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News Transcript

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Presenter: John Tully, commander, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division

July 28, 2006

DoD News Briefing with Col. Tully from Iraq

BRYAN WHITMAN (Pentagon spokesman): Colonel Tully, this is Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon. Can you hear me?

COL. TULLY: Yes, sir, I sure can.

MR. WHITMAN: Very good. Well, thank you for joining us this evening. And good morning to the Pentagon press corps, as well as the large group of interns that we have here from the National Journalism Center who are here with the National Journalism Center program and working for news organizations throughout the town here.

Our briefer today is Colonel John Tully, who is the commander of the 2nd Brigade Combat Team 4th Infantry Division. He assumed command of that unit in May of 2005, but took the unit to Iraq in November of '05, and assumed an area of responsibility at the beginning of this year assigned to Multinational Division Baghdad. He has approximately 3,400 members of his brigade. And he's talking to us today from Camp Liberty in Baghdad and is going to give us a brief update of what his unit has been doing for six-plus months, and has agreed to take some questions from you then.

Colonel Tully, with that, let me turn it over to you.

COL. TULLY: Well, thank you. And good afternoon from Iraq. This is my second trip to Iraq, the first being 15 years ago during Desert Shield, Desert Storm. Many soldiers in the brigade are here for their second OIF rotation. My Brigade Combat Team deployed from Fort Hood, Texas, to Kuwait in the latter part of November, and then moved up into Iraq in December and assumed responsibility for several provinces south of Baghdad, that's Babil, Karbala and Najaf, and a very small slice of southern Baghdad province. In June, I assumed a larger piece of rural south Baghdad province along the Tigris River.

My area of operations is very large and diverse. The economy is primarily agriculture, based with concentrations of industry in some cities. The vast majority of the population is Shi'a, particularly in Najaf, Karbala, and southern Babil. Then, as you move north in Babil province, you enter what we call the Shi'a-Sunni fault line, and it's a solid demarcation line in the Sunni triangle, and it's a mixed area with Sunnis to the north and Shi'a to the south.

Finally, along the Tigris and Euphrates River Valleys in my area of operations, it is almost exclusively Sunni.

My BCT has approximately 3,700 U.S. Army soldiers deployed and living on four different forward operating bases stretching from FOB Duke in Najaf to FOB Falcon on the south side of Baghdad.

The BCT also includes some small but very professional and greatly appreciated attachments to include the Marines, Navy, Air Force, DA civilians and contractors.

I also operate with six Iraqi army battalions, approximately 4,500 Iraqi soldiers, and three of their respective Iraqi army brigade headquarters. I also assist with the training of a large Iraqi police force, approximately 28,000 Iraqi police.

In land mass, my area is approximately the size of Massachusetts and Connecticut combined, and the majority of my forces are concentrated in the northern part of my area of operations on the Sunni-Shi'a fault line and along the two river valleys.

Although I have many challenges, I can tell you I have more good days than bad days. We have made real progress in my area of operations, and I remain optimistic it will continue. Why am I optimistic? I have an extensive area of operations, and I could not accomplish the mission without the efforts of the Iraqi police and Iraqi army. I have to rely on my Iraqi partners. And training Iraqi security forces have been my main effort since we moved into Iraq in December, and we have made tangible progress, particularly with the Iraqi army.

Beginning in May, we started transitioning the lead for counterinsurgency operations to the Iraqi army. First, Najaf in May, then Karbala and central and southern Babil in June. The transfer of responsibility to the Iraqis has allowed me to shift some combat power north into the more volatile areas.

Along the Sunni-Shi'a fault line, I have avoided much of the sectarian violence experienced in other parts of the country, and I attribute that to several factors.

First, my battalion that operates in this area, 2-8 Infantry, has done tremendous work getting the Sunni and Shi'a leadership -- that's both community and tribal, the sheikhs -- to commit to the community, commit to a civic society vice a sectarian society by being tough when they need to be need tough, but helping generate jobs, train the Iraqi security forces, support the local government councils, treat Iraqis with respect. It has paid dividends. They have helped start an agricultural union, a co-op, and they have another one in the works in Iskandariyah, which is in the center of the Sunni-Shi'a fault line. We have helped generate approximately 350 jobs in an industrial complex. So 2-8 Infantry has generated hope in this town.

In [inaudible], which is along the Euphrates River, when we arrived, there was no coalition force or Iraqi security force presence, and the town was an insurgent safe haven. Now, 167 Armor, who has responsibility for this area, has established two patrol bases, and most important, a new Iraqi police station is under construction, almost finished, and we are on the road to having Iraqi security forces enforcing the rule of law. When we arrived, the town had maybe five small shops open. Now, they have over 50 and a new marketplace under construction. Again, we are generating hope through economic, political and security improvements.

