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**Presenter: Commander, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, Col. Thomas Vail**

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**DoD News Briefing with Col. Vail from Iraq**

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

BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Well, good morning, and welcome. Good afternoon to Colonel Vail. Colonel Vail, can you hear me? This is Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon.

COL. VAIL: I can hear you. Good morning.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you for joining us this morning. This is Colonel Thomas Vail. He is the commander of the 4th Brigade Combat Team of the 101st Airborne Division. He's commanded that brigade since July of 2004, and his unit includes approximately 4,000 infantry, armor, artillery, cavalry and support troops.

The brigade also works closely with about 15,000 Iraqi security forces in and around Baghdad.

He's speaking to us today from Camp Liberty in Baghdad. And sticking with our normal format, we'll turn it over to him to give us an overview, and then we'll get into some questions.

So with that, Colonel Vail.

COL. VAIL: Okay. Thank you for this opportunity.

I'm speaking to you from Multinational Division Baghdad headquarters at Camp Liberty, Iraq. I'm Colonel Tom Vail, commander of the 506th Regimental Combat Team, which is the 4th Brigade, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault). We deployed from Fort Campbell, Kentucky, in November 2005 to Kuwait and on to Iraq to assume the east Baghdad area of operations in early January 2006.

What I'd like to do first is give you a summary of our mission.

East Baghdad stretches north and east from Salman Pak in the south to the urbanized areas in Baghdad along the eastern side of the Tigris River. Altogether, with the Iraqi security forces, we operate in an area of about 1,600 square kilometers. And it's home to nearly 5 million Iraqi people. More than half of that area is lightly

populated countryside.

We have over 30 battalions in our area, both Iraqi security and coalition forces.

Our current mission is Operation Together Forward. Both Iraqi-planned and Iraqi-led, it is a part of a larger effort across the city to significantly reduce the -- and hinder the activity that's going on in Baghdad. Particular neighborhoods, or mahalas, were selected by the government of Iraq because of the amount of violence seen in these areas recently, and a propensity for continued violence without intervention.

This operation is based on the strategy of clear, protect and build. For this method, 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 through our increased patrols with Iraqi army, national police and Iraqi police to provide security in an effort to re-establish normalcy in Baghdad neighborhoods and increase the trust and confidence of the Iraqi people.

Early on the morning of 27 August, soldiers from the 1st Brigade, 9th Iraqi Army Division and 2nd Brigade, 6th Iraqi Army Division, along with elements of our brigade combat team, cordoned off a portion of Adhamiya and began to rid the neighborhood of murderers, kidnappers and terrorists. Elements of the Alaska-based 172nd Striker Brigade are performing clearance operations in partnership with the Iraqi army forces in Adhamiya. These operations set the conditions for us to work the local government, continue to secure Adhamiya and focus on the essential services.

Our leaders have met with the local officials to determine requirements for security and services, and we're concentrating on trash and debris removal, power generation and medical support. In addition, our civil affairs teams are assisting with the reopening of shops and stores. We are now assisting the local governments, through their district councils, to get these functions in place for the long term so the people can have a safe place to raise their children, return to work and get back to a more secure, normal life.

The initial cleanup effort is ongoing. We're removing abandoned vehicles, debris and ensuring that traffic can flow safely through these neighborhoods. Yesterday, multiple contracts for essential services provided jobs for 686 workers, 37 dump trucks, eight front end loaders and other support assets which resulted in 74 truckloads of garbage removed from the area.

Yesterday, we delivered over 1,700 humanitarian assistance meals through their fire station and district council and 50 power generators to the Adhamiya District Council for distribution.

For medical support, Iraqi army doctors and medics will provide three special medical clinics and provide basic health care services and screening for the lower-income residents of Adhamiya. Our medical personnel will assist them, and assessments are planned for the ministry of Health facilities to identify their need for staff, supplies and equipment.

The commander of our 506th Brigade Special Troops Battalion attended the Adhamiya District Council and met with representatives of the ministry of Electricity in Usafa (sp) District to discuss solutions for long-term electricity problems in Adhamiya.

