

question was -- had to do with being replaced by smaller forces. Is that the gist of your question?

MR. WHITMAN: Yes, about whether or not you feel or if you know that your replacement unit is going to be a different size than what's currently there.

COL. MCBRIDE: No. Our replacement unit will be a brigade combat team that looks essentially just like we do.

Q At what point do you think your area will be ready to have a smaller U.S force there? At what point will the Iraqis be able to take up more of the responsibility?

COL. MCBRIDE: I will tell you that having been here in 2006 and worked -- and having worked specifically in that job with the Iraqi security forces and then being here for a year now, they have improved dramatically. I was not encouraged in 2006 when I left here in September. And we got back here in October last year, and over that period of time, this Iraqi army and these Iraqi -- and these Iraqi police -- Iraqi national police that work with us have made dramatic improvements.

Right now we have an Iraqi army brigade in the eastern desert of this province near the border of Diyala. They've been out there for now over 30 days in support of the government of Iraq's operation in the Diyala province. They have been totally self-sustaining. We haven't supported them logistically with anything. And they are continuing to operate and continuing to fight.

Now we have our transition teams on the ground with them. We've helped them with some medevac, which they don't have the capability to do yet, air medevac; some intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance assets to aid them in finding the enemy.

But they have been largely self-sustaining, and they're going to continue this operation for another month. That brigade could fight on its own today. They do not need us.

Contrast that -- we've got another brigade, which is in its relative infancy. It's still going through unit training in Kirkuk. They have still two battalions to be trained. So we've got a mix of Iraqi brigades, four total in this province, at different stages.

But overall, I am very pleased with their progress. And every one of these brigades, no matter what stage of development in terms of collective training and their ability to support themselves in terms of having equipment and personnel, they're all willing to fight and will all fight. So I think they've made tremendous progress.

We've got a couple of brigades that need several months, I think, before they can operate at the independent level. We see the 14th Brigade operating today. But they're continuing to make steady progress.

And the other thing I see is the quality of leadership is significantly better at the company and battalion level than what I saw two years ago, and that makes all the difference in the world.

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead.

Q Sir, Colin Clark with Military.com. The Maliki government's begun issuing warrants for some of the Sons of Iraq personnel. Is this affecting operations in your area? And if so, how?

COL. MCBRIDE: No. No warrants have been issued for any of our Sons of Iraq.

We have 7,000 in this province. They understand and their leadership understands that they work in support of and subservient to their respective governments.