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Presenter: Commander, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, August 18, 2006 9:05 AM EDT
Col Michael Beech

DoD News Briefing with Col. Beech from Iraq

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

BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Well, good morning, and welcome this morning. Let's see if Colonel Beech can hear us. Colonel Beech, can you hear us?

COL. BEECH: Yes, I can.

MR. WHITMAN: Okay. Well, we just observed you talking and then we heard you significantly after that. So -- other way around, actually. So we're going to -- it may be a tad bit awkward, but Colonel Beech has made himself available, and I'd like to try to press ahead, even though the technology is not cooperating as well as we'd like it to.

This is Colonel Michael Beech. He's the commander of the 4th Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division. And he's got nearly 4,000 U.S. service members and a battalion from the Republic of Georgia and various Iraqi and police units that are also working with his unit.

He's speaking to us today from Forward Operating Base Prosperity in central Baghdad. He did his transfer of authority back in January of this year, and so he's been there for a good amount of time. And he's going to start off by giving you a brief overview before we get into the questions. And we'll just move to work with the delay that we have here.

So, Colonel Beech, let me turn it over to you and let you go ahead and open it up.

COL. BEECH: Well, thank you, and I'm happy to have the opportunity to speak with you all again about my brigade and our operations as we work shoulder to shoulder with our partnered Iraqi security forces to secure central and south Baghdad. And if I may, I would like to read a short statement that I've prepared.

At the request of the Iraqi government, U.S. and Iraqi forces have been conducting combined missions in support of Operation Together Forward or, in Arabic, Operation Ma'an ila Al-Amam.

Operation Together Forward is an Iraqi government plan and an Iraqi-led operation. The purpose of this

operation is to reduce the level of violence in the Baghdad area, specifically, to significantly reduce the amount of murders, kidnappings and assassinations that have been plaguing the people of Baghdad. It's also to reinforce the Iraqi government's control of their capital city.

Our recent operations have been focusing on those areas that are most particularly violent. The plan calls for deliberately clearing these focused areas, all by protecting the population within these areas, and then a concerted effort in civic action and increase in civic capability.

Now, while security operations continue in this focus area, we also conduct intelligence-driven precision operations throughout my area of responsibility. Thus far I've been very pleased with the trends that we have seen, and let me explain why.

Over the past three weeks, the 4th Brigade Combat Team, working in partnership with Iraqi national police forces, have concentrated our efforts in the neighborhoods of Dura, which is in the eastern part of the Rashid district of Baghdad. The Dura suburbs, which have seen as many as 20 murders in a single day, is now secured by the 6th National Police Brigade of the 2nd Division.

There were recent actions that provided the level of security in Dura that enabled the local citizens to renew their daily lives while living in a sense of normalcy. As a direct result of their actions, we have been to advance our efforts, not only in security, but stabilizing Dura. We are successfully working with the Rashid District Advisory Council as well as the neighborhood advisory councils and other local leaders and religious leaders in the area in order to promote civic action within their communities.

As we speak, a huge cleanup effort is ongoing, where we're removing vehicles, debris and any reminders of the violence that the terrorists have imposed upon the people of these neighborhoods. With the assistance from my brigade, we are leading in the cleanup effort.

Along with providing essential services, our current plan makes provisions for long-term stability within this area. To ensure the population (that) is living in these neighborhoods knows who's responsible for securing them, we have worked to establish habitual relationships between particular Iraqi security forces, U.S. forces with a particular neighborhood. Each subdivision has been dedicating a particular national police company, along with a U.S. company, in particular Iraqi police patrols. This is in an effort to establish true community-based policing and security and build trust and confidence in the national police and the people that they protect.

Operations like this one in Dura will continue and are continuing throughout many districts in Baghdad, aiming to provide stability for the capital's most violent areas.

The security situation confronting the capital is a complex one, and the solution must be long-term. The Iraqi government, coalition forces and Iraqi security forces are dedicated to establishing peace in Baghdad. While we have seen progress and results from our training effort and our operations, we must set realistic expectations as we move on into the future. Ultimately, along with governance and economics, it will be the Iraqi citizens themselves who reject violence and cooperate and collaborate with the Iraqi security forces that will make this plan work.

And with that, I'd like to open it up to your questions.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you for that overview, Colonel, and we'll get started right here with Will Dunham.

Q Colonel, it's Will Dunham with Reuters. It's been a couple of months since the beginning of this operation to try to bring some order to Baghdad.

You mentioned some of the successes that you're seeing, but broadly speaking, the capital still has not been brought under order. Can you explain why a couple of months' effort has failed to bring the capital under order? And do you think that beyond the 172nd coming in, you need additional U.S. troops?

