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Presenter: Army Col. Sean B. MacFarland, commander of 1st Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division **September 29, 2006 9:00 AM EDT**

DoD News Briefing with Col. Sean B. MacFarland from Iraq

(Note: Colonel MacFarland appears via video teleconference from Iraq.)

COL GARY KECK (director, Department of Defense Press Office): Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the Pentagon briefing room. I'm Colonel Gary Keck, as most of you probably know, and it's my privilege today to introduce to you Colonel Sean MacFarland, the commander of the 1st Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division, speaking to us from Iraq. And he is the -- his brigade operates as part of Multinational Forces West.

And Colonel MacFarland is speaking to us from Ramadi, and he previously spoke to us in July. And Colonel MacFarland is here again to provide us with an operational update on what his unit's doing.

And with that, Sean, I'll turn it over to you.

COL MACFARLAND: Thanks, Gary.

And good morning, everybody. Thanks for your interest in what the amazing young men and women of our armed forces are doing here while serving in Iraq.

Today I'd like to tell you about the -- how the soldiers of the Ready 1st Combat Team are dealing with the news of their extension. And I'd also like to talk to you about how they, along with all the other soldiers, Marines, sailors and airmen that are serving with us here in Ramadi, are doing.

I've been extremely proud of how the soldiers and the families of the 1st Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division, have received the news about -- of this extension. It's for 46 days, as you know, and it'll extend us out from our original date of the 13th of January out to the 28th of February.

And of course nobody's very happy about it. I'm not particularly happy about it myself. But the soldiers of the brigade have shown what true professionals they are by taking the news in stride. And if I had to characterize their reaction, I would probably characterize it as a collective shrug. I've been going around and talking to the units in the brigade, and I haven't been able to get to all of them yet, but the soldiers that I've talked to so far understand that they have a job to do, and they're going to keep on doing it, to the best of their ability, until the very end.

Receiving the news well in advance has certainly helped. The other thing that helps is that we've been very candid with them about why they've been extended. American soldiers fight best when they are well-informed, and this has been no exception.

I've told them that the situation in Iraq, particularly in Baghdad, has not allowed us to reduce our forces. In order to maintain our current force level, a brigade of the 3rd Infantry Division will deploy to replace us, but they will not have a full year of interdeployment dwell in time for us to go home on schedule. The soldiers who are Ready 1st completely understand the need for their brothers in the Raider Brigade Combat Team to complete their training and preparation cycle before they deploy back to Iraq, particularly to Al Anbar Province.

We recognize that every drop of sweat spent in training will save pints of blood on the battlefield, and we've had the opportunity to properly train for this fight, and our soldiers have done extremely well. And we want to turn the battle over to a well-trained unit that can continue to advance the mission for which we have paid so dearly.

I've also been proud and impressed by the reaction of our families, whom I notified by video teleconference just prior to the official announcement. They, too, were disappointed, but they also remain fully supportive of their soldiers and of each other.

The last time I talked to you, I told you that we were at a tipping point in the battle for Ramadi. Well, I think we've actually tipped. Attacks are down 25 percent over the past couple of months, and coalition forces, together with the Iraqi security forces, have steadily increased their presence inside of the city. The Iraqi police recruiting has soared tenfold, and the Iraqi army readiness has improved to the point where Iraqi army battalions are now assuming the lead in portions of the city and its suburbs.

Public works projects are now beginning to bring real improvements in quality of life. Water and power projects are moving forward. And by February, we will have more

than doubled both basic services.

Even more encouraging has been the surge in interest among local leaders in cooperating with the coalition and the Iraqi security forces in the fight against al Qaeda.

There's still a lot of work to be done, but I'm very encouraged by the direction of events here. With an additional 46 days, I think we'll be just that much closer to imparting irreversible momentum to the work that we've already begun.

I would be happy to answer any questions you might have about either topic now.

COL KECK: Okay. Thank you, Sean. I would remind the press that he cannot see you, so please identify who you are and who you're with.

Bob.

Q Colonel, this is Bob Burns with AP.

I'd like to ask you about the insurgency that you're facing. It's often described as well-entrenched, well-organized and well- financed. Is it your aim to actually break the insurgency? Is it beatable, or are you trying to simply contain it?