While civil-military operations continue, we maintain an offensive spirit against anti-Iraqi forces. We continue to conduct intelligence-driven operations to eliminate the terrorists and death squads. Our soldiers have liberated more than 20 kidnap victims and detained many of the kidnappers just recently. We have also captured six of our top 10 most wanted terrorists over the last two months, which disrupts their leadership. This is all part of a larger plan to provide a better future for Baghdad.

In the end, an Iraqi solution is best. The people of Baghdad must reject acts of violence and assist with information on the AIF and support their government. The government of Iraq is committed to the fight against terrorists and bringing a better way of life to all Iraqis.

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

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you for that overview, and let's go ahead and get started with Bob Burns.

Q Colonel, this is Bob Burns from AP. I'd like to ask you, if you could describe the current makeup of the insurgency in your area, and do you have any expectation or reason to believe that the appeal of the insurgency to ordinary Iraqis will decline in the months ahead?

COL. VAIL: Well, it will decline, and it already has. We have lots of tips on the insurgents from the population. We have atmospheric and metrics that show that there is an effect to the amount of crimes that are committed right now, especially in Adhamiya as an example. Before, we had 11 a day; now, we're down to six. I think right now today we have about four murders in Adhamiya. So those metrics show that there is a level of animosity towards the insurgents, and the population is standing up for themselves and taking action to assist the Iraqi security forces in this entire operation.

Q Can I ask a follow-up?

MR. WHITMAN: Sure. Go ahead.

Q About that first part of my question about the makeup of the insurgency in terms of foreign elements and other elements -- how would you describe who it is?

COL. VAIL: Well, the first thing we do is we apply intelligence and atmospheric to the situation, so it's those who are violating the rule of law. That's where we're focused.

Now, as we gather intelligence and we can find out that they're part of a particular element or a particular group, then we'll mature that, send it up to higher headquarters for analysis, and that helps us to identify exactly what motivates that particular group.

But there are many different groups, small and -- some are possibly large -- that are affiliated and participate in some of these violations of the rule of law.

MR. WHITMAN: Will, go ahead.

Q Colonel, it's Will Dunham with Reuters. What's your level of concern that Iraq could slip into a full-scale civil war? And to what degree do you see the ingredients present for such an outcome?

COL. VAIL: Well, I've got an optimistic view that civil war would not occur, but I can't predict the future. My optimism comes from the amount of forces and the amount of capability available in Baghdad right now as we intervene and we protect the people. So right now we see that there's actually a decline in violence in Baghdad, in certain areas specifically, that we're applying more combat power to.

So right now, though there is a bit -- an upswing in violence from when I first arrived, which was about nine months ago, I think that we have mitigated that violence with the Operation Together Forward and also the maturity and the capability of the Iraqi security forces. So I'm, I guess, guarded optimistic about the whole thing.

Q I'm sorry, could I just follow up on that? Could you just talk about the dynamics of the sectarian violence and what leads you to have guarded optimism that the sectarian violence that's occurring now wouldn't

escalate into something more unmanageable?

COL. VAIL: We do see some sectarian violence in East Baghdad daily and we know that there's some retribution and possibly murders, kidnapping, executions that happen, and that's exactly why we're doing this operation right now. That's why you see the surge of forces in particular areas. But the government of Iraq has decided that they need to apply more combat power in those areas. So I think that I would agree, and I believe that the government of Iraq has applied combat power to those areas that are the most violent to protect those people and to get their way of life back to normal.

So there is some sectarian -- there is sectarian violence and we're taking action against it.

Q Colonel, David Wood from the Baltimore Sun. Could you talk a little bit about what the enduring U.S. presence will be in Adhamiya after, say, a couple weeks on down the road, and particularly what will be the requirement for combat forces?

And I'm thinking of civilian U.S. medical workers, civil affairs people, that kind of thing.

COL. VAIL: That's a great question, because we want to make sure that our continuity of operations lends towards continued protection of the people during this operation. So you have a clearing phase, then a protect phase and a build, and they're not sequential. There's some simultaneity going on because we're doing the build phase right now as we work the streets, provide medical care and the electricity.