COL. BEECH: Well, to address your first question, we've seen significant progress over the last few weeks. This is the third week in a row that in the Rashid District we've seen three continuous weeks of downward trends in murders. In the Dura area in particular, in the month of July we saw as many as 73. In the month of August so far throughout the entire Rashid District, we've seen 11. And from the start of this clearance operation that's focused on the Dura neighborhood, we've seen only one murder since the 7th of August.

So I think we've been making significant progress. Overall in the last three months we've seen a general downward trend in attacks in my particular area. So I think we are seeing success.

We do see peaks in attacks against coalition forces, Iraqi security forces and the population, but generally we have seen a downward trend. I am particularly optimistic of the operations over the last two weeks.

Q To follow, the 172nd is coming into the Baghdad area. Do you think that that is sufficient or do you think additional U.S. troops beyond that are needed?

COL. BEECH: I could tell you in my area of operations I have sufficient forces for our task and purpose. We have just received an additional battalion, the 114 Cavalry from Fort Lewis, Washington. Those forces have been provided to me, along with the national security forces that I'm partnered with. And the forces that we have been provided are certainly sufficient in order to conduct the ongoing operations.

MR. WHITMAN: Lolita.

Q Colonel Beech, it's Lolita Baldor with the Associated Press. I think the last time we saw you you said that about 60 percent of Baghdad was under Iraqi control. Can you bring us up to date on how much now is under Iraqi control, and whether this new Baghdad effort has, because it's brought more U.S. troops in, whether there is now more U.S. involvement rather than less?

MR. WHITMAN: Yeah, that's an interesting question. I'll take the last part of that question.

When we conducted our recent operations to clear and protect those high-crime areas in the Dura neighborhood, to give you some perspective, I had one U.S. battalion in that particular operation. I had two national police brigades also directly participating in that focus area, each that came with two battalions of its own.

So two-thirds of the forces that are conducting operations in these focus areas, in my case, are still Iraqi security forces.

Q Just to follow up. Do you know how much of Baghdad is under Iraqi control at this point? And are they in the lead in any of these operations?

COL. BEECH: Well, certainly in the last operation that we conducted in Dura, the Sixth Brigade commander, General Karim, was certainly in the lead in operations. They provided the vast majority of forces conducting the searching of the homes.

We conducted the search of over 3,700 homes in the Dura area. The national police of the Seventh Brigade conducted the cordon, and we assisted in that, so certainly the national police are in the lead in these focus areas.

In a perspective from where we were several months ago, certainly the Sixth Iraqi Army Division, with its two brigades -- the Fifth Brigade and the First Brigade -- are still responsible for the training in northern Baghdad as well as its Second Brigade. We've had additional forces from the Iraqi army that have also been deployed into Baghdad from the Taji area. So certainly those forces are in the lead in their area.

We have a variety of security operations currently ongoing and planned for the future, as those are the ones that we continue to do in my area in Rashid in the Dura area.

Q (Off mike) -- of that 60 percent figure?

COL. BEECH: Yeah, I think that 60 percent figure is probably still about right, although there are additional forces in terms of operating in their own independent battlespace. I think that figure's still about right.

MR. WHITMAN: AI, go ahead.

Q Colonel, it's AI Pessin from Voice of America. You said the trend is going in the right direction in your area, but it was reported yesterday that the trend nationwide is up in terms of attacks against U.S. forces, especially IEDs, to unprecedented levels. Are you seeing IEDs in your area? And if not, why do you think your area differs from the national figures?

COL. BEECH: Well, I know IEDs in my particular area have been going down again over the last three months. We experienced 89 IEDs in the month of July. So far in August, we've experienced 36, only which two were effective in targeting U.S. forces. So not only has the number of IEDs gone down in my area, but their effectiveness has also gone down.

I think this is a combination of the targeting we're doing on the terrorist cells and insurgent groups.

It also reflects the increased presence of Iraqi security forces on the streets. And I think it also reflects well on the population and their trend in trusting and having additional confidence in the Iraqi security forces.

Q To pin you down on one other thing that you said in your opening statement, you said that we need to be realistic about our expectations. What are your realistic expectations about when the security situation in Baghdad can be brought under control?

COL. BEECH: That's a great question. And it's hard not to be optimistic. I walk the streets of Dura every day, and what I see is every day there are additional shops open that weren't there before. I see the Dura market has increased traffic and people in the Dura market shopping every day. The feedback that I get from people on the streets is absolutely very promising.

My interpreter, that's been here in Baghdad for three years, says that he has never seen the level of activity and normalcy in Dura that he has been seeing in the last week.

