

As was pointed out, we're going on our 12th month being gone from Fort Campbell, Kentucky, and our brigade combat team of 4,000 soldiers continues to perform, in my opinion, exceptionally well.

As you all know, we've been working in the Salahuddin province. Salahuddin province is northwest of Baghdad, a geographical size comparable to the state of Vermont, a population about of about 2 million people. And then it's largely Sunni, except for two cities, the cities of Balad and the city of Dujail in the southern portion of the province.

I will tell you up front that the situation here continues to improve from a security standpoint. And having said that, we still have work to do.

There's still an active enemy out there that we are pursuing and going after every day. And all indicators across the board -- economic, governance and development of our Iraqi security forces -- is getting better. And it's significantly better than it was in January, February of this year, which -- when, in my opinion, was probably the low point of our tour.

So having said that, I'm happy to take any questions that you've got.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, very good, Colonel. It's -- we do have several questions here, and who'd like to start it off?

Dave?

Q Colonel, this is Dave Wood from The Baltimore Sun. I know that you've been doing a pretty intensive job in terms of trying to penetrate the IED networks and that's sort of a multifaceted, multidimensional kind of -- part of the fight. How much of that are the Iraqis able to take over now? And do you see them taking over that fight, including the -- all the ISI hook-ups and everything else that goes into it, the battlefield forensics, any time in the near future?

COL. MCBRIDE: Okay, I heard most of your question. I think you referenced the IED fight and how we combat those networks. And then the second part of your questions dealt with the Iraqis' preparedness to do that in the near or future term. Is that correct?

Q That's right, Colonel. Thanks.

COL. MCBRIDE: Okay. I'm going to answer that in two parts. One, the amount and volume of improvised explosive devices continues to decline in the province. The way that we've approached IED and -- combatting IEDs is, we look at how they affect the population and their ability to move. If you look at MSR Tampa -- and MSR Tampa is a main highway that runs from Baghdad, runs through the length of this province and then runs all the way up to Mosul -- in November of 2007, probably 10 or 11 IEDs a day on MSR Tampa; today, an average of maybe one or two a day.

The important part of that is that those IEDs are largely ineffective. And for that reason, the population is able to travel those roadways. And my concern with IEDs, quite frankly, is not how they affect our forces -- and we have not had one soldier who's been seriously wounded on that main highway -- but how it affects the population and their ability to move. So that's how we've approached combatting the IED network, because frankly, we've always seen it as a tactic the enemy uses to force use to lock down those highways and restrict the way the population moves.

And we've taken kind of counterintuitive approach, and now the population is moving on those highways. Economic commerce is moving. I think it's helped the economy, and the people believe they're safe on those highways.