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Presenter: Deputy Director, Regional Operations, Joint Staff, Brig. Gen. Michael Barbero

August 23, 2006 1:30 PM EDT

DoD News Briefing with Brig. Gen. Barbero from the Pentagon

COLONEL GARY KECK (Press Office director): Good afternoon. Greetings. I'm Colonel Keck, the director of the Press Office. And it's my privilege today to introduce General Michael Barbero, who is the deputy director of the Regional Operations on the Joint Staff. He's been in that job for a few months now and has agreed to take a moment to have a discussion with you and give you an operational update on his area.

He has some opening statements he'd like to present, and then he'll take your questions. And without further ado, General Barbero.

GEN. BARBERO: Good afternoon, everybody. I would like to present just a short update on ongoing regional operations, and then, as was stated, I'll be happy to take your questions.

In Central Command, Operation Together Forward continues in Baghdad, and it's an Iraqi-planned and Iraqi-led operation. While it is still early, there are positive indications of the effectiveness of this operation in reducing sectarian violence. In Afghanistan, the pace of enemy and coalition operations has increased. Both the NATO International Security Force and the Operation Enduring Freedom coalition forces have been conducting operations in areas of Taliban concentration.

The NATO international -- international security force, ISAF, achieved stage three transfer of authority on 31st of July when it assumed the lead in Regional Command South. ISAF now has the lead for assisting the government of Afghanistan in the north, west and southern regions. The OEF coalition retains the lead in Regional Command East.

Forces assigned to Joint Task Force Horn of Africa are providing disaster relief to the flooding victims in Ethiopia. Navy Seabees provided temporary shelter for 6,000 victims of flooding in Dire Dawa. Also, a medical mobile training team arrived to provide medical treatment and support.

Elements of the USS Iowa Jima Expeditionary Strike Group and the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit recently completed their work evacuating nearly 15,000 American citizens from Beirut, Lebanon. This important mission was executed safely, securely, rapidly and without incident.

These units are returning to duty in the Arabian Gulf.

Today the responsibility for remaining humanitarian assistance missions and support to the U.S. embassy in Beirut was transferred from the commander of U.S. Central Command to the commander of U.S. European Command.

In Pacific Command, the U.S. Navy hospital ship Mercy is in the midst of a humanitarian assistance mission in East Timor, having completed similar operations in the Philippines, Bangladesh and Indonesia. In executing this important mission, Mercy has to date treated over 35,000 patients, performed over 800 surgeries and filled over 43,000 prescriptions.

Finally, on the 27th of July, approximately 3,700 soldiers from the 172nd Stryker Brigade were extended in Iraq for a period of up to four months. We acknowledge and are extremely grateful for the sacrifices made by these soldiers and their families in executing this critical mission.

In closing, I would like to recognize the tremendous sacrifices made by the soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines, especially those serving in harm's way. And the sacrifices of America's sons and daughters and those of the families make us all proud.

And with that, I'll take your questions. Please.

Q General, Lolita Baldor with AP. There's been some -- obviously the announcement yesterday by the Marines. There's been critics who suggest that this indicates that there's been no real progress, that there's -- the troops are stressed, and there's no real plan for victory in Iraq. Can you address that? And can you perhaps point to some discernible progress that you believe is being made, despite the fact that the number of troops are now going back up to where they were the middle of last year?

GEN. BARBERO: Right. Well, let me talk about the Marine Corps announcement. I'm not an expert in personnel issues, and it's a Marine issue. But the Individual Ready Reserve is a tool designed to fill the gaps. And this is exactly why it exists. Our active -- this allows the Marine access to the total force, the total force of active National Guard and Reserve.

When every young American raises their right hand and volunteers to serve in the armed forces, they understand that they have a period of active commitment and Reserve commitment. When I enlisted at 17, I understood that. That period is usually three years active and four years in the Reserves.

When you transition to the Reserves, you usually serve in a Reserve unit or go into the Individual Ready Reserve. This is how we fight our nation's war. What I understand this announcement to be is this gives the Marines the ability to involuntarily activate individuals from this Individual Ready Reserve, and that is why it is designed.

The Marines plan on using this to fill specific gaps or requirements as we fight this global war on terror. If they need a communications expert in a battalion, they'll go the Individual Ready Reserve and find the Marine with those skills, activate them, give them five months' notice and bring them on active duty to fill that gap.

First, they'll seek volunteers. If there aren't enough volunteers, then this is a tool that gives them the ability to access the total force.

