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Presenter: Commander, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division, Colonel Robert Scurlock

**August 25,
2006**

DoD News Briefing with Col. Scurlock live from Iraq

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

COL. GARY KECK (director, Department of the Defense Press Office): Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I'm Colonel Gary Keck, as you know, director of the DOD Press Office. And it's my privilege this morning to introduce to you from Iraq Colonel Robert Scurlock, commander of the 2nd Brigade Combat Team of the 1st Armored Division. He's commanded the brigade since June of 2005, and they've been deployed for nine months into the AO.

The 2nd Brigade Combat Team includes approximately 3,000 U.S. service members and is participating with the Iraqi army and police units in efforts in Baghdad, I believe.

Colonel Scurlock is speaking to us from Camp Liberty. And as -- I want to remind you that although you can see him, he cannot see you. So when you ask your questions, please identify yourselves, so that he knows who he's talking to.

Today's briefing is on the record, and with that, Colonel Scurlock, I'll turn it over to you for any opening comments.

COL. SCURLOCK: (Audio break from source) -- for this opportunity talk to you today. I'm speaking to you from Multinational Division Baghdad headquarters at Camp Liberty, Iraq. I am Colonel Robert Scurlock, and I command the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division.

We deployed from Baumholder, Germany, in November of 2005, to Kuwait, and deployed to Baghdad in support of Operation Together Forward in late July, early August.

What I'd like to do first this morning is to give you a brief overview of our area of operations and our mission here in Baghdad.

The 2nd Brigade Combat Team's area of responsibility is western Baghdad, and it stretches east from the rural Abu Ghraib farmlands to the urbanized areas in Baghdad along the Tigris River. Altogether, with the Iraqi security forces, we operate in an area more than 300 square kilometers, and it is home to nearly 1.3 million Iraqi people.

This operation, both Iraqi-planned and Iraqi-led, is part of a larger effort across Baghdad to significantly reduce the amount of violence that was hindering progress in our area of operations. These particular neighborhoods, or muhallahs (sp), were selected by the government of Iraq because of the amount of violence seen in these areas in recent months and the propensity for continued violence without further action.

This operation is based on the strategy of isolate, clear, hold and build. In this case, once Iraqi security forces and coalition forces have isolated and cleared the area, together we hold the area and protect the people. We are accomplishing this throughout -- through our increased patrols with Iraqi army and police forces, to provide security in an effort to reestablish the normalcy in Baghdad neighborhoods.

Early on the morning of 13 August, soldiers from the 1st Brigade, 6th Iraqi Army Division, along with elements of our brigade combat team, cordoned off the neighborhood of Amiriyah and began clearing every residence and building in an effort to rid the neighborhood of murderers, kidnappers and terrorists.

Simultaneously, additional soldiers of 1st Brigade, 6th Sixth Iraqi Army and the 5th Brigade of the 2nd National Police Division, along with elements of the Alaska-based 172nd Striker Brigade, began their clearance operations of neighborhoods of Shula, Nuir (sp) and Ghazalia. These operations set the conditions for us to work with the local governments to get the essential services functioning again. We concentrated on trash and debris removal and getting stores and shops open once again. We are now helping the local governments to get these systems in place for the long term so the people of Iraq can have a safe place to raise their children, get back to work and to get back to a secure, normal life.

Since the end of the clearing phase, there have been isolated attacks on civilians, Iraqi security forces and coalition forces. These attacks are still fewer than the average we've seen in recent weeks. The enemy has realized the progress we're making, and is attempting to suppress our efforts. This will not deter us from assisting the Iraqi security forces in providing their citizens a secure environment in which to live.

We also continue to conduct intelligence-driven operations to continue to eliminate the terrorists and death squads. We will also continue to work with the Neighborhood Advisory Councils to provide assistance in order to give the Iraqis the essential services they require.

Ultimately, the only solution in Iraq is an Iraqi solution. The people of Baghdad will have to come together, reject acts of violence and support both their government and their security forces. The government of Iraq is committed to the fight against terrorists, and is committed to bringing a better way of life to all Iraqis. They have shown their commitment by asking coalition forces to assist their Iraqi security forces in securing Baghdad.

With that, I'll open it up to questions.

Thank you.

COL. KECK: Lolita?

