

COL J.B. Burton, Commander MNB-Baghdad

with Pentagon Press Corps

SUBJECT: REMARKS BY COLONEL J. B. BURTON, COMMANDER, MULTI-NATIONAL BRIGADE-BAGHDAD TO THE PENTAGON PRESS CORPS.  
MODERATED BY BRYAN WHITMAN, DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS.

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MR. WHITMAN: Well, good morning, and welcome.

And good afternoon to Colonel Burton. This is Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon. Thank you for joining us again in this second time back to the Pentagon press corps here.

This is Colonel J.B. Burton, the commander of 2nd Brigade, 1st -- 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division. He assumed command of the Dagger Brigade back in June of 2005. And today he is speaking to us from Baghdad and will give you a brief operational update and assessment in terms of what his unit's been doing, and then we'll take your questions.

So, Colonel, again thank you for coming back and sharing a second time with us what you're doing.

COL. BURTON: Great. Well, good morning. And thanks for this opportunity to talk with you all.

As you said, I'm J.B. Burton of the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division, also known as the Dagger Brigade Combat Team, and we assumed responsibility for coalition forces in northwest Baghdad in November of last year. And I feel it's important to update you on some of the many changes since then and then entertain any questions that you might have.

Since our deployment from Schweinfurt, Germany, last year, we dispatched our three organic maneuver task forces and our field artillery battalion to other brigade combat teams and then subsequently integrated and employed five robust maneuver task forces as part of our formation here. Three of those task forces are from the surge which began arriving in January, providing us increased combat power and capabilities to get at our mission.

We retain our highly capable combat engineer battalion, forward support battalion, five separate companies, and we've established a provisional task force to assist in the formal integration and synchronization of coalition and Iraqi security force efforts here. Each of

those formations provide critical enablers on the streets and inside the neighborhoods of northwest Baghdad and help to make a positive difference daily.

Our soldiers, in conjunction with our Iraqi security force partners, have set the conditions for increased positive growth here. We have integrated and employed an embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team, which delivers tremendous capability to help us understand and affect reconstruction and reconciliation efforts. They provide us the savvy necessary to understand and integrate resources from various joint and interagency actors to assist us in achieving our objectives.

We are partnered with 10 Iraqi army battalions and two national police battalions deployed across the Kadhimiya and the Mansour security districts. Both of these districts are commanded by highly competent, patriotic Iraqi brigadier generals who consistently demonstrate their unbreakable will to deliver security, reconciliation and reconstruction to northwest Baghdad.

Collectively, we are responsible for a heavily urbanized area of 93 square kilometers, or 36 square miles, and more than 1 million people. Our area is principally Shi'a in the northeast and north, Sunni in the south and west and somewhat mixed in the east. These simple demographics further define the fault lines where sectarian (conflicts ?) reached their peak in January, with al Qaeda and their surrogates fighting to bring terror and destruction to Baghdad from the west, and where Shi'a extremists sought to reduce Sunni population centers and al Qaeda sanctuaries through extrajudicial killings and large-scale displacements from the north in places like Hurriyah. Those original fault lines now largely define the areas where the government of Iraq has or has not been able to deliver services and sustain reconstruction efforts.

North and east of these fault lines in places like Kadhimiya, government-provided services and reconstruction efforts are generally working pretty well. To the south and southwest in places like Ghazalia and Amiriyah, the government has yet to deliver a measured increase in essential services, so reconstruction in these areas is provided largely through coalition force and other contracts.

There does remain a challenge for the government to deliver certain essential services, such as fuel and electricity, into the city, regardless of which side of the fault lines you fall on. All of this defines our environment and thus our approach here. When initially analyzing our area, we recognized a majority of the population was largely secular, moderate, and the cycle of violence was being delivered by extremists and criminals. The majority of the citizens were tired of the violence and eager to get about the task of reconstruction. So in order to stop the cycle of violence, we set about to defeat sectarian expansion conducted by Shi'a extremists while simultaneously defeating al Qaeda and denying their access to the population.

In short, we had to get out into the city, live among the citizens, fight alongside the Iraqis and deny insurgents, criminals and extremists free access to the population. The Baghdad security plan, along with the troop surge, allowed us to do just that, thus increasing our

ability to affect the communities and combine our efforts with those of our Iraqi partners. We have established 14 joint security stations inside the neighborhoods where our soldiers live, plan and work alongside the Iraqi security forces day in and day out.