Q But can you address sort of that -- when people see that and they look at the entire picture in Iraq, there are questions as to whether or not there's any discernible progress being made -- Senator McCain's comments last week that it looks like a game of Whac-A-Mole, where you just keep shifting troops around and then there's no genuine progress in there.

GEN. BARBERO: Right. Well, I think there is progress being made. Just this morning, the prime minister announced his firm belief that Iraqi forces will be able to assume responsibility in provinces this year and next year. I think you saw an announcement from the United Kingdom that they anticipate transferring responsibility in their provinces, and that would allow them to bring home some of their forces.

Our strategy is and -- is that once Iraqi security forces are ready to assume responsibility, we'll transfer responsibility and bring our forces home.

Our troop levels in Iraq are driven by two things: conditions on the ground and the requests of the commanders there, and we are providing those forces to General Casey and the other commanders in order to win this fight.

Please.

Q General, the Marines say they have been calling for volunteers, and this occurred after they pretty much exhausted that. Doesn't it indicate a certain strain on the force, though, three years into an ongoing conflict, that they have to do this?

GEN. BARBERO: Well, it's no secret that we're very busy. But a little historical perspective -- this tool has been used in the Korean War by the Marines and the first Gulf War -- OIF1, I think they had -- 7,500 Individual Ready Reserves were involuntarily activated, and they've used it throughout Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom.

So we are busy. And the reason that this tool was approved for the Marines is volunteers from the Individual Ready Reserve have declined in the last two years and because we're busy. And -- but this is what the tool is designed to do, is to forward the leadership the opportunity to access the total force.

Q And if I could just follow up on that. Does it say anything about the Marines' seven-year term, which is a little over half the Army's yearlong term -- or seven-month term, I'm sorry -- that they're coming to this stage?

GEN. BARBERO: I don't think so. We'd have to ask the Marines for that. But I'm not -- I don't think it makes a statement on that.

Yes. Tony.

Q General, what's your personal expectation as to what the U.S. troop level will be in Iraq by the end of this year?

GEN. BARBERO: Our intent is to draw down the number of troops. And as I said, that will be driven by the conditions on the ground and the requests from the commanders on the ground. Our job here on the Joint Staff is to support those commanders and to give them the access to the resources they need to win this very important fight.

Q You opened up by saying there are positive indications in reducing sectarian violence. Could you detail some of those? We heard yesterday that car bombs were maybe cut to about a quarter in the last month, the one thing I heard.

GEN. BARBERO: All right. Well, over the last five weeks, the number of incidents of sectarian violence have dropped steadily. Over the last three weeks, the number of attacks on infrastructure have dropped.

Q Do you have numbers on that?

GEN. BARBERO: I do not have the numbers.

GEN. BARBERO: Yeah, we can provide some of the numbers on some of the indicators, but I do not have the specific numbers.

I think the performance of the Iraqi security forces is an indicator. And I would cite the Shi'a pilgrimage this past week -- 1 million Shi'a pilgrims in Baghdad -- Iraqi security forces planned, coordinated, led, executed, and regrettably, there were seven casualties, but overall -- two years ago, it was U.S.-led, planned and executed. Last year, it was a joint operation with us in the lead, and this year, Iraqi security forces were clearly in the lead. And by all reports, to include Major General Thurman, the commander of the 4th Infantry Division in Baghdad, they did a superb job. So that's an indicator. And the performance during this Operation Together Forward, by all reports by all the commanders -- the Iraqi security forces have been very effective in this operation.

Yes, Jim.

Q General, if I can follow up. Is this a case, though, where there is progress in treating the symptom and not really getting at the cause? While the violence has been reduced, what progress has there been made in rounding up those specific death squads that have been responsible, either Sunni or Shi'a? And is there any progress or any intent to disarm the militias, including Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army?

GEN. BARBERO: There has been progress made. Operation Together Forward is targeted at the illegally armed groups and the death squads. And part of this clearing operation, started in the areas where the violence has been the greatest, has been to go in and either kill or capture those we think are responsible for death squad activities, and we've been doing that. And there has been a significant drop in sectarian violence.

The first phase of this was to stabilize the area with Iraqi police, bring in additional combat power, and now we're in the process of clearing it. And then we'll transition the security of Baghdad to the Iraqi police. So I think we have made success.

And it's a multi-faceted approach. It's not just going after the symptoms -- the death squads, as you're saying. There's an element of refocusing the Iraqi police from combat operations and improving their civil policing skills. It's a multi-phase operation that was described last week by General Peterson and is being led by General Dempsey and the Ministry of Interior. It is a process of bringing in civil works and economic development behind the clearing phase.

