

We are going to start a gradual reduction over the next three months from a force level of 7,000 we have now to a goal of about 4,500. We've communicated this very clearly with the senior leadership of our Sons of Iraq. They all understand it. They understood in the very beginning that this was a temporary program.

So at the same time, we have worked hard to create slots in the Iraqi police and in the Iraqi army to transition these men, in addition to other economic programs.

We've had mixed success doing that.

At the provincial level, our provincial director of police has submitted several hundred hiring packets up to the central -- the Ministry of the Interior. We're waiting on those packets to come back down either approved or disapproved. So I think we've done at our level what we can do to transition at this point in terms of where we stand in the province.

But I am semi-concerned with not finding these men jobs, but I think we're going to be okay, because we're talking to them all the time.

MR. WHITMAN: It's the end of our time, but I have one quick question from Courtney Kube, who's been waiting patiently to ask it. So if you'll bear with us, we will make this the last one.

Q Hey, Colonel. It's Courtney Kube from NBC. Just very briefly, you spoke a little bit about not being able to draw down forces in your area, but do you anticipate increasing or boosting force levels around the time of the elections? Some Iraqi officials are now saying they feel confident they'll have the elections this calendar year. So do you anticipate needing additional U.S. or Iraqi forces in your area for security?

COL. MCBRIDE: No. I think the forces we have are perfectly capable of securing the population so they can go vote unhindered. I'm not concerned about that.

MR. WHITMAN: All right, Colonel. Well, we do want to be respectful of your time, but before I bring it to a close let me turn back to you in case you have any final thoughts that you'd like to share with us.

COL. MCBRIDE: Thank you for allowing me to speak to y'all. The only thing I would like to add at the end here is I want to thank the families of the soldiers in this BCT for their sacrifice over the past year. They have a job, in many respects, that is tougher than the one that we have over here. And I just want to say thank you to all of them.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, again, thank you and we wish you the best as your unit reaches the end of their tour. And we appreciate you having taken the time not only today but previously to give us your perspective on what your unit is seeing there. So thank you very much, Colonel, and best wishes for the remainder of your unit's tour over there.

COL. MCBRIDE: Thank you, I appreciate it. Thanks a lot.

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