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Presenter: Commander, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, Col. Michael F. Beech

**May 26,
2006**

DoD News Briefing with Col. Beech via teleconference from Iraq

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

JIM TURNER: Colonel Beech, this is Jim Turner in the Pentagon. Can you hear us?

(Pause.)

STAFF: (Off mike) -- nothing.

MR. TURNER: (Off mike) -- Turner in the Pentagon. Can you hear us?

COL. BEECH: Yes, I can hear you now.

MR. TURNER: Okay. We can't hear you. Can we try that again?

COL. BEECH: Yes, I can hear you. Can you hear me?

MR. TURNER: Yes, we can. Let's get started, then.

Good morning. Our briefer today is Colonel Michael Beech. He is the commander of the 4th Brigade Combat Team of the 4th Infantry Division. His brigade is comprised of approximately 4,400 U.S. service members, a battalion of Republic of Georgia -- a battalion from the Republic of Georgia, 2,000 Iraqi soldiers and police.

Colonel Beech is speaking from Forward Operating Base Prosperity in central Baghdad. And as many of you recall, you can see Colonel Beech, but he can't see you. So please identify yourself, your affiliation when you ask your questions, and remember there's a four-second delay.

Today's briefing is on the record. And with that, Colonel Beech, I'll turn it over to you.

COL. BEECH: Thank you, Jim. And good morning, everyone. I'd like to thank you all for this opportunity to provide you an update on security operations here in Iraq.

I'd like to start out with a brief prepared statement on my brigade, the 4th Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division.

We assumed responsibility of our area of operations as part of Multinational Division Baghdad about six months ago, on the 14th of January. Our area of operations consists of rural area, suburban area and densely populated urban terrain in the center of Baghdad. The religious, ethnic, cultural and societal makeup is very cosmopolitan, which provides us unique opportunity and challenges across all lines of operation.

The 4th Brigade Combat Team consists of seven battalions. We have a cavalry squadron, three infantry battalions, and soldiers, sailors and airmen providing us essential services. We also have a light infantry battalion from the country of Georgia. We are partnered with more than 2,000 Iraqi security forces.

Our sister Iraqi brigade has its own area of responsibility, and we have six national police brigades that we operate with daily in combined areas of operation in central and south Baghdad.

Our mission is to secure central and south Baghdad, to include the International Zone, as well as train Iraqi security forces.

We have made significant progress in the past month -- neutralizing terrorist threats, building capability within the Iraqi security forces and its new democracy.

We're conducting full-spectrum operations every day, including combined patrols and raids, training the Iraqi security forces and assisting with the development of the local government as well as helping to provide essential services.

The successful end state will be for Iraqi security forces to take the lead in counterinsurgency operations and to create an environment which enables the Iraqi government to establish the rule of law. They are stepping up with more pride and more confidence every day. They are earning the respect of the population which they protect. Because of the capabilities of the Iraqi security forces, we are not doing more with less, but we are doing more with more. The ISF know the people, they know the street and they know what right looks like.

Finally, I do not want to forget the Iraqi people themselves, who have proven to be proud and resilient. They have been through years of tyranny and they have been trying to build their new democracy over the past three years. They keep fighting for their right to live in peace and freedom. Their resiliency and their resolve make me ever more optimistic for the future.

And with that, it will be my pleasure to answer your questions.

MR. TURNER: Okay, let's get into it. Lita.

Q Colonel, it's Lolita Baldor with the Associated Press. A couple months ago you said that 60 percent of the capital was in the hands of the Iraqi security forces. Can you tell us what that is today? And also, can you tell us -- give us some sort of measure of how the Iraqi security forces are able to take over? Members of Congress were told just last week that they are not able to take over in any of the provinces.

COL. BEECH: Well, of course, Baghdad is a big province. I operate in central Baghdad and southern Baghdad. I'm partnered with the 5th Iraqi Brigade that operates on the Karrada peninsula and those areas just outside and to the north of the International Zone. Of course, the 5th Iraqi Brigade operates in its own independent area of operations.