I saw a number where the government of Iraq has committed \$500 million to this and the United States government has committed \$130 million to this process. So it's a multifaceted approach to deal with the root causes and not just the symptoms.

Q Some of us were led to believe, however, that in the initial stages there would be no attempt to confront the major armed militias, such as the Mahdi Army. Is there an ultimate objective of disarming and/or actually confronting those militias, including the Mahdi Army?

GEN. BARBERO: The goal of this is to end the sectarian violence. And as we all know, the Shi'a and Sunni extremist groups are responsible for that. I don't think it would be appropriate for me to talk about which factions and timetable and how we're going to execute that, but that is the intent and purpose and the way we're going to execute this operation.

Yes?

Q Sir, you mentioned reconstruction, civil works projects. Have any of those begun? And what's the timetable for us to see some of that begin in Baghdad?

GEN. BARBERO: They have begun. And I do not have the timetable. This is a lengthy process. But I don't have a timetable for those projects.

Q Do you have examples of what they have started in the neighborhoods they've gone into?

GEN. BARBERO: I know one of the first projects is cleaning up the area and putting people to work and setting the conditions for economic development and then transitioning to the Iraqi police. But I don't have any specific examples. I think General Caldwell discussed a couple of those in his briefing yesterday.

Yes?

Q General, an Iraqi official said yesterday that in his view the insurgency in Iraq is fueled by the logistic support that comes in from Syria and Iran over the border.

Can you -- what is your view of that view? And what is your -- how confident are you in this development of the border police, which is -- appear to be the weakest link here so far?

GEN. BARBERO: Well, I know there's -- the border police are developing, and so it's a training issue with the border police, equipping and also building a border -- a system of border forts, and I saw a number yesterday. Several hundred of these forts have been constructed.

But you're right, there is a problem with foreign influences entering through Syria. Iran is definitely a destabilizing force in Iraq. I think it's irrefutable that Iran is responsible for training, funding and equipping some of these Shi'a extremist groups and also providing advanced IED technology to them, and there's clear evidence of that. And I think it's significant that this past week two Shi'a political parties spoke out denouncing Iran for being a destabilizing force and for causing and increasing the violence in Iraq, and I think that's significant.

Yes, Barbara.

Q Sir, when you say clear evidence training, funding and equipping, what does the current information tell you? Is that in fact the central government in Tehran?

GEN. BARBERO: I think it is a policy of the central government of Iran to support the Shi'a extremist groups in Iraq, yes.

Q Have you seen any evidence yet of Iranian fighters in terms of either their military, paramilitary, their al Qods Forces, any of those on the Iraqi side?

GEN. BARBERO: I have not seen any reports of any direct contact, but have seen reports of their involvement and presence there as trainers and to train these terrorists and Shi'a extremist groups.

Q Well, can I just follow up on that?

GEN. BARBERO: Sure.

Q How recently -- could you just make sure I understand what kind of (the ?) Iraqis -- pardon me -- Iranians are you seeing inside Iraq and how recently? And what were they doing? How recent was this? Where were they? What were they up to?

GEN. BARBERO: I do not have the exact timelines or examples, but the evidence that I've seen is clear, that it is -- that they have been involved in supporting -- direct support to these Shi'a extremist groups. They have

been involved in inciting the violence, the sectarian violence, but I do not have exact and precise examples to give you today.

Yes.

Q Besides border security, what should be done that is not being done to take the Iranian influence out of Iraq?

GEN. BARBERO: Well, I think that's a policy decision, and -- which is a little out of my lane. I know militarily my -- in the execution of this operation, to neutralize the Shi'a extremist groups will go a long way to removing their direct influence and to the affairs of the sovereign country of Iraq.

Yes.

Q General, the strains in the force, to what extent is that undercutting the ability of the U.S. military to respond in crises in other places?

GEN. BARBERO: Right. We remain capable of responding to our regional and global responsibilities, and let me give an exact example.

On the 11th of July when the violence started in Lebanon, we had no forces in the Eastern Mediterranean. On the 13th we received a request from Department of State to begin the evacuation of American citizens. On the 16th of July we started with helicopters to evacuate Americans from Beirut. Within a week, we had eight ships, 6,000 Marines and sailors, and we had built the capacity to evacuate in excess of 2,000 Americans a day.

So we formed that task force from units that were in the region, from several different commands, put in place a very effective command element, established a joint operation in the area, and we were able to rapidly respond to this exigent situation. So that's an example that we are still capable of responding to our regional and global requirements.

