

Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus reported to me via STVS that they had just gone into a market area, and seen the commerce and the activities. The Iraqi Health Ministry issued an interesting report that said that hundreds of doctors who had fled the fighting have now returned to serve the people of their country.

The reduced levels of violence in Iraq have been sustained for several months. While the progress in Iraq is still fragile and reversible, General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker report that there now appears to be a "degree of durability" to the gains we have made.

Here's the bottom line: While the enemy in Iraq dangerous, we have seized the offensive. Iraqi forces are becoming increasingly capable of leading and winning the fight. As a result, we've been able to carry out a policy of "return on success" -- reducing American combat forces in Iraq as conditions on the ground continue to improve.

We've now brought home all five of the Army combat brigades, the Marine Expeditionary Unit, two Marine battalions, that were sent to Iraq as part of the surge. I was proud to visit with some of those troops at Fort Bragg earlier this year. They are among our nation's finest citizens, and they have earned the gratitude and respect of the American people. (Applause.)

Another aspect of our "return on success" policy in Iraq is reduced combat tours. Last month, troops began deploying for 12-month tours instead of 15-month tours. This change will ease the burden on our forces, and I think more importantly, this change will make life for our military families easier. (Applause.)

I'm pleased to announce the next step forward in our policy of "return on success." General Petraeus has just completed a review of the situation in Iraq -- and he and the Joint Chiefs of Staff have recommended that we move forward with additional force reductions, and I agree. Over the next several months, we'll bring home about 3,400 combat support forces -- including aviation personnel, explosive ordnance teams, combat and construction engineers, military police, and logistical support forces.

By November, we'll bring home a Marine battalion that is now serving in Anbar Province. And in February of 2009, another Army combat brigade will come home. This amounts to about 8,000 additional American troops returning home without replacement. And if progress in Iraq continues to hold, General Petraeus and our military leaders believe additional reductions will be possible in the first half of 2009.

The progress in Iraq is a credit to the valor of American troops and civilians, the valor of Iraqi troops, and the valor of our coalition partners. And I thank those who are here from other nations for joining us, and I thank you for working with our troops. (Applause.) We welcome you to the United States. And we appreciate you working closely with those who wear the uniform.

Since Operation Iraqi Freedom began -- I want our fellow citizens to hear this fact -- more than 140,000 troops from 41 countries have served as part of our coalition in Iraq. Sons and daughters of Australia, Azerbaijan, the United Kingdom, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, El Salvador, Estonia,