Q Colonel, it's Lolita Baldor with the Associated Press. We've been hearing quite a bit over the last several days, particularly about progress that's being made in Baghdad. But can you give us any details on what the reduction in attacks is? Can you give us some sense of how many there were previously, what you're seeing now, a little more numbers, a little more detail?

COL. SCURLOCK: Yes. For example, in the month of July in Baghdad, there were 52 violent actions a day. And since the two weeks since we began the operations, the attacks have dropped down 41 percent.

An example also would be for Amiriyah. Prior to our operation taking place, there were 29 murders in the 30 days prior to operation; there have been three since the operation was completed.

COL. KECK: Pam.

Q Colonel, this is Pam Hess with United Press International.

Could you maybe explain what the strategy is there? From my understanding, Operation Together Forward doesn't do every neighborhood in Baghdad, but just select ones. I'm concerned that that has the effect of forcing those -- (word inaudible) -- violence into other neighborhoods. Is that -- is it an effect of -- or is it an effective strategy somehow?

COL. SCURLOCK: It is a very effective strategy because what it does is it shows the Iraqi people that their security forces, along with coalition forces, can provide a secure environment in a troubled area. For example, in Amiriyah, one of the most violent cities in -- within Baghdad, we were able to, along with the Iraqi security forces, cordon off the area, and then, showing the Iraqi people that their security forces, showing them dignity and respect, conduct thorough clearing operations to rid their neighborhoods of terrorists, death squads, illegal equipment, and we conducted a census. We registered illegal weapons -- confiscated illegal weapons, registered approved weapons, registered vehicles, and more importantly, was the interaction and the demonstrated professionalism of the Iraqi soldiers to the local population that provided that confidence that they can provide the security across Baghdad.

Q Colonel, this is Courtney Kube from NBC News. You mentioned that the enemy is attempting to suppress your efforts. Can you expand on that and give us specific examples of how they're trying to do that?

COL. SCURLOCK: Yes. For example, we work all our efforts through the local governments, their district advisory councils or neighborhood advisory councils. So we determine the exact needs of the people and where their priorities are. For example, two days ago, we were conducting one of these meetings, made tremendous progress, laid out a plan for the road ahead. And then on the way home, we had the head of the district advisory council receive threatening phone calls, and we had an assassination attempt on another one of the members.

So these courageous people are doing everything they can to provide for the Iraqi people, and it's those terrorists and death squads that are trying to deprive the Iraqi people of a safe and secure environment.

COL. KECK: Jeff.

Q Colonel, Jeff Schogol with Stars and Stripes. Your unit recently moved in from Kuwait. Do you know if your time in the theater began when you got to Kuwait in November or when you got into Baghdad recently?

COL. SCURLOCK: Our time began when we got in Kuwait, and our -- our mission is we are deployed for 365 days, our mission's complete, and there's been no change of that mission.

Q Colonel, hi, Gordon Lubold at Army Times. You mentioned a number of attacks. Can you quantify how many of the attacks in your area there are -- seem to be against U.S. troops or coalition troops versus violence just occurring in the area?

COL. SCURLOCK: I don't have exact numbers, but I would say it's probably about 30 percent against coalition forces, about 50 percent against Iraqi security forces -- that's either police or army -- and the remainder against civilians.

Q Can you quantify like how that's changed over the last few months? Or has it changed?

COL. SCURLOCK: I really don't have a frame of reference on that. I apologize for that. You know, just moving into the area, we began the operation on the 13th, that's my frame of reference. I'd be speculating, otherwise.

Q Colonel, Tom Bowman with National Public Radio. You keep saying that you're assisting the Iraqi security forces. Wouldn't it be more accurate to say that you're in essence in the lead, and that the U.S. military turned over much of Baghdad to the ISF, and quite frankly, you've gone in there to rescue them? What does that say about the confidence and ability of the Iraqi security forces?

COL. SCURLOCK: Well, first off, I disagree with that we came in to rescue them. Our attempt all along was to help develop a professional Iraqi security force, both army and the police. And they've come a long way.

Now, we did have a troubling trend of violence that was occurring in Baghdad, and the Iraqi government decided to call in additional Iraqi forces and coalition forces to stem that violence.