Now, this is all very promising, and it's hard not to be optimistic. At the same time, I've got to be realistic and know that we're going to experience days where we're going to have attacks and the terrorists are going to continue to try to inflict acts of violence on the population.

So we're looking for a long-term benefit of security where the population has the trust and confidence in Iraqi security forces. And this is why I'm optimistic.

Q (Off mike) -- like you feel that that trust and confidence is a key factor. You mentioned it twice.

COL. BEECH: I think it is. One of the indicators I use is how much the Iraqi National Police that are

patrolling these areas are getting information from the local population. I know the brigade commander himself has been getting more and more calls on his personal phone from the population. This is very encouraging. I see the imams at the mosques in the area talking to him more and more than they are talking to me. And I'm very pleased with the trend I see in the population's willingness to engage their own security forces.

MR. WHITMAN: Let's go over here to Mike.

Q Sir, it's Mike Mount with CNN. Can you describe a bit about the violence you're seeing in your section? Is it mainly sectarian violence or is this violence aimed at U.S. troops and Iraqi forces?

COL. BEECH: Well, for a time period we were concerned, in mid- to early July. We were seeing increased trends of violence against the population and Iraqi security forces while we were seeing the downward trend in attacks against coalition. And of course this was the most concerning thing, and thus the operations focused on clearing and protecting these locations where the terrorists were preying on the public.

You know, it's a tough thing. The Iraqi police the other day captured an individual on the road. They did a traffic stop because the automobile matched a description that we had given for a recent murder.

When they searched the vehicle, they found a Glock and a ski mask in the vehicle. An individual description matched who we suspected was the murderer.

And that's the kind of thing we're up against -- this senseless violence, the killing of innocent, unarmed civilians on the street. It's very hard to defeat, but we're making some good progress.

Q Can I follow up on that?

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead.

Q Obviously, the sectarian violence -- the news we're hearing is that that is, you know, really increasing, and it's Iraqi-on-Iraqi violence now. You're obviously not seeing as much of that in your section. Is there a reason for that? And are you preparing for an increase in sectarian violence in your region?

COL. BEECH: Well, over the last three weeks, we have seen a continuous down -- a continuous decrease in the amount of murders in the area that I'm responsible for. For the third week in a row, we're seeing lower numbers of murders. So that's a good sign.

Of course, we're always ever watchful, anticipating any acts of sectarian violence, and of course any spectacular attack could spur a series of reprisal attacks. And through our intelligence-based targeting, this is what we're trying to avoid -- this in combination with the Iraqi security forces protecting these key areas, where we know that violence has been the worst in my particular area.

MR. WHITMAN: Nick? Nick?

Q It's Nick Simeone at Fox News. Sir, what, in your view, is key to ending the sectarian violence?

COL. BEECH: Well, I think most importantly is the people's trust and confidence in the Iraqi security forces. Certainly there's these armed groups that pretend to protect the population and are killing innocent civilians. But if the people have the trust in the Iraqi security forces, and they'll contact their Iraqi security forces, collaborate and cooperate with them, then of course we can control the amount of sectarian violence that is occurring. So I think that's what key to our operations, as well as the civic action that we have ongoing with our protecting.

So it's clear -- clear these areas, protect the people and empower the citizens to have a civic action product that'll allow the people to have confidence in their government and in their forces.

Q Your said their chief reason why they do not have that confidence is because the security forces are infiltrated by militias, militia members?

COL. BEECH: Yeah, certainly that's a major concern, and certainly there are individuals within the security forces that are sympathetic or collaborative with these militia forces. But what's important is that the national police or the Iraqi police take action against those that they find participating in these militias and that they're protecting the people as a legitimate force of the government.

MR. WHITMAN: Alfred.

Q It's Al Pessin again. Colonel, can you give us an idea of how big your area is, the area where you're reporting this progress? And what do you hear from your colleagues in other parts of the city?

COL. BEECH: Well, my -- the Rashid District is estimated at about 1.8 million. In the Dura focused areas, which has been the focus of my security operations -- those were the areas where we saw the highest incidents of murder -- each mahala, or neighborhood, is anywhere between about 900 and 1,300 homes. We've been able to clear five of these mahalas, protect them, protect the population and then introduce civic action, so that gives you some idea of the scope.

In this clearance operation, in the first two weeks of this operation, we have cleared about 3,700 to 4,000 homes. The population in the affected areas were a little bit apprehensive at first as we placed restrictions on movement in and out of these areas, but as the operation continued, we saw that they were supportive of the operation and saw the needed benefits to the operation.

Q And what are you hearing from your colleagues who have similar responsibility in other parts of the city?

COL. BEECH: Well, those operations are ongoing, and they're ongoing across Baghdad. And again, some areas, they're having some very good success. In other areas, they're being a little bit more challenged, and that's really based upon the specifics of that area, and I really can't get more specific than that.