Q But General, if I could follow up, in that case you used Marines that were basically designated as call-forward force for Iraq, so it would seem like you are taking away from a capability that you needed in Iraq to --

GEN. BARBERO: No, I disagree. The 24th MEU at the time of this -- that Lebanon developed, they were ashore in Jordan conducting an exercise. And so we had to withdraw from that exercise, reload all their equipment, the Marines and move to the area. So it was not taking a force away from Iraq, it was a force that was involved in a regional engagement, in an exercise.

Yes, in the back?

Q Yes. Getting back to border security for a second, I know that we're working with the Iraqis on developing a counterinsurgency aircraft. How important is it that that development? And since that's not coming along for a couple years, give or take, what can be done between now and then that you can do or with the Iraqis to secure the border?

GEN. BARBERO: Well, as the Iraqi security forces develop, we'll continue to provide support as they develop and assume responsibility. Intelligence, communications, logistics, those areas aren't maturing as are combat capabilities. So I assume as we develop that and their border security forces take additional responsibility, we'll help them and assist them. And I don't have specific knowledge of the timeline for development of that aircraft, I'm sorry.

Yes?

Q General, do you feel like the corner has been turned in terms of the security situation in Baghdad? And if so, do you attribute that to more U.S. boots on the ground in the Iraqi capital? Or what's your read on that situation?

GEN. BARBERO: I attribute it to an Iraqi government that has committed itself to ending the sectarian violence, and I attribute it to the capability of the Iraqi security forces. Two-thirds of the forces on the ground in Baghdad are Iraqi security forces, and it's a commitment of the government, it's the political engagement, it's the economic and civil works projects. The military's merely setting the conditions for that.

But the feedback, the atmospherics from the population in the areas we've cleared are all very positive about removing the threat of this violence, the performance of the Iraqi security forces and their confidence in the government. So it's a combination of all those. It's a multifaceted approach.

Yes.

Q You mentioned that Iran has provided to date IED technology to the insurgents. Has some of this technology come into play in the rather dramatic increase in IED attacks that MNF-I released last week? The documented numbers from January through July have almost doubled in terms of attacks.

GEN. BARBERO: I wouldn't say that the Iranians are responsible for that. There has been a trend earlier this year of increase of IEDs. It's -- there has not been a change lately in that one way or the other. It certainly plays into that, the training and technology they've provided.

Q Well, sir, what do you take from the increase? I mean, the U.S. is spending billions of dollars to counter these things. When Zarqawi died, we were told the insurgency would somewhat diminish, yet these numbers of these -- basically, these bombings have gone up. I mean, does the Joint Staff see this as an indication that the insurgency is still pretty strong?

GEN. BARBERO: I think it's a confirmation of something we've been saying, that we have a very adaptive, intelligent, ruthless enemy, and they will adapt to our measures. And there's a saying at the tactical level -- the enemy has a vote. Well, the enemy in Iraq has a vote, too, and they're going to adapt, and we have to adapt along with them, and we have. And beyond that, I probably shouldn't talk about the IED threat or our countermeasures.

Sally?

Q Yeah, General, back to troop strength. You said you expect to see a drawdown by the end of the year. Is there a figure that you are aiming at? And has the recent operation in Baghdad helped that, help you get down or --

GEN. BARBERO: In Baghdad specifically, it's too early to tell. We just have some initial indicators, and after several weeks, we're not ready to make an assessment. But there is a process and throughout this effort of constant assessment and adjustments, and we -- our intent is -- as the Iraqi security forces become more capable and demonstrate the capability and we can transfer these provinces to control the Iraqi government -- to definitely bring down our troop strength, but that'll be determined by conditions on the ground and the requirements of the commanders on the ground. We're committed to supporting them.

Yes.

Q On the Marine IRR call-up, is that -- do you think that the active-duty military should be bigger? I

mean, you were talking about 1,200 Marines, like two battalions, and they're not exactly niche capabilities. It's combat arms, it's intel, it's MPs; it's stuff that you'd find in a regular unit.

GEN. BARBERO: Right.

Q I understand the notion of total force, but having that total force seems to indicate that it would just be temporary, and everything we're hearing about says because this is part of the long war. So does the active-duty military need to be bigger in order to shoulder the burden for the coming decade?

GEN. BARBERO: Well, I know that the Army has received authorization to increase their numbers, and I think the Marines have also. And that's really a service issue and discussion. I'm not prepared to talk about that at this time.

Yes.