We have created safe neighborhoods to disrupt and ultimately deny extremists and criminals free access to the population. These safe neighborhoods have controlled and entry and exit points manned 24 hours a day by Iraqi security forces to deny extremists and criminals free access. We have positioned JSSs inside these neighborhoods, providing our soldiers, the Iraqi security forces and local citizens continuous access to each other so that we can collectively solve the problems of the communities from a common perspective.

Further, we are focused on extending the reach of the government by providing businesses access to financial capital, and through the development of public works substations that employ locals in local areas to deliver essential services within their capacity. Our embedded reconstruction team and joint project management office are helping us achieve these effects.

The combined effects of partnered operations to defeat extremists and sectarian expansion, the establishment of joint security stations and a coordinated safe neighborhood effort has provided a window of opportunity for local businesses to open, and where local citizens have come forward as volunteers committed to the security and reconstruction of their local areas. This is happening on both sides of the faultline. These volunteers are actively providing security and partnership with our combined forces and concurrently increasing the citizens' confidence in the Iraqi security forces as a whole.

Our Iraqi partners are working closely with us to recruit, hire and then transition these volunteers into the Iraqi security force formations. To date, we have a total of 1,772 volunteers and recruits, who are fully screened and ready to attend academy for integration into the Iraqi security forces, with 500 scheduled to attend academy this month. We have begun to see an increasing number of former Iraqi army officers coming forward to rejoin the security forces of their nation, and we are working closely with our Iraqi security forces partners on this issue. These are positive indicators, and we continue to welcome anyone who is willing to work alongside our combined forces to secure the population and create increased opportunities for the citizens.

The improvements in the security situation in Northwest Baghdad can be measured by an 85 percent reduction in violence since May of this year. Of our 95 mahalas or neighborhoods, 58 of them are now considered under control. 33 remain in a clearing status, with violence continuing to go down, and 4 remain in a disrupt status.

Here are some figures. Murders are down from a peak of over 161 reported murders per week a year ago to less than 5 per week now, and our continued efforts to defeat sectarian expansion continue to drive these numbers down. IED and small arms attacks are down from a peak of 50 per week in June to less than 5 per week since the end of August. And vehicle-borne IED attacks are down nearly 85 percent due to our combined efforts to

defeat the Karkh VBIED and IED networks -- which has had a tremendous impact on insurgents' ability to instruct and employ those types of weapons effectively.

While our enemy continues to seek ways to attack us, he is increasingly ineffective due to disrupted supply in financial networks and continuous loss of sanctuary and freedom of movement. Iraqi confidence in security is evidenced by an increased number of walk-ins, call-ins and e-mail tips to our joint security stations. This evidence -- this confidence is further evidenced by the return of businesses to previously empty storefronts and market areas, increased numbers of kids in the parks and the schools, and by the increased number of locals engaged in reconstruction and revitalization of their neighborhoods.

With our Iraqi partners, we are fully engaged and committed to the security of the Iraqi people and to the reconstruction of Northwest Baghdad. This mission is far from over, and there's still a lot of work to be done, but we're getting after that every day. With that, I'll be happy to entertain any questions you might have.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you, we do have a few. Let's start with Kristin.

Q Sir, this is Kristin Roberts with Reuters.

There's been some criticism of the statistics on a reduction in violence in Iraq and in your area as a whole. Particularly there's been a criticism that the numbers showing sectarian violence has declined is due to the fact -- due to the massive displacement of people, so that areas that were once Shi'a no longer are, and that's why there's been a reduction in violence.

Can you speak to that criticism?

COL. BURTON: You know, that's a great question. And I do appreciate that, because I've asked myself those questions specifically. Now, remember, when I came in here in November, sectarian violence was in fact happening. We saw a peak in sectarian violence and expansion starting again in January. By that time, we had already integrated our Baghdad security plan inside the Dagger Brigade to focus on the defeat of sectarian expansion across the zone.