Now, working together with the Iraqis, it helps them to develop those skills and that professionalism. They're a young force, but they are making progress. And we are seeing great strides with the police, that are now partnered with our military police. They're teaching them how to interact with the people to do investigations. So the intent is to set the conditions in Baghdad where the Iraqi security forces can assume the security role.

COL. KECK: Jim.

Q Jim Mannion from Agence France-Presse. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about the death squads. And are they -- you know, what their sort of command and control is. Are they being directed from senior people in the militias or are they operating independently of the militias?

COL. SCURLOCK: We see most of the problems either coming from al Qaeda in Iraq, Sunni rejectionist groups, Shi'a death squads, criminals. Really we don't check what organization they're with. It may be radical elements of certain organizations, but there is no evidence that they're being really directed from anywhere at a higher level. I mean, there are different agendas out there and there are many people out there that are trying to counter our efforts and that don't want to see the Iraqi government succeed, and we deal with each one of them individually.

Q A follow-up?

COL. KECK: Sure.

Q Why is it that you're not interested in checking out who they're connected to?

COL. SCURLOCK: At my level we're using intelligence-driven operations to eliminate the threat. That is conducted at a higher level than I'm operating. Again, I operate at a tactical level and our operations are conducted based on intelligence we're given from other organizations.

Q Colonel, Jim Wolf, Reuters. You may have already answered this question. To the extent you say that there's no evidence that you've found that any of the forces are being directed from a higher level, but I want ed to ask you specifically about any Iranian involvement. Is there any evidence that you're finding of Iranian involvement within any of these forces that you're dealing with?

COL. SCURLOCK: In interacting with the different people, some of the things we've been told -- and again, this is coming from the Iraqi people -- is that since we began this operation, some individuals have fled to Iran, conducted training from Iran, have received equipment and -- to do us harm.

But in our area of operations, I have not seen any evidence of that.

COL. KECK: Pam?

Q It's Pam Hess again. Two questions. Could you sketch out for us the learning curve of your forces? You guys got in there after so long in Kuwait. What mistakes did you make in the beginning, or what have you learned in the last few weeks that's improving your operations?

And earlier to my question, you talked about one of the processes here is trying to develop the confidence of the Iraqi people in their ISF. Would you explain to us how you see that playing out? It's been my understanding that establishing that perception of security is the first step, and other things roll from there. If you could sketch that for us.

COL. SCURLOCK: Okay. Like I stated, we deployed to Kuwait in November, and we were held in Kuwait to be the Theater Reserve. We continued our training programs while we were there. We sent leaders reconnaissance up and operated in all different areas within Iraq, training with -- or operating with different forces that were already in Iraq. We put those lessons learned -- we continued to train on all the different systems and processes in Kuwait, so our soldiers were very well-prepared, had a lot of experience. About 40 percent of our force was in Baghdad last rotation -- correction -- previous rotation in 2003-2004, so a lot of people were familiar with Baghdad and operating in Baghdad.

We also deployed one of our task forces to southern Baghdad as part of Operation Scales of Justice in March, and then we deployed two task forces into Ramadi, and they're operating there with our 1st Brigade now.

So when we deployed the remainder of the brigade to Baghdad, we joined up with two task forces that had been operating in Baghdad that were familiar with the area, that had relationships already built with Iraqi security forces, and we were able to bring in the 123 Striker Battalion, who just came in from the 3rd Brigade of the 2nd Infantry Division, and we formed the brigade combat team that we're operating with now. The intent there is to operate in the western Baghdad area. We maintain those relationships. We learned the lessons that those forces had already put into place, and so there was really no major lessons that we had to learn as a brigade combat team. We pulled together the additional resources and surged forces in given towns to conduct these operations.

And I'm sorry. The second part of your question, please?

Q The notion of creating a perception of security is the first step in creating actual security?

COL. SCURLOCK: A lot of the problems are perceptions in Baghdad, the perception that the government may be favoring one group against another, that the security is only being provided in certain areas and being denied in others.

But by demonstrating first off that the Iraqi army can do very basic soldier tasks, can conduct thorough searches, can interact with the Iraqi people, can demonstrate that they treat everybody, regardless of ethnicity, with dignity and respect demonstrates that they are capable and that they can provide security in their areas.