COL MACFARLAND: The insurgency is certainly beatable, and of course the main instrument in that destruction or the instrument of their destruction will be the Iraqi security forces. And that's why we've been working so hard to develop the Iraqi police and the Iraqi army in and around Ramadi, and to that end the acceleration of their readiness has been very heartening.

It's important to keep in mind the Iraqi army division that's here with us -- one of them, the 7th Division -- has been in existence for less than a year. Their first anniversary is on the 4th of October. And so they've come a very long way in a very short time, but they are taking the fight to the enemy on a daily basis. So I am very encouraged by that.

I'm also encouraged by the Iraqi police. Just today the Iraqi police had a great action where they intercepted some insurgents with a car full of RPGs. They got in a gunfight. The insurgents tried to run away. They chased them, and they killed or captured the entire group. More recently, they intercepted a suicide VBIED before it could detonate at an Iraqi police position. They were able to predetonate it.

So they are coming along very well, I think, and I think that the enemy is beginning to recognize that as well.

COL KECK: Will.

Q Colonel, this is Will Dunham with Reuters. I just want to follow up a little bit on Bob's question. I mean, is it the mission of you and your troops to beat the insurgency in Ramadi, or to some degree, are you biding your time, keeping violence at whatever you view as a manageable level in order to sometime down the road have the Iraqi security forces do the heavy lifting?

COL MACFARLAND: Okay. I understand your question.

Yeah, the -- we're not just biding our time in Ramadi by any stretch of the imagination. What I am doing is with my forces, the American soldiers and the Marines and the sailors and airmen that are with us, is to drive the level of violence in Ramadi down to a level that the Iraqi security forces will be able to manage after our departure. So I am responsible for setting the conditions for success for the ISF, and I think we're making good headway on that.

Q Colonel, it's Peter Spiegel with the Los Angeles Times. Can I ask you how many either battalions or companies from your brigade have been moved from Anbar to be part of the new Baghdad strategy, and how has that affected your ability to carry out your mission in Anbar and in Ramadi?

COL MACFARLAND: Well, that's an easy question for me to answer, because the answer is zero. I have not been affected by the situation in Baghdad directly.

My higher headquarters has been affected, but they have pretty well fenced me from the impacts because they understand the importance and the seriousness of the situation around Ramadi.

COL KECK: Pam.

Q This is Pam Hess with United Press International. You said that violence is down 25 percent. Could you put numbers on that? I don't know that we know specifically what you all are doing out there.

And also, I've heard recently from someone who visited Ramadi and Anbar in general is that there is a lot of Sunni insurgent and al Qaeda violence between the two groups, but that the al Qaeda side seems to be exacting a heavy toll. They're killing a lot of the Sunnis that are opposing them now.

COL MACFARLAND: Okay. Thanks, Pam.

Well, first of all, attacks have dropped from about 20 a day to more like 15 a day. It was actually a little bit lower than that before Ramadan. We had a little bit of a surge, an uptick since Ramadan began, and we'll wait to see how that levels out here in the next few days. But it has been on an overall downward trend.

With respect to the violence between the Sunnis and the al Qaeda -- actually, I would disagree with the assessment that the al Qaeda have the upper hand. That was true earlier this year when some of the sheikhs began to step forward and some of the insurgent groups began to fight against al Qaeda. The insurgent groups, the nationalist groups, were pretty well beaten by al Qaeda.

This is a different phenomena that's going on right now. I think that it's not so much the insurgent groups that are fighting al Qaeda, it's the -- well, it used to be the fence-sitters, the tribal leaders, are stepping forward and cooperating with the Iraqi security forces against al Qaeda, and it's had a very different result. I think al Qaeda has been pushed up against the ropes by this, and now they're finding themselves trapped between the coalition and ISF on the one side, and the people on the other.

Q Colonel, it's Dave Wood with the Baltimore Sun. You suggested that the -- when you were talking about the Iraqi police stepping up their activities, you said something to the effect that the insurgents are beginning to recognize that. What did you mean by that?

COL MACFARLAND: I think that the insurgents have figured out that the Iraqi police are locally recruited and they serve locally, so they have inherently an advantage when it comes to intelligence-gathering. They know who's who. They live in the same neighborhoods.

Now, in the past, it's been a problem for Iraqi police because they've been subjected to murder and intimidation by al Qaeda. You know, their families have been threatened, or they've been directly threatened, and that's inhibited them from doing their job properly.