We have over 34 battalions of coalition and Iraqi security forces in east Baghdad right now. And we can allocate those forces as we see fit, to make sure that the continuity of the particular operation in Adhamiya provides security.

Now, there are Iraqi police, there are national police battalions, and there are Iraqi army battalions available. But I think the most important thing is that as the people realize that they're being protected and as they see that the services are coming back, and the relationship between the Iraqi security forces and the people improve, I think that will have detrimental effect on each type of insurgency or a particular group that's trying to take advantage of the population.

So that's another integral part of this operation we're doing right now and will help us to continue the protect phase or the secure phase of Adhamiya.

Q In your planning, do you foresee a continued need for the protect phase to extend indefinitely?

COL. VAIL: Definitely for the Iraqi police. The Iraqi police are the key, and that's where we need to really assist them. We have police transition teams that work with them. Every day they're out patrolling the streets, doing dismounted and mounted patrolling and throughout Adhamiya and in Baghdad at all the areas. And I think the Iraqi police is a focus for us, to make sure that they are able to conduct their operations in and around the people. And we're helping them to get out into the population, doing some analysis on what other equipment they may need and what support they need.

So with 30 police transition teams throughout Baghdad, including Adhamiya, we're able to keep a good eye on what the Iraqi police need, and I think that's the future.

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

Q Hi, Colonel. This is Jim Garamone with American Forces Press Service. When I was with your brigade back in June, you had one of the more robust training efforts with the Iraqi army, the Iraqi police and the national police. I'm just wondering how that's going, if the uptick in operations there has caused your -- you to

stop using as many troops out there actually training the Iraqi police and Iraqi army.

COL. VAIL: Well, we did have a very good train up for our deployment, and we anticipated the transition teams, which we formed six months before deployment. So we anticipated that piece of the fight, and we also had the leader training, the medical training and marksmanship, et cetera, as a life cycle-managed modular brigade in the United States Army. We were able to train up for almost over a year to prepare for this, and we knew what we were getting into because we had a good transition with 3rd Infantry Division. We took their momentum from the operations that they were doing when we did our transition of authority. And when you were here last, we had a good talk about that, that the soldiers have quickly gained a rapport with the units they work with habitually, that they are -- they understand the population, they understand the streets, they know when things change, they know the look and they understand the threat.

So with all that, I think we're able to better advise and train with the Iraqi army and national police daily. And the operations are going very well. You know, we've had combined operations the entire time we've been here because we've had the luxury of having Iraqi security forces in our area of operations, and we are able to partner everything we do. So I'm very proud of the progress that we've made, particularly on police.

When we first started police transition teams, we focused on the operations in the station, on maintenance, digging into their logistics requirements and challenges, and we did a lot of assessments. In the past two or three months, we're now out with them participating on patrols and transitioning and training them to provide security on the streets.

So the transition teams have also evolved with the police, and I think we are prepared for that across the board.

MR. WHITMAN: Luis?

Q Colonel, it's Luis Martinez with ABC News. Sir, I have a question about the decrease in violence in your sector. Do you attribute that to the presence -- an increased presence of U.S. troops in your sector or to the tactics being used in Operation Together Forward? Or is it a combination of the two?

COL. VAIL: I think it's primarily because of Operation Together Forward. I think applying this much combat power of additional Iraqi security forces, concentrated in particular areas, is having a detrimental effect on the insurgents. I mean, they understand a big stick, and they understand when you have presence in the street and disciplined soldiers that are working side by side with Iraqi security forces.

So there's no doubt that we are out there to protect, and we're concentrating our efforts in certain areas.

So I look at Operation Together Forward as one of the big reasons. When you talk about TTPs and, you know, tactics, techniques and procedures and things like that, there's no doubt, after nine months, that our soldiers are taking full advantage of their experience in their areas. And so they've been in those areas for nine months, and occasionally we move them around to other areas in east Baghdad. But they understand the dynamics of the culture, the people, what type of forces are out there in terms of national police or Iraqi army or Iraqi police.