Now, you might say -- you might be led to believe that because consolidation of the population centers had happened, that sectarian violence has been on the downturn. What I would offer is that we continue to see attempts at sectarian expansion from the north and northeast of our areas, and we are focused very heavily on the defeat of those extrajudicial and murder squads that are projecting themselves from the north and northeast of our area.

So the motivation is still out there for criminal enterprises and financially motivated individuals to prosecute a sectarian cleansing campaign in northwest Baghdad. So we are focused very heavily on the defeat of those death squads and the destruction of their infrastructure so that they no longer threaten the population in northwest Baghdad.

Q But have you seen a major change in the makeup of the neighborhoods in your area? I mean, are areas that -- when you entered last November, areas that were Shi'a, are they still Shi'a? And areas that were Sunni, are you they still Sunni?

COL. BURTON: Predominately, they are. However, given the increased security situation in our areas, we have seen a return of displaced citizens back into portions of our area of responsibility. These aren't in huge numbers by any means. And when people started returning to the neighborhoods, the government of Iraq identified a challenge, because displaced people had been -- had arrived in neighborhoods after they had been pushed out from neighborhoods from other parts of the country and other parts of the city. Well, people trying to move back into the neighborhoods now found people in their houses. So the government of Iraq is developing a program to help get these people resettled.

We have seen, though, people moving back in to these neighborhoods of both sects -- both Shi'a and Sunni -- who are now actively involved in these communities where security has increased and the confidence in the security and improvement of the overall environment is understood by the citizens. So I believe that we have defeated for -- in the large part, sectarian expansion through the commitment of Iraqi security forces and coalition force efforts. We do see displaced citizens moving back into their homes that they had left previously.

These are all good news signs to us as we look towards the government of Iraq to develop policies to help us integrate these people back into their neighborhoods.

Q Colonel, this is Joe Tabet with Al Hurra. Talking on the sectarian violence, what could you tell us about the Jaish al-Mahdi, especially in your area of responsibility, in the north and the northeast of your area? What about its role -- its activity right now?

COL. BURTON: Okay. There's a lot of groups operating out of the northern and northeastern portion of our area of responsibility that operate under the banner of Jaish al-Mahdi, whether legitimately or illegitimately. What we do is we focus instead of on an organization, on the criminal actors within those organizations. Jaish al-Mahdi in large part we believe has responded to the call for cessation of hostilities from Muqtada al-Sadr, and so we welcome that.

We also understand, though, that there are rogue actors out there, where people that were interested in expanding and supporting a cause to defeat al Qaeda have transitioned their ideas to criminally and financially motivated enterprises, and they have now become rogue elements. They're not responsive to much of anybody. They still operate under the banner of Jaish al-Mahdi; do not believe that Jaish al-Mahdi is solely responsible for their actions, but they do help us to understand now who is responsive to and who is not responsive to Muqtada al-Sadr and some of the other leaders from the office of the Martyr Sadr.

Q Excuse me. Just to follow up, do you have any information about Muqtada al-Sadr? Where is he right now?

COL. BURTON: I have no information on where Muqtada al-Sadr is.

Q Colonel, it's Luis Martinez of ABC News. A question about contractors operating in your area. In light of the recent events with the Blackwater shootings in Nusoor Square, has there been more interaction and more oversight on your part with regards to how they operate in your sector?

COL. BURTON: Well, we have -- let me make it perfectly clear. We have contractors operating all over the place. We have contractors that are providing security to government officials. We have contractors that are fixing my digital communications systems, and we have contractors helping to sustain my route clearance equipment. All of these people play vital role.

The challenge that we run into with anybody, contractor or not, is when they transit our areas of responsibility without proper coordination.

I have been interviewed and I have made my position known about my increased desire to have increased coordination with these formations as they move through our area so that I can respond to any incidents that they may become involved in. And I believe that our message has been well received.

Q If I could follow up on another point, has there been a transit of weapons to insurgents in your area perchance through the use of some of these contractors that maybe belong -- that are protecting Iraqi government convoys, use of ambulances or something like that? Is that something that you guys are seeing in your sector?

COL. BURTON: Well, you know what, we have, in fact, uncovered a(n) ambulance in the northern portion of our sector that was transporting weapons in the city. We make it a habit to oversee the checkpoints throughout the city, to take the opportunity to check any vehicles in any patrols that aren't part of our formation, to ensure that they are in compliance with the rules. And when we find people that are not in compliance with the rules, we take the appropriate actions.