We often combine and do operations together, as well as the rest of the 6th Iraqi Division that operates in Baghdad itself. The 6th Iraqi Division has two brigades operating on the north side of Baghdad in their own areas of operation. Now, we always often conduct combined operations where combined operations provide us our unique, own capabilities in order to best meet a particular situation.

Q But can you say how long it's going to be before you expect that they'll be able to take over on their own? And can you give us a comparison figure with the 60 percent amount you said in February?

COL. BEECH: Yeah, 60 percent back in February is about the same as it is right now. What's changed between -- when I last spoke in February is we have a lot more national police forces operating with me in southern Baghdad. As I said previously, I have several national police brigades that are operating with me in southern Baghdad as well.

Over the next three to four months, we're scheduled to have five additional Iraqi brigades operating. In the North, there's the 9th Division that is scheduled to be fully capable and assume battlespace not long in the future. But these are conditions-based, based upon their manning, their training, their leadership and their capability to conduct operations.

MR. TURNER: Will.

Q Sir, this is Will Dunham with Reuters.

The Marine Corps commandant's in Iraq to enforce to Marines the need to respect laws of war. One of the things that he's telling them is we do not employ force just for the sake of employing force. We use lethal force only when justified proportional and lawful. We follow the laws and regulations, Geneva Conventions and rules of engagement. I understand that you're not a Marine officer, but is that a message that you think that your troops need to hear and that all U.S. troops in Iraq need to hear, and why?

COL. BEECH: That is a message that applies to all forces operating across certainly my unit and all the units in Iraq. Of course, we always try to use the minimum amount of force necessary to accomplish our mission, and every soldier has, of course, the right to defend himself and his unit.

Q Colonel, it's Al Pessin from Voice of America.

On that same subject, and again realizing that you're not in the Marines, you're not in that part of Iraq where these incidents allegedly took place, can you talk a little bit about the pressure that's on the soldiers, especially when they find themselves in a situation where maybe an IED has gone off or they've been attacked by snipers, what the temptations might be for retaliation, and how you as a commander deal with that.

COL. BEECH: Well, of course our soldiers have the absolute right to defend themselves. And out on the streets of Baghdad even now it is still a very dangerous situation. Our soldiers -- the best way they approach every situation is based upon the leadership and the training that they receive before coming here, and the continued training that we undergo in order to maintain our skill sets. Our soldiers are provided with a wide range of equipping and tactics, techniques and procedures in order to address and mitigate -- to ensure they're able to defend themselves, while at the same time protecting innocent civilians' lives.

Q Is this something you specifically addressed with your troops in terms of not succumbing to temptation in their dealings with civilians, especially in the heat of battle?

COL. BEECH: No. Our soldiers are constantly reinforced with our rules of engagement, and to make sure that we're able to protect ourselves while protecting the civil population. We're here in Baghdad in order to

protect Iraqis, and that's our job and that's our mission and that's the focus of everything we do.

Q Colonel, this is Pam Hess with UPI. Is Adhamiya in your AO?

COL. BEECH: No, ma'am, it is not.

Q I will pass my question over.

Q Peter Spiegel with the Los Angeles Times. Back after the Samarra bombing, General Casey moved up a couple of the battalions from Kuwait into Baghdad for security purposes. We also heard last night that General Casey has met with the new prime minister to talk about security in Baghdad, specifically.

I'm curious if you can talk to us a bit about this. It sounds like Baghdad is -- I don't want to say getting worse, but certainly the security situation has remained a big problem. Is there anything that you guys are doing to deal with that, and how big a concern to you that it's not -- it's either getting worse or at least not getting better?

COL. BEECH: Well, what we certainly did not see after the Samarra mosque bombing was Baghdad degenerate into the civil war that we heard so much about.

It's what the terrorists would like you to believe, but of course that's not what's happening here.

We have a great opportunity right now, with the new government of Iraq taking charge here in Baghdad, with the inauguration just several days ago. And with that opportunity and the Iraqi security forces that gain in capability every day, that presents us an opportunity in order to neutralize this insurgency.

MR. TURNER: Jeff?

Q Colonel Beech, Jeff Schogol with Stars and Stripes. You mentioned you work with both Iraqi army and Iraqi police. Are you finding that your men often have to correct the Iraqi soldiers that they have to wear hard cover, they have to wear their IBA, they have to look down the sights of their weapons when they fire?

