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**Presenter: Commander, Iraqi Assistance Group, Brig. Gen. Dana Pittard      August 28, 2006 10:30 AM EDT**

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**DoD News Briefing with Brig. Gen. Pittard from Iraq**

(Note: General Pittard appears via teleconference from Iraq.)

BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Public Affairs):  
General, can you hear me?

GEN. PITTARD: I can.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, welcome. This is Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon, and I have a distinguished group of Pentagon reporters here in the room that are anxiously awaiting to ask you some questions.

Our briefer is Brigadier General Dana Pittard, and he is the commander of the Iraq Assistance Group. He did previously command a brigade combat team in Iraq, in 2004 and 2005, and is going to give you an update on the military transition teams that are embedded with the Iraqi army. And to give you an overview, I think we'll just open it up to him and then take some questions for you, once he's had an opportunity to provide you with a general overview of what his command is doing.

So, general, with that, let me turn it over to you.

GEN. PITTARD: Okay. Well, thank you very much.

Again, my name is Dana Pittard, and I'm the commander of the Iraq Assistance Group. And the Iraq Assistance Group has oversight over all the embedded transition teams, so the advisers, throughout Iraq. We have border transition teams, national police transition teams and military transition teams.

And our major mission is to help develop and support the Iraqi security forces, and of course to advise them.

And from the time that I left Iraq last year to now, the difference between then and now is like night and day with the Iraqi security forces.

The embedded transition teams are truly making a difference here in Iraq.

Another additional mission that we have with the Iraq Assistance Group is the partnership, with the partnership unit for the national police. And that's the national police which is in -- primarily in Baghdad; 26 battalions of the national police.

So at this time, I'll open it up to any questions anybody has.

MR. WHITMAN: Very good. We'll get started here, then.

Lolita.

Q Hi, general. It's Lolita Baldor with the Associated Press. Could you -- you're saying it's like night and day. Could you give us a more specific sense of the changes in -- particularly the equipping of the Iraqi security forces? We were -- we understood a while back that they really did not have a lot of logistical support and a lot of their equipment. Can you give us some specifics about what they have now, how well-equipped they are now and what it is they need?

GEN. PITTARD: Sure. When I left in 2005, there were two Iraqi army divisions that were just kind of being created. What we see today is 10 Iraqi army divisions, numerous brigades and battalions that are part of those brigades.

Now, as far as the equipping of the Iraqi army, that's actually done by the Multinational Security Transition Command, General Dempsey -- and I know you've heard from him before -- and the mission of that element is to train, equip and man the Iraqi army.

What we do as advisors is we take those Iraqi army units and advise them in the field. It's more of the execution phase. The Iraqi army, for the most part, is fairly well-equipped. There are some areas that need assistance, and that's in their logistical system.

Q Can you be a little more specific about what exactly -- what types of equipment they need and what types of equipment or logistical support they need?

GEN. PITTARD: Well, from the logistical support side, the areas that at least that we are focusing on are just basic sustainment: sustainment of fuel, sustainment of ammunition, their medical supplies and their maintenance. Those are the key areas that we're focusing on with the Iraqi security forces.

MR. WHITMAN: Pam.

Q Sir, this is Pam Hess with United Press International. Could you address two things for me?

One of the phrases we hear come out of you guys a lot is that the Iraqi forces are in the lead.

What exactly does that mean? I have a hard time believing that U.S. forces in joint ops would follow Iraqi forces if they didn't agree with what it was that they had decided to do. So what exactly does it mean to be in the lead? I've got to assume there's American handprints all over whatever plans they come up with.

And the second question is, could you talk to us about the situation with the national police? Lots of folks from Baghdad have confirmed that they seem to be infiltrated with militias. What are you seeing? What's the extent of that infiltration? Is it an organized infiltration or is it just sort of a hangover from the fact that there's so many Shi'ites in the force?