Q Does that include Iraqi government convoys that are protected by security contractors that in the past may have been granted transit through checkpoints? And has your checkpoint visibility been increased to counter that?

COL. BURTON: Listen, we have operations going on inside of Baghdad that focus on anybody transiting our area that we may be suspicious about their activity. Certainly I don't want to divulge all the specifics of that, but if I've got concerns about a certain party or organization that may be involved in the transport of illegal weapons or illegal personnel or involved in illegal activity, I'll let that be known to my higher headquarters

and then I develop programs to intercept and defeat those operations.

Q Colonel, Bill McMichael with the Military Times newspapers. When you briefed us in March you talked about IEDs and VBIEDs and EFPs that had been found in your area, both discovered and had been exploded. I wanted to kind of update that a little bit, or get you to update that if you could. In March you told us that you discovered -- that 89 IEDs had been detonated in January, and that number was down as of March 16th to 21. And you had also discovered 36 IEDs in January. That was down to 10 through half of March. EFPs, you discovered 12 in January; that was down to three in March. And I wonder if you can please give us just a sense specifically in those terms to compare what you're finding now and what's been -- what you've encountered now.

COL. BURTON: Well, I will. First, in the Sunni areas, we saw a transition from largely military-grade munitions to what we've termed homemade explosives that the insurgents were using to build bombs, some of them very effective and large bombs, to target and kill our soldiers. Some of them were effective; we have found even more.

But on the average, September was our monthly low, with less than one IED found on a daily basis throughout the entire month of September. So we've continued to see a constant downturn in IEDs in the Sunni-, al Qaeda- and their surrogates-associated areas.

Up where we were originally seeing explosively formed penetrators, we have made a robust effort to target the cells associated with the import and employment of those weapons systems, and we have seen a drastic reduction in their employment across the zone. Very rarely do we find the -- an effective EFP within our principal -- our former historical EFP hot spots, given the increased participation of local nationals in helping us to find these weapons, the increased responsiveness of the Iraqi security forces to defeat these cells and the increased effectiveness of our targeting operations to defeat the entire network that tries to get far left of the explosion before it hits our forces.

So we have seen a dramatic decrease in IEDs of both types -- well, of all three types: military-grade munitions, homemade explosives and explosively formed penetrators across the zone. Even more importantly, what I would tell you is that we're starting to see the effects of our disruption efforts and our targeting efforts on the ability of the enemy to employ IEDs effectively, a continued downturn in the reduction of effectiveness in the employment of both explosively formed penetrators and IEDs of homemade explosive or military-grade forms across our area of responsibility. And I believe this is because we have torn the networks apart; we have removed their experts and we've put them in prison, and we have them in such a state of disruption that they are no longer able to well-organize themselves to get ahead of us and our reconnaissance and direct-action efforts.

Q Could you give us some -- could you give us any numbers to associate with the EFPs that you're finding?

COL. BURTON: Well, I can't. I'll tell that you're we're finding one to two EFPs across the zone generally per month. We have had a few detonate outside of our area of responsibility in the last week or so. We had seen an increase of -- well, not an increase -- but about two a week in the -- much of August and September, but we were finding them before they were detonating on our soldiers, and that is a very positive trend. So we are not seeing the great wealth of explosively formed penetrators, munitions across our zone of action any longer.

What we did find -- we started finding down in the Sunni areas was an increased employment of very large IEDs designed to create massive casualties.

And through the integration of local nationals and local national tips, we've been able to pull those weapons off the battlefield effectively. Just the other night, in the former stated capital of the Islamic state of Iraq, in the actual hayy of Amiriyah, we removed a very large quantity of these weapons from the battlefield, along with the folks that put them there. We're real proud to know that we've removed that aspect from our enemy's hands.

Q Let me just follow up with the IEDs, Colonel. You said that you're finding less than one IED daily, at least in the Sunni areas, currently, and that would be roughly 30 a month. That's roughly what you were finding in January in your area. Can you give us a - - can you contrast that with the number of the IEDs that are being detonated in your area on a daily, weekly or monthly basis? There were -- you reported 89 detonations a month - - or for the month of January.