MR. WHITMAN: Will.

Q Colonel, Will Dunham with Reuters. Can you tell me the total number of U.S. troops in Baghdad right now and the total number of Iraqi government security forces? And could you compare that to the numbers that existed in the same areas a couple months ago?

COL. BEECH: I cannot. I can tell you I command about 5,087 soldiers that are assigned, attached or under my tactical or operational control. I can tell you that I work with three national police brigades; each one is approximately just over 2,000 soldiers in the brigade.

MR. WHITMAN: Colonel, if I can --

Q Oh, I'm sorry. I was -- (off mike).

MR. WHITMAN: Oh, I'm sorry. Go ahead.

Q Actually -- (off mike).

MR. WHITMAN: We'll come back to you, then.

Q A question about the success of the operation. You're saying that you're seeing successes right now, but Operation Together Forward's been going on for almost two months. What if these type of operations or actions that you're seeing right now had taken place much earlier during the operation? Would you may have seen a higher success rate?

COL. BEECH: Well, I've seen success rates in the tactics we're using right now, and we have had success throughout Operation Ma'an ila Al-Amam. Again, we had significant success early in June. We saw some spikes in some attacks in my area since then, and over the last three weeks to a month we've seen a significant downward trend.

And in the last two weeks, we've seen a significant drop in murders. So I wouldn't categorize this as you have. I would categorize this as the operation has been going well. Recently some changes in our operations which directed the focused operations in particular high- risk areas, in clearing those areas, in protecting the population, in civic action in particular areas in the city is what has had a dramatic effect over the last two weeks.

Q A follow-up, sir. Were those high-risk areas a target early on as part of the operation, or they have just now become a recent target?

COL. BEECH: Well, we saw some of the murder levels increase in the month of June in particular areas. We saw some spectacular attacks in these particular areas in terms of VBIEDs, or vehicle explosives. We saw the murder rate spike in particular areas. And that's why we targeted these particular focus areas.

MR. WHITMAN: Now over to Nick.

Q Colonel, it's Nick at Fox again. Do you feel that Iraq's leadership has done all they can and spoken out as often as they should against militias and in efforts to crack down on the militia violence?

COL. BEECH: Well, you know, Operation Together Forward is an Iraqi-planned operation. This operation was directed by the prime minister of Iraq. The planning efforts have been collaborative with the Iraqi security forces. Of course, Iraqi law is very clear. We've seen the prime minister himself speak out against militias. I think they've taken a strong stance that these forces will not be tolerated, that the proper and true constituted security forces of Iraq rest in the national police, the Iraqi police and the Iraqi army.

MR. WHITMAN: All right, let's do one more. Al, we'll let you close out, and then we'll turn it back to Colonel Beech to close.

Q Colonel, it's Al Pessin again. Do you have the forces and the command commitment to sustain this kind of operation over time? Because we've seen in other parts of the country where they do these clearing operations and then pull out, maybe leave some Iraqi police behind, and then the insurgents move back in, or in your case maybe the criminals or whoever they are.

Is there a commitment to maintain what you say you're building there?

COL. BEECH: Well, that's what's decisive about this whole thing. The clearance part of the operation isn't the most important. The most important is holding on to it and protecting the population. The national police forces and the Iraqi police are critical to this. This is a collaborative effort between U.S. forces and national police, and what we have to get is the support of the Iraqi people to trust their security forces.

And to me, once we have established those conditions, they'll be able to protect these people in their neighborhood.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, Colonel, thank you again for giving us some of your time and for giving us the perspective that only forces on the ground can have.

Let me turn it back to you to see if you have anything you'd like to say before we close it.

COL. BEECH: Yes. If I could, I just have a closing statement.

Let me close by expressing my pride at the performance of our soldiers and the service members that I command.

I'd also like to highlight the progress of the Iraqi security forces, with whom I work every single day. They're young forces. They're facing a lot of daunting challenges, but I'm -- continue to be encouraged by their performance and their dedication, Iraqi soldiers, police that demonstrate in the accomplishment of their mission every single day.

As their training and experience grow each and every day, Iraqi forces are showing their willingness to take the lead in security in Baghdad.

Let me add that with the best of leadership and equipment, and the full world-class training that our forces have had, a large part of our success comes from the support of our loved ones back home. In particular, I'd like to thank the family members and friends of our soldiers, with their support that they have given us, and their strength. I'd like to thank them very much.

And that's all I have. Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, Colonel, again, thank you very much. And we wish you the best, and hopefully we'll have an opportunity to talk to you again before your tour is up.

COL. BEECH: Thank you.

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