahead and get it turned over to you, and then we'll get into some questions.

GEN. CHIARELLI: Well, thank you, Bryan .

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for attending today.

I'd like to give you an update on the operational progress in Iraq from my perspective as the Multinational Corps-Iraq commander and then open it up to your questions.

We are entering a historical and decisive moment in this country, as it is on the verge of inaugurating a democratically elected unity government. We will soon have Iraqi leaders and ministers in place that won't have to worry about an impending election or writing a constitution, but can instead turn to addressing the key needs and concerns of the Iraqi people.

The coalition remains fully committed to supporting and assisting the new Iraqi government as they mobilize to tackle some of the critical challenges they face. We continue to assist in the training and fielding of

their security forces, and we are also standing by to help the Iraqis in any way we can as they build strong and capable institutions of governance and rule of law that can promote economic growth and prosperity.

The Iraqi security forces continue to improve and perform their jobs bravely and admirably. A few weeks ago, there was a coordinated attack against several Iraqi security force checkpoints in Muqtadiyah (sp). Not only did the ISF handily beat back this attack, the Iraqi army and Iraqi police worked smoothly together to cooperate and coordinate their response to the insurgents.

It was my honor recently to visit some of the Iraqi army soldiers involved in this action alongside two senior Iraqi generals as they bestowed honors and awards on these soldiers for their bravery.

The Iraqi army is progressing steadily and is still on track for 75 percent of its brigades to be in the lead in their sectors by the end of the summer. Our efforts in this year of the police are bearing fruit, with more and more cops on the beat who have increasingly better training and capability.

The progress of the ISF is due to the talents, commitment and patriotism of the Iraqis themselves, but I believe it is also due to true partnership we have created with them. Our vetting/training teams live, work, eat, sleep and fight alongside their Iraqi colleagues day in and day out, building personal and professional relationships that will last a lifetime, and this approach has worked.

They key to sustaining these gains and continuing to make progress in the ISF is ensuring that the Iraqi government ministries responsible for providing policy guidance, promotions, pay, logistics and all other forms of support needed for the modern military are fully capable.

I believe that building Iraqi ministerial capacity, both in the ministries charged with maintaining the ISF but also in the civilian areas, is indispensable. Ministerial capacity is key to Iraq realizing the enormous potential of its natural resources, and key to the Iraqi government being able to provide basic services to its people. And it is vital to creating a society based on the rule of law and to generating and sustaining a prosperous economy.

I'd like to emphasize the importance of this last issue -- economics. I firmly believe that the linchpin of a peaceful Iraq is to reduce unemployment and put people to work. By creating jobs and opportunity, the Iraqi government would take away a major source of support for violent movements -- aimless, underemployed, young men who would otherwise rather be gainfully employed and supporting their families, but are laying IEDs, shooting RPGs and fighting Iraqi security forces and the coalition because they lack alternatives.

Disillusionment, poverty and hopelessness are the breeding grounds for violence. While there may be a small core of zealots who will never give up their violent ways, basic services and economic opportunity will isolate these extremist few from the majority of the population, who merely seek a better life for themselves and their families.

I recall the dictum, "Be sociable with them that will be sociable, and be formidable with them who will not." We can progressively shrink the number of people we need to be formidable with by simply providing for the needs of the Iraqi people and offering them alternatives.

Through the ISF, we can address the symptoms, violence, but by building up Iraqi ministerial capacity to provide basic services and create hope and economic opportunity, we can get at the causes. A prosperous Iraq will be a peaceful Iraq. The link between this is inextricable.

We look forward to working with the new Iraqi government and helping them any way we can to pursue both of these objectives simultaneously and with equal energy.

With that, I'm happy to take your questions.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you, General. We'll get right into it here.

Bob?

Q General, this is Bob Burns of Associated Press. I want to ask you about the insurgency and American casualties. Over the past month and a half there have been close to 130 American deaths in Iraq. And as you mention, the Iraqi security forces are increasingly taking the lead, the Americans are more of a support role. How does that square with this recent increase in casualties? And what is your expectation?