So to have people in Amiriyah out playing soccer in the streets and opening shops and out picking up trash and assisting us in clearing debris in their streets, talking about the upcoming school season, you know, getting back to a normal life, it demonstrates that confidence that they have that things are getting better. And then, we assist the government in the local areas to gain those essential services. When they see that they can get their fuel for their generators to run the air conditioner or fan, when they see they can get medical help; they see the trash and the debris leaving their towns, and they see that the sewage systems are being taken care of; those basic essential services is a form of security in itself. And they see that the government and their security forces are providing that, and that's how we give that confidence.

COL. KECK: Nick.

Q Colonel, it's Nick Simeone at Fox News. How do you ultimately secure Baghdad if the Iraqi people don't trust the police?

COL. SCURLOCK: They are gaining that trust in the police. It's a different way of dealing with the police. It's a cultural shift because of the way the police operated in the past. Now, they're operating more as policemen. Now before they used to sit in their police stations and wait for calls to handle situation that happened; they were not trusted by their government. Now, they're doing policing functions. We've got the International Police Liaison Organization out there with them; we've got our military police out there. And now it's time that they show the people that they can do what is required of a policing force.

Q (Off mike) -- infiltration of Shi'ite militias. We hear that the Iraqi people are afraid of the police because they're

infiltrated by the Shi'ite militias. How do you solve that?

COL. SCURLOCK: Again, that is a perception, and that is a reality in some cases. And the Iraqi police, the Iraqi government, the Iraqi army is working hard to root out whatever infiltration is there, and there's no way you can deny that there is efforts to do that. The same in corruption in parts of the government. It's a young government; it's going to happen. And the government is actively pursuing rooting out those problems.

COL. KECK: Mike.

Q Sir, it's Mike Mount with CNN. For your long-term goals there for security in your AOR, for so often we've seen U.S. troops mixed with Iraqi troops go into these neighborhoods -- this is all around Iraq -- provide security, and you see the violence go down.

And then when the troops leave, the violence tends to pop back up, and you're kind of playing a game of Whack-a-Mole. What are the long-term goals you're seeing there to kind of prevent that from happening again in your AOR?

COL. SCURLOCK: A long-term goal is that we set the conditions where the Iraqi security forces can handle the security in their area, that it's at a level that, based on the amount of Iraqi police and Iraqi army forces that are in the area, they can handle those spikes of violence.

To this point -- again, it is a very young force. It's still a force that's equipping. It's still a force that is getting the basic logistic systems in place. But they're making progress every day. And our goal is to get them to a level where they can assume that security role by themselves, and they're getting there. And the government is gaining their confidence that they can do that.

COL. KECK: Tom?

Q Colonel, Tom Bowman again with NPR. You said your AOR is 300 square kilometers, 1.3 million Iraqis. What's the total force there, Iraqi and coalition, and how has it increased over the past several weeks for this recent violence?

COL. SCURLOCK: Oh, we've got about 3,500 coalition forces and about 5,000 Iraqi security forces. That has increased -- it's about doubled in the -- since we've got up here. All right? And that's had a tremendous impact. We've been able to concentrate forces in given areas to handle the different problem spots.

Q Thirty-five hundred -- that number is -- so roughly 4,000 before the surge, correct?

COL. SCURLOCK: Correct.

Q Four thousand troops for 1.3 million Iraqis? Is that sufficient?

COL. SCURLOCK: With the Iraqi police that's also operating there, I believe it is. And again, it's -- the Iraqi people are also participating in the security effort.

COL. KECK: Jeff?

Q Colonel, Jeff with Stars and Stripes again. I just want to go over the figures you gave us. You said violent attacks in Baghdad were at 52 in July, and now they've decreased 41 percent? So that it puts it down to, what, 31 a day?

COL. SCURLOCK: Yeah, I believe that's right.

Q (Off mike) -- neighborhood -- is that 29 per day or 29 per -- per --

COL. SCURLOCK: That is violent actions across all of Baghdad. Not my AO.

I'll use the example of Amiriyah again. Prior to the operation there were 29 murders. There have been three since the operation began on 13 August.

Q Murders. Is that per day or is that since when?

COL. SCURLOCK: Since the 13th of August. The 29 was the 30 days prior to the operation.