GEN. PITTARD: Sure. I'll answer the first part of the question first. But with the Iraqi army lead, what's meant by that is Iraqi army units -- and primarily I'll talk about Iraqi army divisions that are in the lead -- have their

own area of operations, where in the past they were within a coalition area of operations. Now, the Iraqi army, at least those divisions that are in the lead, have their own battlespace, and that's an area of their own to operate in, in which they coordinate obviously and the coalition forces are in support of that. That's an a -- Iraqi army in the lead, and we've seen quite a bit of that. Five of the 10 Iraqi army divisions right now are in that Iraqi army -- in the lead process. They're at that point right now.

As far as the national police, the national police is about 70 percent Shi'a, 30 percent Sunni. Now because of that and where they are in Baghdad, there are some elements within the national police that are probably from the militias. But we're in support of the Iraqi government as they try to get rid of those militia influences in the national police.

MR. WHITMAN: Michael.

Q Sir, Michael Gordon, New York Times. There was a media report a few days ago that there was an Iraqi unit, I think it was the 2nd Battalion of the 4th Brigade of the 10th Division, which was with the British, and I think, in the Amarah area, which refused to deploy to Baghdad to participate in the current Operation Together Forward. That was -- there was a number of media reports on that. Did that in fact happen? And have there been any cases where Iraqi units have declined to deploy to Baghdad to participate in the current Baghdad security plan?

GEN. PITTARD: That was in the -- the 2nd Battalion of the 4th Brigade of the 10th IA, or 10th Iraqi Army, was in Maysan. Now, there were some soldiers, I think it was about a hundred, that said that they would not deploy as a part of the operation. A decision was made -- or decision is going to be made whether or not that battalion will actually deploy.

What's tough right now is the Iraqi army for the most part is a regionally based unit. The majority of this particular unit was Shi'a, and they felt, the leadership of that unit and their soldiers, felt like they were needed down near Maysan in that province. Now, that will be worked out by the Iraqi government and the Ministry of Defense, and we'll be in support in that.

Q So just to clarify, there was indeed this case where a hundred soldiers declined -- indicated they wouldn't go to Baghdad. This is now as a result that unit may not deploy to Baghdad. But have there been any other cases like that, or is this the only case in which soldiers have refused to go to Baghdad?

GEN. PITTARD: It's only the second case that I knew of. There was another case of the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Brigade of the 2nd Iraqi Armored Division -- not Armored Division -- Army Division -- that was up in northern Iraq that was to go and deploy with the U.S. 1st Brigade, 1st Armored Division to Ramadi. A number of the members of that unit ended up not deploying down to Ramadi. That's the only other case that I know of like that.

MR. WHITMAN: Tom?

Q General, Tom Bowman with National Public Radio. If we could stay on this subject for a little while, what does that tell you if they're refusing to go up to Baghdad and they're saying they want to stay in their own area? I mean, clearly they don't see themselves as being part of a national army. How do you read that?

GEN. PITTARD: What it tells me is that primarily the Iraqi army has been a regionally recruited organization, which really means if you are from a particular area, that's where you're recruited from, and that's where your roots are, that's where you trained, that's where you've operated. And now as other units are asked to go to other places, it becomes more difficult because for many of those soldiers, they just thought that they would be operating in their homeland areas, their regional areas. So that is something that's got to be tackled by the Iraqi government.

Q You said they thought they were just going to be operating in their own area. Were they told that or did they believe that? How did that occur? Because clearly, when you're creating the Iraqi army, it's a national army, it's not a regional army. How did they come to that?

GEN. PITTARD: Yes, the Iraqi army is supposed to be a national army. But as I mentioned, they were recruited regionally and for the most part they've been operating regionally. So that's there the difficulty is, and that's going to be worked out by the Ministry of Defense and working with the Iraqi commanders. And again, we're in support of that. Now, our transition teams have been a big part of that development in assisting the Iraqi army into becoming a national army.

MR. WHITMAN: Courtney.

Q General, this is Courtney Kube from NBC News. Just on this same topic still. Were there any repercussions for these soldiers?

And how, as advisers -- I mean, how are you teaching Iraqi army leadership to deal with soldiers refusing to deploy?

GEN. PITTARD: Well, right now that situation with the 2nd Battalion, 4th Brigade, 10th Iraqi Army is still under investigation, so I think it's really too soon to tell as far as what actions are to be taken in that regard.