And then it's a counterinsurgency operation. So we want to attack the strategy, want to attack certain personalities every time. Even though we go after high-value targets, the bottom line is, we want to attack their strategy. And so there's non-lethal application of power, and there's lethal application of power. So that also helps, just because we've been here for a while.

And we took from what the 3rd ID did, and they took from what 1st Cav did. So you know, our professional Army passes on lessons learned, and we have good continuity due to our relief in place operations.

So -- but you know, that's a long answer to -- Operation Together Forward has cleared and seized -- cleared buildings, seized weapons -- you know, thousands, tens of thousands -- buildings cleared throughout Baghdad. And it's having an effect right now.

Q Sir, if I could follow up, you describe this as a classic counterinsurgency operation. What would you describe your earlier operations as?

COL. VAIL: Could you repeat the last part of your question?

Q Since you're describing Together Forward as a classic counterinsurgency operation, well, how would you describe your earlier activity, in the previous nine months, before this Together Forward was launched?

COL. VAIL: I would say it's a communal insurgency, not a classic insurgency like you've seen in the history in other countries. So a communal insurgency depends on that particular area and that particular threat and who's violating the rule of law and what's the level of extortion and illicit operations. So it depends on the area that you're in, and from month to month it changes.

Before nine months ago, I was not here, so I can only go on what I was told when I arrived. But I think that we took the lessons and the targets and what worked in terms of projects and non-lethal operations to provide for the people to allow them to have a better life, we took all of that information and moved forward. So I don't know about a classic insurgency, but definitely a community insurgency that's actually a little bit more complicated because of all the different factions that are attacking.

Q Colonel, this is Pam Hess with UPI. Can you help us understand Operation Together Forward sort of on a broader base? I understand and I hear the statistics that you're saying as being progress, but then every morning I'm waking up to some new disaster in Baghdad, I think 50 today and 250 injured.

Can you really improve the security in Baghdad if you don't do the entire city? What's the scope of what it is that you're doing? And how do we square up what you're saying as progress and then what we're seeing as sort of a daily death toll in Baghdad, which is high?

COL. VAIL: Yeah, I wouldn't deny the facts about the violence in Baghdad overall. But the purpose of Operation Together Forward is that the government of Iraq decided to focus on certain areas that needed the most help to protect their citizens, so the operation called for a clearance and then a protect.

The violence that you're seeing is a result of all along what these groups have been trying to do. They've been trying to intimidate and increase anarchy in certain areas. And also it may be a reaction to the offensive threat that we're posing to them right now in all those areas. It's an extremely offensive operation. I mean, we're being very careful because we're in a built-up area and the collateral damage, but there's no doubt that we're in the enemy's face. And because of that, sometimes you might have an upscale in violence in certain areas.

Q Are you sure that you're not just pushing the violence out of the neighborhoods where you're working?

And can you tell us how many of 18 neighborhoods you're in, out of how many -- I think there's 18?

COL. VAIL: The neighborhoods that will be cleared in our area -- there's two different areas primarily, but that's not my call. The government of Iraq will decide where and when to conduct this operation. Right now they've decided Adhamiya.

And that's a good point you bring up. You know, you exercise combat power in one area, and then what

about the other area? The way we get around that is that we have presence throughout Baghdad, and we have presence throughout east Baghdad -- 34 battalions, 8,000 police, 42 police stations, transition teams with every battalion. And we also have lots of other assets that give us information besides just my leader engagements with travel sheikhs and leaders in the area. So if we think that it's going to move to another area, we are able to anticipate because of all those indicators from all of those sources and having combat power in each area. So this is an increase in combat power. We're not spreading it out.

MR. WHITMAN: Jim.

Q Colonel, Jim Miklaszewski with NBC. What specific threat do the armed militias pose and challenges do they pose? And what specific operations or plans are there to deal with those militias?

COL. VAIL: They do pose a threat every day. And we know the locations that they go to, and we're applying as much effort as we can at those particular areas in working with the people.