American tax dollars have also improved the central services, with construction of water treatment plants, road repair, electrical distribution lines, new IP stations and Iraqi police equipment, new Iraqi army facilities and equipment, repair of schools, et cetera. However, this country was so neglected, it will take many years and billions of dollars to meet basic needs of the Iraqi citizens.

This is still a very dangerous country, and I don't delude myself into thinking that Iraqis will ever love us. But most Iraqis acknowledge they need us until they can get their house in order. It is important we see this mission through and help the Iraqis establish a stable democracy.

It is a very critical time right now, heightened by the sectarian violence. And as the four-year national unity government begins to assert itself and provide national leadership and governance, we must support the government of Iraq as they work solutions to the many issues facing this country.

And that's my opening statement. So if you have any questions, please fire away.

MR. WHITMAN: I'm sure we've got a few here, Colonel, and if we run out, we'll go to the interns, but I don't think we will.

Go ahead, Will.

Q Colonel, it's Will Dunham with Reuters. Understanding that you're not responsible for the entirety of Baghdad, I still want to ask you what changes in approach do you expect to see in security operations in Baghdad? Also can you tell us how many additional U.S. troops are going to the capital, and what's the current number?

COL. TULLY: Well, unfortunately, you know, I don't have any troops in Baghdad. The closest I have is on the southern outskirts of Baghdad in the Rashid area. So I only know what I've read in the Stars and Stripes today; that mentioned 4,000 U.S. troops and 4,000 Iraqi troops were going into Baghdad. That's what's in the Stars and Stripes. I don't know if it's true or not. But that's all I really know about it.

As far as a change in -- what the technique is, I think they, you know, from what I understand is they basically are going to increase the presence on the streets; you know, cop-on-every-block-type thing to get a handle on the sectarian violence that's causing all the problems in Baghdad right now.

MR. WHITMAN: Jeff, would you like to make a -- (laughter) -- Stars and Stripes.

Q Colonel, Jeff with Stars and Stripes. We actually have another story that'll be in today's addition with a little more information. Have you -- in your time in Iraq, have you seen a shift recently -- seen the Sunnis become a little more likely to engage U.S. troops and the Shi'a a little less likely to engage with U.S. troops?

COL. TULLY: Well, there definitely has been, after we arrived, a shift with some of the Sunni tribal leaders. We're talking to a lot of my battalion commanders and company commanders in the past when they had not engaged with us, and we saw that as a real opening to get them to lay down their arms and support the government of Iraq. We have seen some increase -- in my area, I have seen some increase in violence in the southern part of my area, which is predominantly Shi'a. So there has been openings in the Sunnis, and there has been some slight deterioration with the Shi'a.

Q To what do you attribute the -- what you call slight increase in violence in the south, and is it possible to quantify that at all?

COL. TULLY: I think some of the violence that I'm experiencing in my area is militia based, and I think that based on some arrests of some criminals that were associated with certain militia groups, this is pushed back from that.

As far as quantifying it, you know, maybe 25 percent increase in violence in the southern part of my area of

operations.

Q Numbers from -- I'm sorry. Can you put that into numbers; that is, from X attacks to Y attacks?

COL. TULLY: You know, maybe two more per week. Something along those lines. It's not a significant spike, but it's worrisome because I do have people operating on the roads. So it's not a huge spike, but maybe a couple more per week as far as attacks.

MR. WHITMAN: Lolita.

Q Colonel, it's Lolita Baldor with the Associated Press. Can you tell us whether you expect to play a role at all -- considering your proximity to at least part of your troops to the Baghdad area, whether you plan to play a role in the increased security in Baghdad? And considering the diversity of your region, are there concerns, do you think, that this increased military presence may fuel some of the insurgency that you have seen?

COL. TULLY: Well, as far as any role that I'd play, the only thing I can see my brigade doing is only a supporting role, and that is -- since I'm operating south of the capital, it's to interdict any kind of supply lines that are feeding the insurgency in Baghdad itself. Actual participating in the city against the -- with the efforts of this new initiative, I don't see my brigade playing any part of that. So it's really only a supporting role.

And I'm sorry, what was the second part of your question?

Q Considering the diversity in your region, do you see any concern that an increased military presence will perhaps fuel the insurgents?

COL. TULLY: I don't think so. You know, my experience working with the Iraqi people, when we go into areas that has not had a strong coalition force or Iraqi security force presence previously, the locals all say that they want increased security, they want safety for their families. So this is good. What they really want is, you know, a strong Iraqi police and a strong Iraqi army to provide the security, not necessarily the coalition, but they'll take whatever they can get in order to get safety for their families.