But I'll tell you that the transition teams are absolutely behind the Iraqi security force units that they train with. And again, I invite all of you to join us and visit some of our embedded transition teams.

Q But, general, presumably, the American transition team advisers are trying to teach the Iraqi army that they need to work as a cohesive unit. So how are you teaching them when you have examples like this? What are you doing to reinforce that?

GEN. PITTARD: Again, there are more than just American transition teams. There are coalition transition teams from throughout the coalition that have been provided as far as embedded transition teams, and the emphasis is to make them as professional of a force as possible. The cooperation that you see in some areas -- in many areas throughout Iraq between the Iraqi army and the Iraqi police, a lot of that has to do with the transition teams, again, working closely with their Iraqi security force counterparts to help them cooperate with each other.

Q General, it's Luis Martinez with ABC News. There was a report today of a major firefight down in Diwaniyah, south of Baghdad, involving Mahdi Army and elements of the Iraqi army and Iraqi police. Supposedly, the Iraqi police elements did not engage the Mahdi Army and left the post, leaving only the Iraqi army to continue the fight. Can you provide any specifics about this engagement? And what does it say about the professionalism of the force if they're not continuing to engage?

GEN. PITTARD: Well, I was just down in Diwaniyah just two days ago, and I was conferring with our transition teams and the 8th Iraqi Army Command. From what we saw and what we know of the actions that have taken place down there is that the 8th Iraqi Army and -- working closely with the Iraqi police -- repelled the attacks of the insurgents down there in Diwaniyah. There was some tough fighting that went on, but the -- I think the Iraqi army did very well.

Q But how -- sir, if I could follow up, what about the Iraqi police elements that reportedly left the position to then engage the Mahdi Army militias?

GEN. PITTARD: Remember how -- as we look at stability in Iraq in the future and what the end state is, the end state is normal law enforcement duties will be done by the Iraqi police. If there's something that the Iraqi

police cannot handle, then they'll call either the national police or the Iraqi army. And we saw that as an example in Diwaniyah. We had a situation that was beyond the at least initial capability of the Iraqi police, so they called in the Iraqi army. The Iraqi army and the Iraqi police together, as a force, repelled the insurgents. I think that's a good-news story.

MR. WHITMAN: Dave.

Q General, this is Dave Wood with the Baltimore Sun. How many embedded advisers do you have each with the Iraqi national police and the army? And could you describe in some detail their operational responsibilities with the police? In other words, who's calling the shots on those police operations?

GEN. PITTARD: Okay. We actually have hundreds of embedded transition teams throughout the Iraqi security force formations, from battalion-level organizations -- and a battalion is about 500 to 600 Iraqi soldiers -- to a brigade-size element, which has three to four battalions, to entire divisions, which have three to four brigades. As far as with the national police, the 27 national police battalions, we have national police transition teams with all of them. The size of the national police -- the basic size or general size of our transition teams is about 11 to 15 personnel on them.

I think the rest of your question was, "who's calling the shots?" Well, that depends on the status of the Iraqi security forces; depending on if the Iraqi security forces are in the lead or not. But again, Iraq is a sovereign nation, and for the example of the national police, the Ministry of Interior, which has oversight of the national police headquarters, actually calls the shots. Our transition teams are advisers.

MR. WHITMAN: Peter.

Q General, Peter Spiegel with the Los Angeles Times.

A bit of a follow-on to that question. Focusing now on the military transition teams, can you give us -- you said hundreds. Do you have a specific number of the number of U.S. personnel, U.S. soldiers, involved in the MiTT teams now, as opposed to, say, you know, six months ago, and give us a trend line? Is that likely to increase?

And also, this has been going on for some time now. Any lessons learned you guys have developed over the last year or so since you began using these MiTT teams, and things you're doing differently now than perhaps you were doing a year ago?

GEN. PITTARD: Yeah, that's a good question. In fact, if you look at all the transition teams throughout Iraq, it's well above 3,000 coalition soldiers, Marines, airmen and Air Force personnel that are involved with that.

This time last year, the transition teams, for example, were taken out of major commands, and major commands throughout the military were told, "You need to provide this number of teams." And they were trained at different locations throughout the United States and Europe.