COL. BEECH: Well, training is something that we do every day with the Iraqi security forces, and all of my partner units are very different in terms of their level of training, their level of leadership, their manning and their equipping.

Of course, some of my units, like the 5th Iraqi Brigade, is as good as any U.S. force operating here in Baghdad. Other forces that are newly formed or are shorter or long on their training and leadership progression -- of course those are the units that we're focusing on, on our military transition teams and our police transition teams.

Q Quick follow-up. What are -- you're dealing with both Iraqi army and Iraqi police. There's been some times when these two sides haven't gotten along. What do you do to get IA and IP on the same page?

COL. BEECH: Well, of course, you know, I meet with my Iraqi security force counterparts every week, and we look at problems holistically, and we look at how we can partner to solve these problems. That and working with them together on the street every day is how we maximize our cooperation, bringing our unique capabilities to any particular problem.

Q Colonel, it's Nick Simeone at Fox News. We have a report that at least 26 al Qaeda have been captured in a town south of Baghdad, Mahmudiyah, and that a senior al Qaeda official has also been killed

there in a battle with U.S. and Iraqi forces. Can you talk about that, confirm it, or say what you know?

COL. BEECH: Well, Mahmudiyah is south of my area, so I hesitate to talk specifically on any operations that are going on outside my area of responsibility. But I will tell you every single day Iraqi security forces and U.S. forces are out after -- to neutralize and defeat the terrorists, wherever they find them. So this is certainly not -- wouldn't surprise me or is not unusual.

MR. TURNER: Jim?

Q General, this is Jim Mannion from Agence France-Presse. Can you tell me what the trends of sectarian violence are in your sector and whether you see any abatement of militia activity?

COL. BEECH: Of course sectarian violence is a big concern of ours. Again, our focus is protect the civilian population, Iraqi citizens themselves.

During the time period of April, in my particular area and in the area of Dora, I saw an increase of civilian murders and assassinations. It's often difficult to tell which ones are criminality, which ones are the result of terrorist activity, which ones are secular violence. But we saw a significant increase in attacks against the civilian population. We refocused our efforts, both the Iraqi security forces and U.S. forces, in this area.

I'm glad to say, over the last two weeks, by application of some new tactics and techniques, the numbers of murders and assassinations in this particular area have reduced two weeks in a row now. I think what we're doing is right on target, and we're going to continue to employ those techniques, as well as incorporate some others, to make sure that we can bring those attacks on the population down even further.

MR. TURNER: Pam?

Q Colonel, it's Pam Hess again from UPI. Would you talk in a little bit more detail about what you just told us in the Dora neighborhood? What was a normal level of violence there? What did it spike to? And what did your guys do? Was it simply a matter of presence or was there increased intelligence and more raids?

And then if you would as well, please talk to us about what you see with the militias. It's become shorthand here in Washington to say that, you know, of course the Iraqi security forces are infiltrated by militias. Could you give us your perspective on that? What does it all mean? What's it look like?

COL. BEECH: Well, what we saw in Dora in the April time period is certainly the insurgents and terrorists were focusing on attacking civilians. We saw the numbers range from anywhere, five or six murders a day. I think the worst day that I can recall was approximately 10 murders in one day, and that was certainly absolutely unacceptable.

We changed our tactics. It wasn't necessarily an increase in forces, but we were specifically targeting these cells that were preying upon innocent, unarmed civilians. We've had some success with that in the last couple weeks and I think we're going to have some success in the future.

Also, tied with that, our Iraqi security forces became absolutely critical to us in their coordinations, discussions and cooperation with the neighborhood advisory council and the district advisory council so that we could better focus on the problem. I think that was a big success.

As it applies to militias, what I would tell you is that I go after terrorists every single day, whether it's a cache, whether it's someone preying upon the civilians, whether it's a group that's attacking U.S. forces or our partners in the Iraqi security forces. And we go after these targets. And what type of membership card they

have in their pocket is really not important to me. Terrorism is as terrorism does, and we're out there prosecuting those targets every day to neutralize those people that are preying on these innocent Iraqi civilians.