But now that the population and the tribal leaders are beginning to make common cause against al Qaeda, the tide is -- the table is turned completely against al Qaeda, and now it's the al Qaeda forces that need to be worried about living in those neighborhoods. They stick out like a sore thumb. Everybody knows who the terrorists are.

And one of the things that we've done to help keep the families of the police safer is we've put small police substations out there in the neighborhoods where we're recruiting the police from, so they know that when they're at work, their families are being watched over by their fellow family or tribesmen who are also Iraqi police. So it's a situation that's beginning to spiral in our favor, especially out where both the Iraqi police -- where the Iraqi police are strong and where we're able to support them.

Q Colonel, this is Courtney Kube from NBC News. You answered Will's question by saying that your mission right now is to drive down the level of violence to a manageable level for the Iraqi security forces to handle when you guys leave. So is it fair

to say that your mission is then -- is not to actually win, not to beat the insurgency, but just to drive it down to a lower level?

COL MACFARLAND: Well, I think so. You know, an insurgency is a very difficult thing to defeat in a finite period of time. It takes a lot of persistence -- perseverance is the actual term that we like to use. And who knows how long this is going to actually last.

But if we get the level of violence down to a point where the Iraqi security forces are more than capable of dealing with it, the insurgency's days will eventually come to an end, and they'll come to an end at the hands of the Iraqis who, by definition, will always be perceived as more legitimate than an external force like our own. And there is no single military answer to an insurgency, it's a combination of multiple approaches, both kinetic, which is to say violent, or non-kinetic, which includes financial, governmental, and other types of approaches.

And the Iraqi police are really the most ideally suited to bringing that to closure.

Q How does that weigh on the morale there in Ramadi, to know that the forces aren't actually there to win, that they're just there as -- almost as a temporary force?

COL MACFARLAND: Well, we are here to win all the fights that we're in, and I'm happy to report that we do. And we choose our fights. And we choose our fights with a view to establishing the Iraqi security forces to bring this insurgency to its final conclusion.

You know, the idea behind an insurgency is tough to beat. I mean, it's really hard to destroy or completely eliminate an idea.

And you know, to this day, there are still neo-Nazis that are running around America, touting the principles of Nazism, long after the Nazis were decisively defeated in the Second World War. But our police are more than capable of handling that. So do we need American soldiers standing on street corners in America because there are neo-Nazis in America? Certainly not. And what we're trying to do is get the level of violence down to a point where the Iraqi police can handle whatever holdouts remain out there.

Q (Off mike) -- MacFarland, Greg Kelly from Fox News. Hi.

In your opening remarks, you talked about we're past the tipping point; violence down 25 percent; Iraqi troops assuming the lead; and public works projects doubling, I think you said, on utilities.

A lot of these sound like things that we've heard of going back two and three years. We've heard those kinds of -- some would call them talking points -- before. Yet the American people have the impression that things are going very poorly on the ground. Can you talk a little bit about that disconnect? I mean, what is really kind of happening there

seems to be confusing. We're hearing one thing from military commanders and we're seeing another on television screens.

COL MACFARLAND: Well, I'll give it a shot. You know, I'm stationed in Germany, and now I'm here in Iraq. I haven't been in America very much lately.

But I think that for one thing, the decreased level of violence in Ramadi is not something that you've heard a lot of over the past two or three years. That's relatively new.

And as far as the disconnect between what commanders on the ground are seeing and what the American people may perceive, you know, I think you're probably in a better position to explain that than I am. Obviously I'm only seeing my little slice of Iraq here in Ramadi, and what I'm seeing here is a good-news story.

You know, I was talking to somebody the other day, and I said attacks are down 25 percent. That still means we still have 75 percent of the attacks that we used to have, which are still a lot.

So you can still go around and find bad news if you want to focus on bad news. It all depends on if you're a glass half empty or a glass half full kind of a person. Right now, you know, the glass is maybe three-quarters empty, a quarter full, but we're pouring more water in it all the time.

And you know, I like to focus on the more positive aspect of what we're doing here. Like the other reporter asked, how do you keep the soldiers' morale up? Well, you keep the morale up by focusing on the successes that you're able to achieve.

