

I'm very pleased with the -- both the MRAPs and the maintenance support I've received at Forward Operating Base Falcon. It's a good piece of equipment.

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead.

Q This is Jim Mannion from Agence France-Presse. I was wondering if you could talk about how durable you think this decline in violence is in your sector and how you would go about judging that.

COL. MARTIN: Sure. That's interesting you use the word "durable," because our commanding general had challenged us to achieve sustainable security in Baghdad, and I thought, as I arrived in the country, that was a pretty lofty goal, a tough mission. And we went after that.

Just before -- I guess just about a week ago, I was talking to the commanding general, and I told him I think we're on the cusp of achieving durable security. So we share the same word. I think that what I'm seeing right now in Rashid -- and again, I'm -- my view goes back to 2003, when I first arrived, through 2004 and again in 2005, and I've been studying this area since October of last year. There's been a phenomenal change in the security situation in Rashid district. And I don't want to speak to all of Baghdad, because that's not my area of operation. But in the southern quadrant, what I've seen is, I've seen the people come forward now and not accept militias.

This really broke in the May-June time frame. There seemed to be a wedge that was placed between the people and the insurgents and we tried to exploit that. And we've exploited that by continuing to improve the effectiveness of the Iraqi security forces. We also went all-out on our clearance operations to take away the base of support, and by that I mean he can't fight unless he has access to munitions.

A signal that I see in the Rashid district is the quality of the improvised explosive device. When we see the Iranian-made explosively-formed projectile, we know that the pipeline has not been cut off. Less and less do we see these specific anti-armor improvised explosive devices. We're seeing homemade explosives, low quality, and many that have improper initiation systems. So not only are they -- have they not been very effective in the past 45 days, that -- we've actually been able to discover more. That means that the quality foot soldiers of the enemy have either been killed, captured or driven away and now the amateurs are at work in our area.

Now, that is not to say that there's no threat to our soldiers, because frankly it's -- the improvised explosive device is very deadly. And complacency, when it sets in, is a big danger to our soldiers. So I would say that we're aggressively pursuing the IED threat. And what I'm seeing on the battlefield right now is telling me that there has been a fundamental shift in the security situation in Iraq and we are moving out fast to exploit that.

Q Could I follow up?

MR. WHITMAN: Sure.

Q What would you have to see to go beyond it being on the cusp of durable security to being durable security? What more are you looking for?

COL. MARTIN: Well, as a military man, I'm pretty conservative. I'm going to look at the battlefield and I'm going to have to feel it in my gut. And I've got quite a bit of time here in Iraq and I've had different feelings in my gut. But right now, my gut is telling me that if we're not there, we're close.

And I think to actually say that the security is durable in my district, I need a little bit more time to convince myself. Again, I said I'm very conservative here. I don't want to -- I don't want to make a rash judgment on what I'm seeing, because, you know, it's easy to get disappointed in a combat zone. But I think, with the attitude of the