COL. BURTON: Yeah, right now in the month of September, there was a total of 19 IEDs found across the entire zone. That's why I'm saying it's less than one per day because the math doesn't add up to 30. So we found 19 in the month of September, and that has been a part of this continuous downturn in IEDs from across the zone. And in the month of September, in terms of detonations, we had a total of 21 detonations in the month of September, and most of those were largely ineffective against our soldiers. We suffered some damage to some vehicles, mainly flattened tires and some damage to the armor, but our soldiers who are walking away from these most of the time in very good shape.

Q It's Kristin Roberts again. As American troop levels start to decline to pre-surge levels very gradually over the next few months, do you think you're going to be able to hold on to these gains that you're citing for us?

COL. BURTON: Well, that is a great, great question, and here's what we're doing. In the entire zone, as we continue to work with local nationals that are involved and interested in providing security, we're creating more and more capacity on the part of the Iraqi security forces.

I fully understand that at some point I've got to transition battlespace responsibilities to the local nationals. So, our partnership at the joint security sites partner training with our Iraqi security force partners and formal integration of these volunteers serves to create

capacity in terms of security forces that can assist us in retaining control of areas that we have already achieved control in.

That allows us to take available forces and then relocate them to areas where we might need -- where we don't have enough volunteer security forces and where we might need to have an increased coalition force presence. That informs us of how we cycle these volunteers through academy and how we cycle these volunteers into the Iraqi security forces so that we increase capability at the local level to allow the coalition force commanders and the Iraqi security force commanders to reallocate forces in space to sustain the effort to secure the population of northwest Baghdad.

Do I think we can sustain it? I do. It will take, though, a continued investment on the part of the coalition forces and the government of Iraq to identify -- integrate these great volunteers into legitimate Iraqi security forces and then employ them effectively and non-sectarianly against criminals, insurgents and terrorists across the zone.

Q You said we're now under control, out of the 95 in your area. Are the Iraqi security forces playing the lead role in controlling those areas?

COL. BURTON: You know, the Iraqi security forces in all of our areas are working in partnership fully with us. In some areas I've been able to reduce the number of coalition forces and their responsibilities there so I can go out and move my forces into other areas to create increased effects, and we're developing plans to do that right now, in one of our areas in particular.

The Iraqi security forces, though, let me make no mistake about it, they are planning and they are employing forces across their zone in partnership with us. And there are some areas of our area of responsibility where I put limited coalition forces in on a daily basis because the Iraqis have gained control of this.

Now, there is a large portion of my area -- or our area in northwest Baghdad that is currently absent of any standing Iraqi police force. That is a lack of capacity. These volunteers that we're recruiting and integrating into the Iraqi security forces will help us build that capacity. And then as the coalition force commanders decide that the security situation is appropriate and we have transitioned to retain with Iraqi security forces fully in the lead, then we can relocate coalition forces and Iraqi army forces to places where they are needed more.

Q So U.S. forces still -- are still playing the lead role in controlling those neighborhoods, right? I mean, it's not until the retain phase that the Iraqis take control?

COL. BURTON: We have turned over no area specifically to the Iraqi security forces. We retain partnered responsibilities throughout the area of responsibility because I still have a responsibility, (as described ?), the brigade combat team commander, to assist the Iraqi district -- security district commanders in increasing their capacity across the zone of responsibility. And I do that by remaining plugged in with them and conducting

combined security coordination meetings and combined governance and essential services coordination meetings with the Iraqi security force to increase their capacity.

So we are fully engaged as partners across the zone right now and are looking hard at areas where we can formally turn over those area of responsibilities solely to Iraqi security force control, where the coalition forces would not be involved other than in the transition team role.

MR. WHITMAN: We have time for about one more. And Louie (sp), we'll let you take it.

Q Sir, it's Louie (sp) Martinez again with ABC. You're talking about the volunteers. You mentioned Amiriyah. I think I saw that Amiriyah's experienced the first month without a sectarian murder or any kind of murder in about a year. That is primarily a Sunni area, and I think what turned -- the turnaround there was primarily because volunteers stepped forward and approached you for assistance against al Qaeda. Are you seeing the same level of volunteerism, if you will, on the part of the Shi'a in your sector?