Now that has changed. The seriousness that our Army, the seriousness of our military establishment, the seriousness that they're taking on this mission -- they feel about this mission can be seen in what we've done with one of the 10 combat divisions in the Army. The 1st Infantry Division, one of our 10 combat divisions in the Army, has been re-missioned to train transition teams at Fort Riley. Fort Riley, Kansas, now is the transition team training center of the United States. Now teams from the Army, Navy and Air Force are trained there. Marines are still training at Twentynine Palms. But we've now reduced the locations of the training to just two locations.

And I'll tell you the training model there at Fort Riley -- and you need to -- you should visit Fort Riley -- is a 60-day training model that truly trains these teams to become advisers. We didn't see that six months ago. The

first teams to go through Fort Riley went through June 1st. Our first teams that have arrived in Iraq after going through that training cycle just arrived two weeks ago. And what a difference they're making.

Now, that's not to take anything away from the teams that have been here in the past, because they have made a huge difference with the Iraqi security forces. But I'll tell you, in the future, we're excited about the teams and the training that's going to be taking place here in Iraq. They'll just be better-prepared teams.

Q I'm sorry. And that 3,000 number you said in the beginning -- was that for all training teams, or is that just military?

And can you break that up between military police and border?

GEN. PITTARD: That's really all transition teams -- border transition teams, military transition teams, police transition teams, national police transition teams, and there is this -- a host of other transition teams that are throughout the Iraqi security forces. But it's more than 3,000 military personnel.

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

Q General, it's Mike Mount with CNN. Over I guess the last period of months, senior Iraqi government leaders have said that Iraq is ready for U.S. troops to pull out; sometimes, they've been saying within months. They're fairly rapid timetables. Your troops have been obviously working with Iraqi forces. Do you think these calls are justified? And if not, how long do you think these troops still need training? How long do you think that U.S. troops should still be in Iraq?

GEN. PITTARD: You know, obviously that depends on the operational situation. But I'll tell you, the progress that we're seeing with the embedded transition teams is, as I've said before, is really making a difference.

Now, U.S. forces will be here as long as the Iraqi government wants us here. But I'll tell you, with the transition teams and the advisors -- after the majority of U.S. forces leave, we'll still see some level of advisory teams that'll still be here. In fact, I feel like we'll be the last men standing at the end of the U.S. presence here.

MR. WHITMAN: (Off mike.)

Q Andrea Esa-Shalal with Reuters. To follow up on my colleague's question, what is your -- just to sort of get at this issue of the future of the Iraqi forces and what kind of a timetable -- do you have goals in mind for how -- you know, certain criteria, milestones that you want to accomplish with these embedded transition teams on the road to being able to pull out the transition teams? And can you give us a timetable for us?

GEN. PITTARD: I can to an extent. It's, again, situationally based and operationally based. Our goal is to increase the readiness levels of all formations at all levels. Ideally, when a readiness level reaches a certain level, that advisory team will then no longer have to be with that unit.

Let's take the example of a 600-person battalion in the Iraqi army within a brigade of, say, three battalions. If the training level or the readiness level of one of those battalions reaches a certain level that the Iraqi government, the Iraqi military and coalition forces are satisfied with, then that advisory team can be moved. However, there will still be advisory teams with other formations within that same brigade. But that timetable is based on the operational capability of the Iraqi security forces.

Q Bryan --

GEN. PITTARD: When you look overall at -- well, if I could finish on this one, September 1st is going to be

a big date. It will be the first time that an Iraqi army division will no longer be under the tactical control of the coalition forces. The 8th Iraqi Army Division will come under the command of the Iraqi Ground Forces Command. That is a key element in a timetable that eventually will include all 10 of the Iraqi army divisions under the command of the Iraqi Ground Forces Command and not the coalition forces.

MR. WHITMAN: Did you want to follow up?

Q I just wanted to follow up. The question, I think, is, you know, there are these calls by Iraqi officials that their forces are going to be ready for U.S. forces to pull out within a period of a couple months, or yesterday there was a quotation of, like, 12 months. Is that a realistic goal from your perspective on the ground and inside these troops, both in terms of the readiness, in terms of the training, but also you mentioned, you know, logistical gaps that still exist? Is that achievable? Is that a doable goal?