MR. WHITMAN: Jim.

Q This is Jim Mannion from Agence France Presse. Going back to the increase in violence you've seen in the Shi'ite areas, could you say what kind of violence that is? And also, are you seeing any indication of -- you were talking about interdicting routes into Baghdad. Any indication of an increase in weapons moving into Baghdad from the Shi'ite areas?

COL. TULLY: I don't have any indications of an increase. We only moved up into the Tigris River Valley in June, so I don't have a lot of historical knowledge on what may have been happening there previously. But I have not seen any kind of spike and increased smuggling of weapons and munitions moving into Baghdad.

As reference the attacks, you know the vast majority of the attacks that occur against my soldiers are the improved -- improvised explosive devices, the IEDs on the roads. That's the main threat to my soldiers, and that's the main thing that's caused casualties among the troops in my brigade. And that's across the board for everybody; IEDs is the main threat.

Q If I could just clarify, so when you were talking about the increase in attacks, you're talking about attacks by

Shi'ite -- Shi'ite militia-related attacks on U.S. forces? And if so, if that is what you're talking about, are you also seeing any kind of an increase in sectarian type attacks in those -- at least those borderline areas?

COL. TULLY: As far as the sectarian violence in my AO, there's been very little. There's been a couple of very horrific attacks down in Kufa, down in Najaf there was a couple of suicide car bombs down there that caused some pretty bad casualties. And that's a predominantly Shi'a area.

But in my areas in North Babil, that are the mixed communities of Sunni/Shi'a, I've seen very little sectarian violence. And things are more peaceful there than when we arrived in December. So that's pretty good -- that is a good-news story.

MR. WHITMAN: Mike.

Q Colonel, Mike Emanuel with Fox News. With news yesterday that some soldiers, not your soldiers, but some soldiers are having their tours extended and they're being redeployed to Baghdad, as an officer do you worry about the morale that it would have on those soldiers, your soldiers, to see tours extended to Baghdad?

COL. TULLY: Well, you know, a year is a long time over here and none of us look forward to being extended. But we all knew what the chances were coming over here. I know before we deployed in the 4th Infantry Division, we told everybody -- the CG, me, everybody told the soldiers it's a year-long tour but you got to be prepared to serve longer. And we don't like it, but we're soldiers and we do what we're told. And times like this is when leadership has to step up and drive on to get the mission accomplished.

Q Colonel, this is Sara Wood with American Forces Press Service. Along that same line, how would you categorize the morale among your troops?

COL. TULLY: I'd say that morale among my troops is very good. Based on the sensing sessions I've done and going around just talking to people, getting feedback from officers and NCOs, just talking to troops, morale is very high. They're very proud of what they've accomplished. They see that they're making a difference. And overall, I'd give us at least a B-plus in morale.

Q Colonel, it's Al Pessin from Voice of America. I wanted to follow up briefly on morale, and then I have another question. There was a story in the Washington Post, I think it was yesterday, quoting a soldier in a tank as saying that he feels like all he does is he goes out every day and waits to get bombed, and that that indicated that morale was not very good, at least in that area. And then this announcement can only have hurt it. So can you talk about the impact of this announcement specifically, and of the slight increase in attacks that you mentioned, on the morale of the soldiers?

COL. TULLY: Like I said before, you know, getting told you're going to spend more time over here will definitely be a blow. But, you know, the small unit leaders, the E-5 sergeants, have got to sit down and talk to their folks and explain to them, you know, why they're being extended, the importance of the mission over here. And, you know, we're soldiers and we do what we're told.

As far as the comment about the one soldier, you're going to have pockets of individuals in any unit that are unhappy, but you just got to do the best you can to keep soldiers informed, tell them the importance of the mission and keep folks motivated through just strong small-unit leadership.

Q increasingly difficult to keep them motivated?

COL. TULLY: Sir, I've not had that issue. I've not had that issue. It has not been increasingly difficult. We're doing okay. So far so good in the 2nd Brigade 4th ID.

Q Colonel, I'm Carl Osgood with Executive Intelligence Review. Are you concerned that the continuing high rate of violence in Baghdad itself might have some sort of spill-over effect into your area, especially along the Shi'a/Sunni area that you talked about earlier?

COL. TULLY: Clearly, that's a concern. Since I do have a mixed area, it's definitely a concern. And we're staying engaged with the local leadership, the local community leaders. I have very strong Iraqi police and Iraqi army presence in that area, as well as my troops staying engaged with local leaders.

And when need be, we're doing offensive operations to keep the insurgency off balance. That is definitely a concern, but so far so good in North Babil.