GEN. CHIARELLI: What we've seen is a pattern that we've seen many, many other times in Iraq. We've seen a pattern of the insurgents and the terrorists and foreign fighters taking advantage of a key and critical period in Iraq. I don't think there's been a more key and critical period, the seating of this new government. And they have indicated again through these actions that they're going to do everything they possibly can to destabilize that government and not give it the opportunity to do the things that it needs to do.

And we are committed to fighting this violence wherever we can and to doing the things that are absolutely necessary to give this government a chance, a chance to govern a free and democratic Iraq.

Q A follow-up, real quick?

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead, Bob.

Q General, do you have any expectation that this will change any time as long as the Americans have in the neighborhood of 100,000 or more troops in Iraq, in terms of the casualty rate, I mean?

GEN. CHIARELLI: I honestly believe the key to this thing is exactly what I said in my opening statement, putting the Iraqi people to work. And finally we have a government that can concentrate on doing exactly that. And that is absolutely essential, to take the angry young men off the street, to give them an alternative. And believe me, they want an alternative. They want an alternative to make the life of their families better than the life that they've lived, and to make their life better. And I honestly believe as this government begins work on the policy that will be required to put people to work and make use of the vast resources of Iraq--that you're going to see a decrease in violence.

But it is absolutely key that the government attack these issues, and I'm sure that's exactly what they're going to do.

MR. WHITMAN: Tony?

Q Sir, this is Tony Capaccio with Bloomberg News. 2006 was supposed to be a year of transition. There was a Senate resolution passed in November laying out the sense of the Senate on that. Can you give us a sense of, you know, almost a half a year into the year now, where have the Iraqi security forces made the most progress on the road to a full transition? And conversely, where have they made the least progress? And your expectation by the end of the year where the year of transition actually will settle down?

GEN. CHIARELLI: I said it before and I'll say it again, the Iraqi army has made tremendous progress. Again, as I mentioned in my opening statement, by the end of this summer we expect 75 percent of the brigades in a 10-division army to be in the lead in their sectors. And I think that it's an absolutely amazing, amazing work that has been done to get them there. That's not to say there aren't issues and problems that we're going to have to face as we stand up the capability to support that force. And we are counting on the Iraqi government to

assist us in that way.

In addition to that, I have been very, very pleased with what I am seeing with our police training teams. Barely in the field for two months, they are already making a tremendous difference. I think I reported on the progress of Samarra before. When I went to Samarra one day after the bombing of the Golden Dome, there were 40 policemen at work. When I was back there three weeks ago, there was 540 and a brand-new police chief. And I'm told today we've added another 170 to those numbers, and they are actively out patrolling the streets of Samarra and making life better for the Iraqi people in Samarra. We're seeing that in Samarra and we're seeing that in other locations as our police training teams get out and work with the local policemen on the beat. I think this is an absolutely critical requirement that we must continue to move toward and I think part of that whole transition that we have spoken about.

But again, I really think it's absolutely critical that we get the support of this new Iraqi government -- I have every reason to believe we will -- in creating the kind of conditions that will allow that improvement to continue and allow them to continually gain more and more respect in the communities that they serve and lower the level of violence.

Q Follow-up?

MR. WHITMAN: Bret?

Q Realistically, though, I mean, is the trend such that by the end of the year you can expect major drawdowns of U.S. troops? You know, given the trends to date, everybody's looking for the year of transition to be a year where U.S. troops will be withdrawn. I mean, are we on a positive vector?

GEN. CHIARELLI: From my standpoint we're on a positive vector, but at the same time, the enemy gets a vote in all these kinds of operations. And we have to constantly be aware of what he's doing, and we have to be ready to react to that.

I think that there's no doubt in my mind that we will reach that 75 percent mark that I indicated earlier. There's no doubt in my mind that the police will continue to improve. Again, the key is going to be the Iraqi ministerial capacity supporting both the police and the Iraqi army as they go about securing Iraq and allowing the economic prosperity that I spoke of occur in this country.

MR. WHITMAN: Joe?

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

In your point of view as general of the ground, what are the serious scenarios to resolve the problem of militias in Iraq, and especially the Kurdish ones, the Peshmerga?

GEN. CHIARELLI: I'm sorry. I couldn't quite understand the question. Could you repeat it?