MR. TURNER: (Off mike.)

Q Peter from the LA Times again. I'd sort of follow up on that point because I think a lot of the concern, at least what we hear here in Washington, is that the ability to identify those who are actually attacking the Iraqi security may be difficult, in that, particularly with the police, they've been infiltrated; you know, Jaysh al-Madi in particular, their influence in -- I'm not sure it's your AOR, but certainly in Sadr City and what not.

Can you talk a bit about that concern, that particularly in the police situation, there's been some infiltration by some of the Shi'a militia in Baghdad?

COL. BEECH: Well, certainly the minister -- the Ministry of Interior is focused on making sure that anyone who gained access to the Iraqi police forces that should not be in the Iraqi police forces is investigated, and those individuals that are conducting acts of terrorism are going to be captured and treated as terrorists. And I know that's a large part of what the Ministry of Interior wants to do. I know the prime minister, who spoke to all the Iraqi security force commanders just the other day, this is one of the areas that he highlighted with them.

Q And can you give us any granularity from your point of view? I mean, you have a direct interaction with the Iraqi police. Are the commanders you're talking to there concerned about this issue? Do you witness any of this going on in terms of the guys you're working with?

COL. BEECH: Well, I know the Iraqi security force commanders that I work with are concerned with this and intolerant of any extra-governmental forces operating within their formations.

Q It's Nick Simeone at Fox again. Based on everything you've said to us and what you know, do you think now is a good time to consider reducing U.S. troop strength?

COL. BEECH: I think right now we have a great opportunity. We have U.S. forces combined with very capable Iraqi security forces, and Iraqi security forces that are gaining in capability. We just had the first democratically elected government inaugurated just a few days ago. This provides us an opportunity. I think the insurgents -- this provides a huge problem for them. And I think we ought to continue our operations as we are now, partnered with our Iraqi security force brothers. And I'm very optimistic for greater success here in the future.

Q Colonel, Jamie McIntyre from CNN. Last night President Bush referred to additional forces from the call-forward force in Kuwait being moved to help secure Baghdad. Can you tell us any more about that, how many troops, and what's the idea behind it?

COL. BEECH: What I can tell you is that in my brigade I received about 700 additional forces, one infantry battalion, from the call-forward force. This came in the wake of the Samarra mosque bombing. Of course those forces were applied here, given battlespace within my area, partnered again with Iraqi security forces. And those forces have been doing an absolutely fabulous job conducting operations here in Baghdad.

Q Follow-up, sir. The president seemed to indicate that there would be additional forces moving in in the days to come from that same call-forward force. Are you aware of that, and can you tell us anything about it?

COL. BEECH: Well, I know that I, in my particular area of Baghdad, we are not scheduled or there's no

plan to increase the forces that are associated with my brigade.

Q Colonel, it's Luis Martinez with ABC News. The Marines are conducting two investigations into allegations of misconduct in Hadithah and Hamandiyah. I understand these are separate services, obviously, but are your troops aware of these investigations and have they affected morale in any way?

COL. BEECH: The morale of my forces is absolutely tremendous. When I talk to my soldiers on the ground they're absolutely committed to what we're doing here. It's really -- it's really reflected in our reenlistment rates.

When you look at my brigade, my reenlistment rate for this -- right now is 116 percent from my first-term soldiers. Those are soldiers who just came in the Army. They volunteered knowing that they were coming to Iraq. A hundred and sixteen percent of the soldiers that we needed to reenlist have now reenlisted and elected to stay in the Army. That's a tremendous thing, given that we are now in Iraq, in Baghdad in a pretty tough fight. So I think the morale of our forces is great.

Q If I could follow up, sir. With regards to these two particular incidents of possible misconduct against civilians, are you aware that there is talk about these incidents among your troops? Or is there concern among your leadership that it may affect the morale of the troops?

COL. BEECH: No, I would tell you that our -- again, our -- the forces that I'm command of and certainly the ones that I work with, the morale couldn't be higher.

I know that all our soldiers know they can take measures to defend themselves. They're confident in their leaders. They're confident in their training, and they have the best equipment in the world.

