

Noncombatants will pay the price in Taliban retribution in any security vacuum in Afghanistan. The coalition will pay the price in lost gains and lost trust of the people there if that should happen.

Everyone seems to agree that additional forces are the ideal course of action for preventing a Taliban comeback, but just where they're going to come from is still up for discussion. In fact, I wouldn't expect anything definitive prior to General Petraeus and his opportunity to brief the president on Iraq.

Should our leadership determine that more U.S. forces are needed in the fight in Afghanistan, it's no secret that the Marine Corps would be proud to be part of that undertaking. However, in order to do more in Afghanistan, our Marines have got to see relief elsewhere.

With that, I'd be happy to take your questions. Bob, I think you're the first guy on deck.

Q Hey, General. Thanks. Given your description of the security situation in Anbar province and also your reference to being turned over to Iraqi control next week, does it look to you like security could continue to improve and it could be handled with fewer U.S. forces, including Marines?

GEN. CONWAY: My commander our there -- our commander out there, Major General John Kelly, believes exactly that. In fact, he's got statistics to validate that, Bob.

After we started to see the effect of the Sunnis working with us, we saw the removal of the Army brigade headquarters that had operated for a long time out of Ramadi. Six Army battalions associated with that left the province, ostensibly for good. We have also seen the equivalent of about an Iraqi division, brigades from the 1st and the 7th Iraqi Divisions, who have Marine MTTs out west and that we have, you know, brought along over time, be the very forces that were deployed elsewhere in the country to large effect. And those forces are still outside of the Anbar.

That being the case with regard to force structure, we have still seen attacks go to an all-time low. Even with all of those additional security forces leaving, attacks now average two or three a day in the entire province. So, yes, the answer to your question is that we do believe that security conditions are such that even with reduced force, that we can keep them at a very low ebb.

Q Do you think -- do you know whether General Kelly has in fact recommended specific change in this?

GEN. CONWAY: He is approaching his superiors. He and I talked about it while we were there. I think it should be readily evident that the force that we needed in the Anbar province in 2005, 2006 to fight the insurgency at its height is not the force that we need there now to do nation building and to try to bring the government and the Sunnis closer together.

Q There's two regimental combat teams there, I think. Is that --

GEN. CONWAY: That's correct, yes.

Q And you think, what, one would be sufficient?

GEN. CONWAY: Well, I think in time that there's going to have to be a natural draw-down. I'm what they call a Title X kind of guy, so those really aren't my determinations to make. But I do know that 25,000 Marines in a province, again, are probably in excess of the need, especially after Iraqi provincial control assumes responsibilities for security, because one of the things we did while we were there was meet with the leadership of that army and police apparatus and they're pretty confident that at least they can manage the internal security aspects of what has to take place now.

Q General, Afghanistan -- there's been, as you know, a big increase in use of U.S. air power there and there's been a commensurate increase in civilian casualties, with a bad one just a couple days ago, apparently. Is that a result of not having enough boots on the ground? In other words, is the command there compensating for having insufficient numbers of troops by increasing air power? And is that a risk? Are you worried about that? And do you see