

was a reporter, and I won't name which U.S. organization he was from, who spent a day and a half looking for Kurdish forces surrounding the city of Kirkuk.

And he finally came in to Colonel Pascal and he said, "Hey, I didn't find any Kurdish forces that were surrounding the Iraqi security forces up here." And Dave said to him, "Well, why didn't you come in and ask us first, because we would have told you that that was somewhat of a myth."

So right now Kirkuk is relatively peaceful, all things considered. We're just continuing to watch the flashpoint there. I'm sorry for interrupting. Go ahead, please.

Q Yeah. This is Andrew Gray from Reuters. General, I was just wondering, of the four provinces in your area, how many of them would you say are on an acceptable level of stability? And how far do you have to go before you can turn over more substantial responsibility to Iraqi forces and reduce the number of U.S. forces there?

GEN. HERTLING: Yeah, that's a question we ask ourselves every day, quite frankly. None right now are at an acceptable level of security, in my view. And I've talked to each one of the governors of the four provinces, and they agree as well. I just was with Governor Hamood (ph) last Sunday in -- he's the governor of Salahuddin province -- and in fact we had this very discussion. And we were having a conversation about when he would like to have the province turned back over to him. And I gave him a date. He actually thought later than what I said as the date potentially to turn over Salahuddin province. And they're the ones right now with the least amount of problems with security.

They have the least number of attacks of the four provinces.

So it's interesting. I think when you talk to the politicians and the men on the street, it's sort of a mixed bag on when they want the provincial Iraqi control. And most of them may say one thing when being interviewed, but they'll say quite a different thing, because they know that the Iraqi security forces and the coalition forces are partnering very well, that there's still work to be done in terms of the economic and the government line of operations, as we call it, with the PRTs.

There is still the election to be considered. And depending on what happens in terms of the election date and how that occurs on a timeline -- all of those things, in terms of drawing down forces, as we use the term -- it's condition-based. When we draw down forces in the north is going to be based on the conditions in each province.

And I'd remind -- I'd remind you, too, that the north is the way it is because the successful Awakening movement in Anbar pushed many of the terrorists to the east and the surge operation in Baghdad pushed many of the terrorists to the north. So we have become probably -- well, not probably, we are the most volatile area in Iraq right now, but we're continuing to pursue so that isn't the case in a few months.

MR. WHITMAN: Mike?

Q General, this is Mike Mount with CNN. You've actually just touched on a topic I was going to ask you about, that a number of the fighting forces have moved up to your area from two kind of very historically violent areas. And you were kind of explaining that, you know, that none of the provinces are quite ready to turn over yet. Is this something that you might require more troops to be moved to your area to be -- to kind of fight these forces, these -- you know, you said you've got seven different kind of groups up there fighting as well. What are you looking at in the future here to kind of control that area?

GEN. HERTLING: Well, Mike, over the last few months we have, in fact, received additional forces. We, in fact, received an additional battalion last week. I won't tell you where it went, but we got an additional battalion from Baghdad, U.S. battalion from Baghdad, to help with one of our fights. As a cavalry man, I'm always trying to