Q General, can you tell us how many Iranian trainers are in Iraq or have rotated through in recent months or years and exactly what type of training they're doing?

GEN. BARBERO: I cannot talk about specific numbers and nor would I want to talk about the specific training that has been observed. But as I said, we are confident that Iranian -- Iran has a direct involvement in arming, training, equipping and funding these Shi'a extremist groups.

Q Can you give us some idea on both points? Are we talking dozens, hundreds, thousands? Are we talking IED training or infantry-type training or what -- just sort of general areas?

GEN. BARBERO: No. I probably -- it'd probably be inappropriate in this open forum to talk about that.

Yes.

Q Does that mean that the border needs to be beefed up, though, if this cross thing is happening as you say it is?

GEN. BARBERO: What it means is that Iraq is a sovereign government, and Iran should stop its actions to destabilize Iraq.

Yes.

Q As the situation improves in Baghdad, are you seeing similar situations in other provinces, specifically Al Anbar, or has that situation remained the same or gotten worse?

GEN. BARBERO: Well, I think the comments by the United Kingdom yesterday indicate that they're hopeful, and as things develop, that their planning to draw down their numbers of forces. So we see continued improvement of the Iraqi security forces, right now about 275,000. The numbers, the capabilities and the equipping increase continuously. I think Prime Minister Maliki announced today that they thought they'd be ready to assume responsibility for a number of provinces. So indicators are that the Iraqi security forces continue to develop, and that'll fit with our strategy.

COL. KECK: Time for one two more.

GEN. BARBERO: Okay. Yes.

Q You mentioned and discussed the Iranian influence. Can you characterize the Syrian influence, if

any, in Iraq?

GEN. BARBERO: As -- I can say is that we know that there has been crossings of the Syrian border of insurgents. I'm not sure if I can go much further than that.

Q Trainers also, or just insurgents?

GEN. BARBERO: Better not say. But there has been some cross-border traffic.

Yes?

Q Has the situation in Ramadi stabilized enough that "call forward" battalions that are there might be able to return to -- be redeployed elsewhere in Iraq?

GEN. BARBERO: What do you mean by the "call forward" --

Q Well, you know, the 1st Infantry Division, the 2nd Brigade, the ones that were in Kuwait at one point, that moved into Ramadi to help with that operation. Has that stabilized enough to turn that over to Iraqi security forces and move those -- I believe it's the 2nd Brigade of the 1st Armored Division.

GEN. BARBERO: Right. And I'm not sure of the exact plan in Ramadi, but as the situation in Baghdad stabilizes and as this operation develops and concludes, there will be a reassessment of the disposition of all of our forces. So --

COL. KECK: General, do one more --

GEN. BARBERO: Yes, one last question. Sure.

Q I just want to clear up what your assessment is about the security situation in Baghdad. You made some -- pointed out some successes. You were asked whether they'd turned the corner, but you didn't actually answer that.

GEN. BARBERO: Right.

Q And then you also said just --

GEN. BARBERO: I didn't -- I said it was too early to tell.

Q Well, then you just said it was too early to tell.

GEN. BARBERO: Right.

Q And that's that. Ambassador Khalilzad said the battle of Baghdad will determine the future of Iraq.

GEN. BARBERO: Right.

Q So what is your assessment? Do you believe you're winning the battle of Baghdad? Is it, as you said, too early to tell? Or --

GEN. BARBERO: Well, there are positive indications, and I think some of them are:

We have a central government, a national unity government, that is holding together, and it's committed

itself to ending this sectarian violence.

The institutions of national power -- the Iraqi army is on the streets of Baghdad, in Shi'a and Sunni neighborhoods, executing this operation. And that is encouraging.

When you had this Shi'a pilgrimage, you had Sunni soldiers out there providing security. And I think that's a good indication.

The battle of Baghdad, as you call it, is geographically isolated. So that's why we've surged forces and concentrated in that area. Ninety percent of the sectarian violence is within a 30-mile radius of Baghdad. Eighty-two percent of the incidents are confined to four of the 18 provinces. That's why Baghdad is so important.

This sectarian violence is not broad-based. It is Sunni extremists and Shi'a extremists conducting discriminate and indiscriminate murder to advance their goals.

So Baghdad is important. The indicators are initially that -- are positive. And we'll continue with the operation, and we are cautiously optimistic.

Q Would you ask them to please make available some statistics that back that up, thaup.

GEN. BARBERO: Sure. Sure. We can do that.

COL. KECK: Thank you, folks. Thank you very much.

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