Q Colonel, Carl Osgood with Executive Intelligence Review. Part of -- what I'd like to know is what are the logistics capabilities of the ISF that you're working with? What is their ability to support themselves without backup from U.S. combat service support?

COL. SCURLOCK: They are working through the systems. And one of the challenges, there's a fuel shortage across the country, and getting fuel to the right locations, to the right forces has been an issue. Getting the systems across the different ministries. Being able to funnel the money and the supplies to the units. They've been -- we've been doing very well on getting the appropriate vehicles and equipment to the Iraqis, and now we are training them in how to maintain that equipment, how to account for it. Property accountability is an important part of being a soldier, and they're actively pursuing that, as well. They interact with our soldiers on training on the equipment. So there is a lot of progress and just the basics of taking care of equipment that our soldiers are demonstrating and they're picking up as they operate alongside us.

COL. KECK: Gordon.

Q Colonel, hi. It's Gordon Lubold at Army Times again. If in fact the ISF is in the lead in some places and you're assisting and are coming behind, can you just walk us through how you help them -- your people help them plan a particular operation? If they make a decision prior to an operation that you think is not a good idea, do you guys say "Whoa, whoa, bad idea" or do you let them fail or succeed on their own? Can you walk us through an example of that?

COL. SCURLOCK: Yes. We work to coach them through to come to the right solution. They have a lot better understanding of the area, the culture, the people. They can achieve a lot better intelligence by interacting with the people. For example, if we had an IED cell operating on a given route, and they looked at it as they wanted to put checkpoints out around to observe that site. That's a very obvious technique, but it may not allow you to interact with the people there and figure out who the cell is. It may scare the cell away. So we may coach them into, through the planning process, how to defeat that IED cell.

A lot of it is the interaction. And, you know, they're coming along in their planning process. They've got some very competent leadership. So a lot of it is just the interaction. And we help them understand how you do the analysis of the intelligence you're getting.

We provide them questions to ask to help refine their intelligence. So it's really working together to come to the right solution.

COL. KECK: This is the last one. Luis?

Q Luis Martinez with ABC News, Colonel. Sir, would you characterize this current operation as an active counterinsurgency operation? And how would you distinguish it from your previous operations that took place prior to it taking place?

COL. SCURLOCK: I think it's definitely a counterinsurgency operation, and it's based on the government of Iraq's concern of the -- that increasing violence. They wanted to get a secure Baghdad, so they can move on and provide those essential services and that governance that the Iraqi people need.

And it is an attempt to get the Iraqis in the lead, in charge of security, where they can do it independent of the

coalition forces. And that's where we're headed. And I think it's taking effect. It's having a definite change, and you can see it across Baghdad.

I was in Amiriyah yesterday with General Abizaid, and he was walking around on the main street, talking to store owners and asking them their opinion of what's going on in Amiriyah, what's going on in Baghdad. And their concern was more about electricity than security.

So I would say it's having a definite impact. The people are gaining the confidence, and I think we're making progress. I remain cautiously optimistic, but we are making progress, and I think we're going to succeed.

COL. KECK: Colonel Scurlock, we sure appreciate you taking time to be with us today. I will turn it over to you for any final comments.

COL. SCURLOCK: Okay. Thanks, Gary.

I do appreciate the questions, and I appreciate you taking the time today to talk to us about this important operation.

I'd like to close by telling you that from what I've seen in the past two weeks, like I said, I am cautiously optimistic. We've seen the security situation in Baghdad improve, but we cannot give -- we cannot gauge the change in the two weeks that we've seen this operation progress. Success in Baghdad will not happen overnight. Over time, with the Iraqi security forces providing security and the government of Iraq providing leadership and the essential services required, Iraq will be a peaceful and prosperous nation. We must remember to be patient. These things do take time.

I'd also like to take this opportunity to thank the soldiers and our families back in Germany; to the American people, for their continued support; and to the men and women of the 172nd Brigade Combat Team from Alaska. A year away from home, from your loved ones, is tough, but the professionalism that the soldiers of the 172nd Stryker Brigade have displayed has been tremendous, especially tough after this extension, which serves as a motivator for all of us.

Again, thank you for your time and for your questions.

COL. KECK: Bob, we hope to hear from you again.

Thank you all.

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