I think the increase in tips is significant to show that the people are willing to give up information about these militias. They're tired of it: the extortion, the illicit operations. They have a government now, and they know it. So they're providing information to the Iraqi security forces, and they provide it to us. Sometimes they go straight to coalition forces with information and tips on the militia. So I think the population and the government of Iraq and the coalition forces are all applying pressure to the militias right now, and they're feeling it throughout Baghdad and in the areas that I'm responsible for.

Q And if I could follow up. Is one of the problems that these armed militias are too well-entrenched in the neighborhoods and connected politically to deal with them only militarily? Is that the problem?

COL. VAIL: Well, that could be the problem in some areas, and the government of Iraq will have to deal with that.

MR. WHITMAN: Drew. I think this will probably be our last question.

Q Colonel, this is Drew Brown with McClatchy Newspapers. Could you describe who these different factions are that are perpetrating the violence in your sector? And could you comment on information or reports we're getting back here that Iraqi police are actually carrying out some of these kidnappings and some of these murders, or at least they're turning a blind eye to it.

COL. VAIL: Well, the last question first. As I stated, there may be corruption -- certain leaders or units in the Iraqi security forces, and the government of Iraq is dealing with that, and they know it before we do. And we provide information if we think there is a problem with corruption, and send that information up, and the government of Iraq deals with it. So I'm not going to say it's not present; it does occur.

Going back to the first part of your question, al Qaeda is one of our threats. Extremists groups on any religion. We have extremist groups that are taking full advantage through intimidation to extort individuals for money and for power, and then to try to disrupt the new government. And then lastly, we have just the common criminals. We have gangs and criminal activity that goes on, and they're violating the rule of law. And so it's all mixed in there. And that's why we try to focus on the rule of law and who's violating the rule of law before we start tagging a particular threat with a title or saying that's that group or this is this group. What we try to do first is find out who's breaking the law, who's taking advantage of the people, and then we go after them. As we get more information, we'll send it up and we'll analyze it.

One other point I'd like to make, because that's a great question. A lot of times the markings of the vehicle and the uniforms are not accurate or people take advantage of the color of a shirt or a particular type of vehicle. So the government of Iraq, in the last few months, has gone out of the way to get the markings straight

on the vehicles and to get uniforms out to Iraq's security forces. It's not complete yet; they're just beginning to do this, but I think that's going to help a lot to delineate between those who are posing as a policeman or posing as a security official and those who are actually doing their job every day and putting their life on the line. And they are committed to Iraq, because it's got to be the most dangerous job in the world to be an Iraqi policeman or part of the Iraqi security forces right now.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, Colonel -- did you want to follow up, Drew, quickly?

Q One follow-up.

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead.

Q You mentioned corruption among the security forces. Could you comment about the prevalence of corruption among security forces in your sector? I mean, how many people have you had to report to the government yourself?

COL. VAIL: I'm not going to comment on that. I'm not going to go into each situation. If we think we have kind of a probable cause that there's something going wrong, we report it up. That's all I'm going to say about that.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, Colonel, thank you again for your time. And before we bring it to a close, let me just turn it back to you if you have any final comments you'd like to make.

COL. VAIL: Yeah, I do. This has been a great opportunity. And I appreciate the questions and I appreciate you taking the time to talk about this important operation.

I'll close by telling you that from what I've seen in the past three weeks, I'm cautiously optimistic. We're seeing the security situation in Baghdad improve. Success in Baghdad will not happen overnight. With the Iraqi forces in the lead and the government of Iraq providing direction, along with the improved essential services, Iraq can be a peaceful and prosperous nation. We must remember to be patient, that these things do take time.

And I'd also like to take this opportunity here at the end to thank the soldiers and our families back at Fort Campbell and Fort Hood, to the American people for their continued support, to the dedicated men and women of our joint and combined operation here.

Thanks for your time and for your questions.

MR. WHITMAN: Thank you, and our best. And we know that you don't have much longer in your tour, but perhaps we'll get an opportunity to talk to you again before you leave.

COL. VAIL: That would be great. Thank you.

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