And, you know, like the old prayer goes, you know -- you know, "Help me to discern between the things that I can change and the things that I can't," and that's my job as a commander is to focus on the things that I can change and accept those things that I can't.

Q One quick follow-up. I mean, there have been commanders there in Ramadi who have said that attacks have gone down in the past. We've seen that. Some of your predecessors have said that. But can you tell me a little bit about the challenges that you're going to face when you hand over your AOR to another unit? A lot has been written about the problems that were encountered when units turned over Fallujah to other units and lessons learned weren't passed down. I know you can pass down some information, but that's a serious challenge, isn't it?

COL MACFARLAND: Well, you know, transitions in combat operations are always periods of risk, and you have to do everything that you can possibly can to mitigate that risk. And one of the ways we do that is with advanced recons from the incoming unit, and

then we spend a very deliberate period of time where we transition tasks and positions one at a time to the enemy -- a battle handover, relief in place process.

And I'm confident that -- because of the additional time that the 1st Brigade, 3rd ID will have to complete their training -- that when they get here, they'll be ready and they'll be able to continue on in Ramadi and take it to the next level.

And I really do think that the dynamic in Ramadi has changed and changed in an important way. You know, any previous reports from my predecessors that you, you know, may have heard notwithstanding -- the tribal dynamic is new here. It's got legs, it's moving forward and it's because success begets success. The people are beginning to recognize that the coalition and the Iraqi security forces mean business, that they're here to stay -- especially on the Iraqi security force side -- and that they have the ability to stay; and at the same time, they've come to recognize that al Qaeda offers them nothing, nothing but death and destruction, and that they are turning away from the al Qaeda fighters and turning toward their own sons who are in the Iraqi security forces.

Q This is Lisa Burgess with Stars and Stripes. Just -- I'm wondering if you could clarify the attack issue. Are those attacks against American and ISF forces? And if so, could you talk about attacks against Iraqi civilians and what you're seeing? Have those also gone down in Ramadi?

COL MACFARLAND: Yeah. First of all, the attacks include both my American soldiers and the Iraqi soldiers. Actually, the Iraqi soldiers in Ramadi work for me, so we keep the -- all those numbers, roll them all up together.

Secondly, we don't see a lot of attacks against civilians in Ramadi. This is a pretty -- (audio break) -- here. It's almost 100 percent Sunni Arab. And to the extent that the terrorists do get civilians caught in the line of fire through indiscriminate use of large weapons, that alienates the terrorists from the people. So, you know, they understand that we and the Iraqi security forces are very discriminating in when we apply violence, and the enemy is not. And that has been part of the process of turning the people away from support of -- or even tacit acceptance of the al Qaeda terrorists out here.

Q Like Baghdad? It's not that sectarian violence situation?

(No audible response.)

COL KECK: Question, Sean?

We got a head no.

Luis.

Q Colonel, it's Luis Martinez with ABC News. Your troops have been engaged in a very kinetic fight there in Ramadi. How much of the decrease in violence would you attribute to the non-kinetic factors that you mentioned before?

COL MACFARLAND: I'm sorry, you broke up a little bit there.

Q Yeah. Your forces in Ramadi have engaged in a very kinetic fight there. How much of the reduction in violence would you attribute to the non-kinetic factors that you listed before?

COL MACFARLAND: Well, that's pretty difficult to assess. You know, you can see and sense the reduction in violence. You know that you can go in places of Ramadi that you never could before. How much of it you can attribute to the terrorists that we've killed, how much can you attribute to the terrorists that have been killed at the hands of the people -- or have been driven out by the people, and how much can you attribute to some of the projects that we've put into place to improve the quality of life, that's incredibly difficult to discern. You know, we know that all of those things have an effect. What percent each has in terms of end state, it's very difficult to say. I wouldn't want to venture a guess on that. It all works together, though.

Q Colonel, this is Jim Garamone with AFPS. What are your -- Ramadi is a provincial capital. What are your dealings with like provincial leaders and city leaders?

COL MACFARLAND: Well, that's a great question. The governor, Governor Ma'moun, is a guy that I see pretty regularly. We provide him with security. And his headquarters, the government center, is not too far away from my headquarters. And I have a Marine Company that's down there helping to secure that place. And we share information pretty regularly. I also deal with his deputy governors for the various services -- for health and, you know, water and oil, education. And we work on various projects and problems that they may have.