MR. WHITMAN: Perhaps I can. The question concerns dealing with the militias and the plan for dealing with the militias.

GEN. CHIARELLI: I think the requirement to come up with a militia policy is absolutely essential. And I believe -- and I think you would have to agree with me, that based on the responses of the prime minister-designate, that once he is in office, he is making that a top priority. Militia policy is absolutely critical.

A comprehensive disarmament, demobilization and reintegration plan is being developed, and we

continue to work with the Iraqi government towards support of that policy. But that is a policy that this sovereign government will have to determine.

It's my hope that we put a big piece of the reintegration piece on the front end of that policy. But a militia policy is absolutely critical.

MR. WHITMAN: You want to follow up?

Q Yeah. I would like to follow up regarding the Kurdish militia, General. What do you think? The Kurdish leaders are saying that the Peshmerga, the Kurdish militia, is vital for the security of the northern of Iraq. What do you think of that?

GEN. CHIARELLI: I've seen no indications that they won't be fully supportive of everything we're trying to do to create a free and democratic Iraq. I've seen no indication -- and I was up north yesterday -- that they aren't just totally committed to that. And it's an area that does not concern me at this time.

MR. WHITMAN: Pam.

Q Sir, it's Pam Hess with United Press International.

Congressman Murtha disclosed a few details the other day about the Marine incident in Hadithah that contradicts some of what the military has said already.

What details can you provide us with? When will the investigation be done? And, given that Congressman Murtha had a -- cited a different precipitating event as to what started the shooting, did someone lie? Did the Marines lie to the military? Did the military not disclose what it knew at the time back in November when it confirmed the event?

GEN. CHIARELLI: As I mentioned last March, I believe, as a referring officer for one of the investigations, I'm limited in what I can discuss on this topic.

Because the investigation is ongoing, I cannot speak about it, because we are all charged with protecting the integrity of the investigation and the rights of those involved.

But I do want to state unequivocally that we took these allegations very, very seriously. And when they were brought to our attention, we immediately opened an investigation. And that investigation is proceeding.

Once that investigation reaches a point where it can be discussed further, I believe that MARCENT will have the lead, and they will provide any more detail on the progress and the state of the investigation. But I can't state anything else about that investigation at this time.

MR. WHITMAN: Will?

Q General, Will Dunham with Reuters. Are you continuing to encounter larger, more powerful IEDs as U.S. forces go into places where perhaps they weren't before, rural areas? And how widespread is the use of these laser devices at checkpoints?

GEN. CHIARELLI: I'll answer your second question first. We've only used -- I wouldn't call them laser devices -- spotlight devices in a limited way, to date. I'm hoping that we'll have many, many more that we can use here before too long. I think they'll provide a very, very important additive to our way of helping Iraqis avoid situations where we have to apply deadly force. And I am, quite frankly, very hopeful that they will be a very,

very good addition and help us in lessening the number of escalation of force incidents that we have.

As far as IEDs go, we are constantly looking for ways to combat IEDs. The enemy realizes that the IEDs are a very, very good weapon, from his standpoint. At the same time, I'm very, very happy that our soldiers have done a much better job at finding those IEDs, albeit we don't find all of them, and many times when we don't find them, it is catastrophic.

At the same time, we're working very, very hard to look at different technologies and ways of combating this threat. This is the threat of this war.

And I want to thank everybody back in OSD for all the support that they're giving, both to my staff and to our soldiers, and I believe they're doing everything possible to help us fight this threat. But it is in fact the lethal threat of this particular war.

Q Quickly, on the devices you're using at the checkpoint, you say in a limited way. Could you quantify that for me, please?

GEN. CHIARELLI: We have some out here as a test, about 10 different systems. We found that they were very, very effective, and we're looking to deploy more of them to see exactly how effective they can be if used across a particular sector or with a particular unit. And I'm awaiting those to arrive, and after a required training period, they'll be out in the hands of soldiers. And I think they're going to make a tremendous difference.

MR. WHITMAN: Jeff?