COL. BURTON: The answer to that is, almost. In the Sunni areas in places like Amiriyah -- specifically in Amiriyah, but also reflected in places like Ghazalia and now Khadra and Jamia, which is in the center portion of our zone of operations, we're seeing increased organized -- organization of volunteers that are working directly under the coalition force's control. They came to us seeking legitimacy and integration into the Iraqi security forces.

In Amiriyah, those volunteers came forward to us initially because they were tired of al Qaeda and they wanted to take the responsibility for removing al Qaeda and their surrogates into their own hands. They ultimately and near immediately agreed to work in partnership with us and then fall in underneath our area -- under our responsibility as a contracted security force.

In the largely Shi'a areas, we have begun to see increased participation with our coalition forces and Iraqi security forces across those zones. We have three areas primarily -- and I'm not going to divulge them, for fear that they might fall apart on us and become targets -- that have come forward and asked to organize volunteers that are focused on defeating the criminal and extremist elements that operate relatively freely in pieces of this -- in parts of this city that we currently regard as disrupt.

So they are coming forward. They're not exactly like what's going on in the predominantly Sunni areas, but there are large portions of the Shi'a population that are eager to coordinate and cooperate with us in both the security and essential services realms to increase capacity of the government of Iraq in northwest Baghdad.

Q Quick follow-up. When you say the Shi'a in those three areas -- they are stepping forward because they're looking for help against the Jaish al-Mahdi?

COL. BURTON: They're stepping forward because they're tired of the violence and they're tired of the criminal enterprises that are going on. There has been transitions between what Jaish al-Mahdi was originally organized for, as I've been told in northwest Baghdad -- which was to defeat al Qaeda -- and a transition to more criminally oriented extremist actors that are just out to kill people that think differently than they do. And the large moderate population in our Shi'a areas is tired of it, and they want to take up arms or at least take up the opportunity to provide us increased information in an organized fashion to rid their neighborhoods of these extremists, who offer no promise of reconstruction or a revitalization of their areas.

What I have not yet seen in the Shi'a areas is the formal coming forward of an organized group that would be representative of what we see in places like Amiriyah. I think time will tell. I think the conditions are set right now, and I think local leaders are looking to reach out to us, now that they see a veil of protection for their efforts, so that they can become more active participants in the security forces of northwest Baghdad, be that either as policemen, be that national policemen or as formal members of the Iraqi army.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, Colonel, we have reached the end of our time. And before we bring it to a close, I wanted to give you one more opportunity to highlight or perhaps touch on something that we haven't here, so let me turn it back to you before we close it.

COL. BURTON: Hey, I appreciate that, and I appreciate you providing me the opportunity to share a glimpse of one small piece of a very complex environment.

As I've stated earlier, the trends are positive across our area of responsibility. Violence is down, reconciliation and participation is up, and that's all good news. Grassroots and local reconciliation and revitalization efforts are clear indications that the citizens of Baghdad have had it with senseless violence and now feel secure enough that they can actively participate with their government in security, reconstruction and revitalization of their neighborhoods and ultimately their nation.

Our ISF partners continue to improve their capabilities to control ever larger portions of the battlefield, while openly working with volunteers to increase the capacity (borne ?) during security. Our soldiers are making a tremendous difference and remain fully committed to this mission.

By the way, in September, a month remaining in the fiscal year, Specialist Matthew Adams (sp) from Alpha Company, 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry, Task Force Blue Spader, became the 1,000th soldier in this brigade combat team to re-enlist.

Our soldiers are committed to this mission. They want to see it through.

We remain blessed to have the enduring support of our tremendous Task Force Guardian and family readiness groups in Schweinfurt, Fort Bragg, Fort Bliss, Fort Hood and Fort Riley, along with the continued tremendous support from the American people and other freedom-loving people from across the world.

I'd ask all of you to continue to tell our soldiers' and their families' stories and keep them in your thoughts and prayers as we continue missions.

Thanks again for your time and your attention. It has been my pleasure to tell you all a little bit about our efforts here. First team and duty first.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you, Colonel, and we hope that before you leave we get one more opportunity to talk to you about what you're doing and your responsibilities.

Thank you.