At the municipal level, we're a bit more challenged right now. Currently there is not a mayor in Ramadi. And we're working with the governor and we're working with the tribal sheikhs to see if we can get a good candidate for the mayor of Ramadi and get a municipal council moving forward to address the people's needs more directly.

Q Colonel, Andrew Gray from Reuters. Some of the reporting about the Anbar region has suggested that perhaps the tribal dynamic is at least a bit of a double-edged sword, that the fact that the tribes are now more actively involved with you and encouraging their members to join the police also means that they have a great deal of influence over the police and of what arrests are carried out, what operations are carried out. Is that a challenge at all? Have you come up against that problem, and how have you dealt with it?

COL MACFARLAND: Actually, it hasn't been a problem at all. The sheikhs that are sending their young men to join the police are very supportive of the political process and the constitution. And they understand the ground rules, that when they put on those blue shirts and become Iraqi police, then they follow the rules of the Iraqi police. And we give them a pretty good training process so that by the time that they hit the streets, they've been inculcated with the values that are consistent with serving and protecting, as a policeman should. And the tribes are very supportive of that and they like that kind of policing. It's not something they saw in the past with the old Iraqi police under the Saddam regime.

Q Colonel, it's Al Pessin from Voice of America. Just to be sure I understand, you've gone down from 20 to 15 attacks per day, and all of those attacks are against U.S. and Iraqi forces? And can you give us some idea of the effectiveness of the attacks? How many casualties has your unit, the Americans, suffered since you've been there, and has that been trending up or down, or been consistent?

COL MACFARLAND: Well, I don't want to get into too much specifics on our casualties because I don't want to give the enemy, you know, direct feedback on how effective he's been. But I will say that overall, the effectiveness of the enemy attacks have decreased somewhat. In this month in particular -- in particular, there's been a noticeable drop-off in effectiveness; about a -- I'd say a 50 percent drop-off in effectiveness, and that's of the -- after a 25 percent reduction in number. So the enemy is shifting to more of a standoff, low-risk type of attack, and I think -- and the numbers that he's generating for his attacks have declined significantly in terms of number of guys running around in black ninja suits during an attack has been cut by probably two-thirds.

COL KECK: We'll make this the last one.

Q Oh, did you have something --

Q Yeah, I just wanted to say that seems to fly in the face of what we're hearing from elsewhere, with insurgents using more sophisticated weapons and being, in many cases, more effective, even against armor. You're not seeing that in your area?

COL MACFARLAND: The enemy is very adaptive, and it seems to us that about every week to 10 days he changes tactics. And you know, it's a game of action/reaction, countermeasure/counteraction, measures/countermeasures/counter-countermeasures. And it's give and take, give and take -- and we've been giving more than we've been taking here in Ramadi.

Q It's Pam Hess from UPI again.

Could you tell us what the status is of your bulldozing program downtown around the government center? I gather it hasn't started yet. I'm wondering why not, or if you're going to do it at all?

COL MACFARLAND: Which program is that?

Q Bulldozing the destroyed buildings around the government center to help secure that area.

COL MACFARLAND: Oh yeah. Thanks.

Yeah, we -- we have taken down the buildings that we intend to take down, and that went very well, without any loss of life on either side. And now we're beginning the process of hauling the rubble out of there, and that's going to be a great jobs program, actually. It's going to hire a lot of local labor to help load up those 20-ton dump trucks and haul all those millions of tons of rubble out. And eventually we hope in the not-too-distant future we'll be able to follow through with the greening of that area and turn that into a nice park.

So that's moving ahead.

COL KECK: Okay. Well, thank you very much, Colonel MacFarland, for being with us today. Do you have any closing comments?

COL MACFARLAND: Yeah, thanks, I do.

I'd just like to close by saying that it's a great privilege to command the Ready 1st Combat Team and to lead the soldiers, Marines, sailors and airmen serving in Ramadi. I believe this extension says less about the quantity of soldiers in our Army than it does about the quality. The fact that we can ask young men and women to serve beyond a year under such commanding conditions and that we can fully expect them to continue to perform their duties with continued strong morale, skill and discipline is something that all Americans can be justifiably proud of.

Thank you.

COL KECK: Thank you.

Thank you, folks. See you next Friday.

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