Q Oh, I'm sorry. General --

GEN. CHIARELLI: In fact, when you consider the alternative, which is a bullet, I honestly believe we can use them; we can use them effectively. We can use them in ways that don't necessarily even, quote, unquote, "light up" the individual, but provide a marker so individuals realize that they are approaching a danger point. And we will do everything possible to inform the Iraqi people of their use, so when they see them, they react appropriately.

Q General, this is Jeff Schogol, Stars and Stripes. Can you talk about the plan to consolidate the smaller FOBs into bigger COBs, contingency operation bases?

GEN. CHIARELLI: It's been our plan all along to turn over forward operating bases to the Iraqis and we continue. Again, in this year of transition, that has been part of our strategy, part of our plan, and we are very, very successful to date in doing that. We're on a timeline to do that. It's absolutely critical to do that so that, number one, the Iraqis gain back some of these locations, which are critical to the stationing and basing of their soldiers and forces. And at the same time, as they take over the lead in more and more of the sectors in Iraq, it's critical that we move and consolidate wherever possible. And that's all part of the process of transitioning sectors to Iraqi security forces, both army and police.

Q Talk about how many COBs you envision in Iraq and how long they're expected to be operating.

GEN. CHIARELLI: Again, the enemy always has a vote in this. And as I look down range and down in time, I'm hoping that we will be down to somewhere in the vicinity of 50 by the end of the year. That's our plan.

But again, I always understand -- and I hate to be repetitive -- that the enemy gets an opportunity to vote in these matters, and we'll adjust our plan if required. But it is a very complicated process. It's a very time-

consuming process. We have a very deliberate way of doing it to ensure that we return them to the Iraqis the way we received them and in fact quite -- in quite a few cases, much, much better than we received them, and as we consolidate our forces.

But at the same time, we have the requirement to support our training teams, which are spread all over Iraq, which makes it a very complicated and difficult process and one that I'm looking at every week.

MR. WHITMAN: (Inaudible name.)

Q General, I wonder if you could talk a little bit more about what the military can do and will do to sort of help the government do some of this economic growth that you talk about. I mean, what sort of new projects or reinvigorated projects can the U.S. military help with?

GEN. CHIARELLI: We're in full partnership with the embassy and the provincial reconstruction teams, which we're standing up all over Iraq. We fully support those teams. They've brought a capability out into the provinces of Iraq and the governments and economic lines of operation that was sorely needed.

At the same time, although they have great civilian expertise working with them, they too are reliant on the United States and coalition military to assist them. Our civil affairs efforts are fully focused at helping the PRTs do the work that they need to do in the different provinces.

One of the things we're going to help do is use -- with the limited funding we have, to realize the true benefits of some of the large capital projects that we've completed.

It's great to have a water treatment plant that has the capability to take care of 100,000 people or provide water for 100,000 people. But for a very small investment, we can do the kind of focused look at these kinds of projects to ensure that they are providing up to their capability through the completion of distribution systems for water and electricity, which will have a tremendous impact of creating the real effect that we want from some of these projects.

So one of the things we're doing right now is checking all the what we call IRRF (Iraqi Relief and Reconstruction Funds) projects that are part of the \$18.4 billion supplemental, we're checking those projects out to see if their capability is fully being realized, and using CERP and other funds to build on those to provide real benefit in the area of basic services for the Iraqi people.

MR. WHITMAN: Gordon.

Q General, it's Gordon Lubold from Army Times. You mentioned the economy. What else tops the "to do" list for the central government as it's formed? And specifically, what in your view will the impact of the formation of the government have on the strengthening of the Iraqi forces, things like administrative issues with pay and stuff like that, how is that affected?

GEN. CHIARELLI: Well, it's absolutely critical, because once the economy gets going and revenues are realized, it will allow the Iraqis to support their forces in a way that to date they've been unable to do that. And I know that they're all committed to do that. This concept of ministerial capacity is absolutely critical. It's one thing to build a logistics system to move supplies, it's another thing to have all the necessary supplies required to support that force and be moved. And we're working very, very hard, and will work very, very hard in any way we possibly can to support the policies of the government of Iraq, which for the first time since I've been here will be able to concentrate on those kinds of policies rather than running for reelection, writing a constitution, or trying to put together a government. This is going to be a period where they can focus on the kinds of policy issues, policy decisions that are needed to get the economy up and moving ahead.