GEN. PITTARD: If your question is should coalition forces leave in the next couple months, my answer is no, I think that's premature based on what we see on the ground.

MR. WHITMAN: Gordon.

Q General, Gordon Lubold, the Army Times. We were told fairly definitively last week that there's concern about cross-border activity with Syria and Iran. We don't hear a lot about Iraqi border patrol, and as I understand, it's a fairly layered approach. But can you characterize what's going on with your folks out there? And are you confident that though this whole thing is a work in progress, that the Border Patrol is where it should be now?

GEN. PITTARD: Our border transition teams are working, obviously, very closely with the border regiments and the Department of Border Enforcement. If you look at all the Iraqi security forces and the timetable and priority as far as equipping and manning, the Department of Border Enforcement was one of the last elements really to get the equipment and the manning necessary. So they're really still a work in progress.

The Department of Border Enforcement is doing a credible job along the different borders of Iraq. I was just up on the Syrian border just about 10 days ago, near Sinjar, and what I saw of the Iraqi border regiments, they were doing a very good job. And our border transition teams embedded in them are certainly assisting them in many ways. I believe that the transition teams on the border will continue to make a huge difference there.

Q What kind of equipment do they need on the -- in those areas that they don't now have?

GEN. PITTARD: It -- different pieces of equipment. Now they just -- many of the border regiments have received communications equipment, and that's made a difference. We still need to work logistical -- the Iraqi army -- correction -- Iraqi security forces will still need to work some of the logistical supporting elements that need to be in place to make sure the border regiments are supported, such as fuel and food, in some cases.

MR. WHITMAN: We've got time for about one more. How about somebody that hasn't had a chance? Pam has been trying to get in. I hesitate to go to you for your three-part question. (Laughter.) If you can make it one and a half, we'll finish with you.

Q I can.

It's Pam Hess from UPI. Would you sketch out for us, in as much detail as possible, where Iraqi security forces stand as far as level one, level two, three, four, maybe by percentages of battalions or by divisions?

And would you also tell us how many provinces do you think will be handed over to Iraqi forces by the end of the year? I think the Iraqi government is talking about nine more.

GEN. PITTARD: I would tell you that the readiness level right now of the Iraqi security forces is a credible level. Would the Iraqi security forces and coalition forces like to see it higher? Sure. And I think we'll see that. We'll see that over the next couple months and over the next year.

What was the second part of your question?

Q Provinces. And can you be more specific about where units stand, readiness lies; how many are at one, two, three, four?

GEN. PITTARD: As far as provinces, obviously we have Muthanna province. That is the first province with provincial Iraqi control, as we call it. We expect to see a couple more provinces over the next couple months.

But as far as readiness levels, as you know, that's something that is between the coalition forces and Iraqi security forces. And that's the kind of information that you really don't want the insurgents to know.

But I -- again, I'll tell you that the -- generally that the levels of readiness are very credible. And they will increase over the next couple months and over the next year.

Q Can you clarify where this 8th Division is?

MR. WHITMAN: I think you just asked.

Q Okay, sir, can I just -- where is this 8th Division? Where is it located, the one that's going to be under Iraqi ground forces command?

GEN. PITTARD: Yes. The 8th Iraqi Army Division is located in the -- what we call the central south area of Iraq, al Kut area and Diwaniyah.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you, general. And thank you for being gracious with your time this morning, and we appreciate the update that you've been able to provide to us. We wish you the best and hope to have you back again.

Is there anything you'd like to close with before we bring it to an end?

GEN. PITTARD: Well, first of all, thank you for your time.

But I invite all of you to come to Fort Riley and see the transition team training that is taking place now. It's a world-class training center that's been developed at Fort Riley. Then, I invite you to come to Iraq and see our embedded transition teams. They are truly making a world of difference with the Iraqi security forces, and these are small teams. Like I said, there are 11 -- 10-to-15-man teams that are making a huge difference, and I invite you all to come to Iraq and embed with them.

Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: Thank you, General.

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