Q Hi, colonel. Gordon Lubold from Army Times.

With regard to training of Iraqi police and army, but specifically the police, are some of the administrative issues that were problems before -- have they been completely resolved? Or are they getting paid every week or regularly, or what issues are there?

COL. BEECH: Of course, every police station and every police district is not the same. Just like the Iraqi security forces, there are different stages in developing their capability; the same is true of the Iraqi police.

In some of my areas of operations, we have some police stations that are fully capable and ready to assume control of full civil authority in a particular area. I have other police stations that need more personnel, need more manning or they need work on the administrative side.

In some areas, there is administrative problems that are being addressed by their police training teams and being addressed by the Ministry of Interior.

Those problems still exist. They are not as widespread as they were six months ago, and they are getting better all the time.

Q Can you -- if I could follow up real quick -- could you just say how much of a problem is it now -- you know, if you can kind of quantify within your AOR how many police officers aren't getting paid regularly.

COL. BEECH: Well, what I can tell you of the 12 police stations that I operate with -- of those 12, we believe that the majority of those will be capable of conducting operations at -- you know, at a level where they can sustain their normal functions administratively within the next three to four months.

Some of the new soldiers, when they are -- some of the new policemen, when they first come on to duty at a new police station, those police officers often run into pay problems. But those pay problems are resolved, and they get on with it.

MR. TURNER: Jeff?

Q Colonel, Jeff with Stars and Stripes again. You were talking about the murder rate in Dura. You attributed these murders to insurgents. Can you say how you know for sure that these people were murdered by insurgents and not, say, militia or security forces? And are you running across bodies where it's unclear who might have murdered these people?

COL. BEECH: Yeah, again, we do run into situations where it is unclear. Certainly some of it is criminality. Some of it, we know, is terrorist activity. Some of these terrorist cells we have been able to neutralize. So we're addressing the full gambit of the threats that the population is facing in this particular area.

Q How do you know for certain that it's terrorists who have been killing these people?

COL. BEECH: Yeah, in some cases, absolutely.

MR. TURNER: Okay. I think we have time for about one more question. AI?

Q Colonel, it's Al Pessin from Voice of America again. You mentioned that you've been there about six months. Can you give us the six-month view in terms of the security situation in your area, the number of IED attacks, the number of deaths, the number of small-arms fire attacks? What's the trend line over the last six months?

COL. BEECH: Well, the trend line over the last six months -- of course December and the January time period, the trend line was low. We saw that increase during the time period of the Samarra mosque bombing. I think the actions that the Iraqi government took immediately following that was able to contain that violence.

We saw an increase in the April time period in both IEDs, small arms attacks. We've seen those attacks in my area drop off over the last couple weeks.

Since we've been here, we've found more than 125 IEDs out on the street of the over 330 that were in place during that same time period. The soldiers have been having success being able to identify the IEDs out on the street.

Small-arms fire continues to be a risk to U.S. forces. We've seen those attacks slightly go down over the last two weeks, where the previous months' trend has been an increasing trend.

MR. TURNER: Okay. I understand you have some closing remarks for us, Colonel Beech. (Pause.) Colonel Beech, I understand you have some closing remarks for us.

COL. BEECH: I would just like to summarize by saying what we've seen over the last six months has been a -- tremendous successes.

We've seen the Arba'in and the Ashura pilgrimage, which had been in previous years very violent times, those two events were done with a significant degree of security. We've seen in -- over the last year, in my particular area, what was just three battalions operating to a full brigade and two additional brigades operating in the northern Baghdad area. We've seen the first seating and inauguration of the new government. We did not

see a civil war, as most predicted. And we see the Iraqi security forces, that are gaining in capability, every day take a leading role in this counterinsurgency.

So I'm very optimistic for the future. I think the people of Iraq, as I talk to them on the street, I think they're very optimistic for the future.

I'd like to thank all of our friends, family members back home, the family members of our soldiers. Of course we couldn't do this without their love and support during this time period, and they're all our heroes.

MR. TURNER: Well, Colonel Beech, thank you for visiting us today in the briefing room, and we hope to see you again soon. Thanks.

COL. BEECH: Okay, thank you very much.

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