For those who have not visited Iraq, I think you just can't appreciate the tremendous capabilities of both -- of the Iraqi people -- and this is a land of great natural resources, of an educated population. And I just don't think it's going to take a heck of a lot, hopefully, for the new government to work the kind of policy decisions to get this economy up and moving in the direction it needs to so that we can employ people.

In areas where unemployment is the highest, as I go out and talk to people in those areas, and they tell me the one thing that you can do to lower the number of insurgencies is find jobs for the people. And we're committed to help both the Iraqi government and the PRTs as they go about the business of doing exactly that.

Q General, this is Jim Mannion from Agence France-Presse. I was wondering if you could describe the current trends in sectarian violence, and also what you've been able to do to get to the root of this problem of militia infiltration of the police and other security forces, or is that a problem that's going to have to await the new government.

GEN. CHIARELLI: Well, it's not a problem that'll totally await the new government. With the current government, we've been working policies, and the police transition teams are exactly that. That is an opportunity for us to get down to the lowest level and to work with the police on a daily basis, and that means everything in this culture and in this society, not teams that show up once a week, in part some training and then go away and come back, but teams that live almost 24-7 down to the local police stations helping the police go through a process that we use to analyze their current state of training and to recommend training programs for them and then to help execute those training programs.

As we do that, we're making a professional force that will be much less likely to be infected with the kinds of things that you speak of.

Q The trends -- current trends?

GEN. CHIARELLI: The current trends in infiltration of the police? Was that the question?

MR. WHITMAN: It pertains to -- if you can talk to the trends in sectarian violence that you see.

GEN. CHIARELLI: Okay, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. It's old age, and that memory starts to go.

I think we look at Iraq with two different lenses -- the lenses of the pre-Golden Dome bombing, a time when we weren't necessarily looking for sectarian violence; in the same way, in the post-period of the Golden Dome bombing, we've put on a different set of lenses. So it is dangerous to compare both the pre-period with the post-period.

However, I will not deny that we were probably wrong before in the pre-period and didn't see some of the sectarian acts that were taking place. At the same time, in the post-period, we have a tendency to call everything sectarian in nature. And I would characterize the period in the post-Golden Dome bombing as a period where we had high sectarian violence, or higher than we had seen before -- much higher than we'd seen before. It went down for a period of time, and in the last week or two weeks, we've seen it begin to move up again.

But there are accelerators to this sectarian violence that I don't think are always explained. And those accelerators are the actions of Zarqawi and his terrorists, who see this as a tremendous opportunity and a tremendous strategy that they can implement, that they can use to try to get Iraqis to concentrate on something totally different.

I think the good news is that we are not seeing Iraqis in neighborhoods picking up arms against each other. In fact, we're seeing watch groups, in some instances, stand up. They're very professional in nature. In other instances, they're not, and where they're not, we work to ensure that -- and the Iraqi security forces work to ensure that they conduct themselves properly.

But -- albeit we've seen an upward trend in the last couple of weeks -- we continue with our presence patrols, our joint patrols in the neighborhoods to give the people a feeling of security. And understand that Zarqawi and the terrorists will use this as a strategy, at least in the foreseeable future. And the key is for the government to show the people a better way of life so they can help us in stamping out these terrorists and let us know when they're working in their neighborhoods.

MR. WHITMAN: General, we've unfortunately reached the end of our time, and so I'd like to just turn it back to you, in case you have any final comments that you'd like to make before we bring this to a close.

GEN. CHIARELLI: No, I'd just say that we're all very excited about what we see happening in the next few days, in the next 100 to 200 days as the Iraqi government gets set and begins tackling these problems.

And I would argue that we will probably see the enemy take every advantage he possibly can in this period to try to destabilize that government as it goes about its business. But I have the full trust and confidence in the leadership of Iraq, the new leadership of Iraq and their ability to tackle the problems, and I have even more confidence in the Iraqi people and their desire for a free and democratic Iraq and moving on beyond this current period of violence.

So I thank you very much. Appreciate the opportunity to speak to you today.

MR. WHITMAN: Thank you, General Chiarelli.

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