Q Colonel, Will Dunham with Reuters. Could you tell us specifically which militias you believe are causing the most problems in your area? You mentioned the slight uptake in violence in parts of your area of operations. Who's responsible for that?

COL. TULLY: Well, you know, that's kind of a tough question because, you know, first off, you know, we are not targeting militias in the AO. What we are targeting is bad actors; any kind of criminal elements that are attacking us or attacking Iraqi security forces or other Iraqis, local nationals. In some cases when we've targeted them, they've turned out to be, you know, Jaish al-Mahdi, you know, Mahdi militia. So Mahdi militia is a term that comes up the most frequently, but I couldn't generalize and say it's one particular militia over the other.

Q Just to follow up, do you think you're seeing a little bit of a power play by Muqtada al-Sadr?

COL. TULLY: It's hard to say at this point. I really don't have a good answer for you on that one.

Q Colonel, it's Jim Mannion again. There have been -- in recent months, I guess, there have been a number of high profile cases of civilian deaths as a result of actions by U.S. troops. I noticed that in your introductory remarks you talked about treating Iraqis with respect. How high a priority is this for you in your area? And if you can -- you know, what are you doing specifically, maybe in terms of the rules of engagement and that kind of thing, in order to avoid these kinds of incidents?

COL. TULLY: Well, it's been a very high priority since the very beginning. The -- when we first got here and started sitting down with all the local tribal sheikhs, both Sunni and Shi'a, what came out again and again in all the meetings was they want to be treated with respect. And we recognize that.

What are some of the things we've done to address it? Well, first off, the rules of engagement haven't changed since we've been here, so you know, we're following the rules of engagement. You know, soldiers always have the right to self-defense, and -- but we haven't changed the rules of engagement.

What are some of the things we've changed? We're less aggressive in our driving. We drive slower. We try to move with Iraqi traffic as much as we can, vice waving them off the road. We -- when we meet them and talk to them, we treat them as fellow human beings, equals in how we address them and how we deal with them. I'm trying to think of some of the other specifics. Of course, you know, we've all gone through values training recently reminding all the soldiers and ourselves what it means to wear this uniform. All those things kind of collectively have had the effect on better relations with the Iraqis in my area.

Q Colonel, it's Al Pessin again. The question I wanted to ask was, in your opening statement, you paint a pretty good picture of your area, and you explained how you've accomplished what you have accomplished by dealing with the local leadership, and, as you just said, treating people with respect. Why are you succeeding on those things when other parts of the country, including Baghdad these days, are not succeeding?

COL. TULLY: Well, part of it's demographics. You know, a lot of my area is Shi'a, and there's never been a strong insurgent foothold in the predominantly Shi'a south. You know, so you don't have those sectarian tensions in the south that you have in other places.

In my areas where it's a mixed area, you know, I've built on the progress that my predecessor units made, the 155 Brigade Combat Team, before them, the Marines. And I don't know if it's just good luck or good leadership, but 2-8 Infantry, 167 Armor, the guys that are in North Babil have made great inroads.

And maybe part of it is when my brigade arrived, we were one of the first brigades to go through the COIN academy training up in Taji. So we really got, you know -- at the company commander on up, we really had buy-in that you had to engage the locals, you have to get the locals to support their government to really break the insurgency.

So, you know, I don't know -- I don't think we've got any kind of secret Kool-Aid that we're drinking down there. It's just -- maybe just good -- lucky circumstances, and a couple of good battalion commanders have made a big difference.

Q You've had the values training recently to remind the troops. Is this part of an effort, as a result of the various abuse allegations that have come out -- is this kind of going across the country, retraining folks on proper conduct towards the local population?

COL. TULLY: Yes, sir. I mean, frankly, it was in response to the Haditha incident where we did the values training. But it's -- you know, it's a good thing to every now and then step and back and remind ourselves, you know, like I said before, what it means to wear this uniform.

And so that was mandated across the force, the values training, so we can avoid any kind of circumstances that -- well, like that again.

MR. WHITMAN: Just about at the end of our time here, and I just wanted to give the last couple of minutes to you, if you wanted to -- or had anything that you wanted to close with.

COL. TULLY: Well, first, thanks for allowing me to speak with you today.

I'd like to leave you with one thought, and that is you should be proud of your Army. Your Army is at war, and your Army is doing well. And my brigade is not unique. It's like every other brigade in the Army, and it's filled with remarkable, young men and women, soldiers who have volunteered to serve their country and are doing great work under tough circumstances. So we all appreciate your support, and thank you very much, and have a good morning there in the Pentagon.

MR. WHITMAN: Thank you, Colonel, and thank you for taking the time to share with us what your unit is doing. And we wish you the best and hope to talk you again sometime.

COL. TULLY: Good. Thank you. Take care.

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