

PRESS CONFERENCE:

Lt. Gen. Bill Rollo, Deputy Commanding General, Multi-National Force - Iraq

Matthew Lodge, Deputy Chief of Mission, British Embassy

Des Browne, Secretary of State of Defense for the United Kingdom

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REPORTERS:

DEBORAH HAYNES FROM THE TIMES

MIQUEL MARQUEZ FROM ABC NEWS

DAVID CLARKE FROM REUTERS

AMIT PALEY FROM THE WASHINGTON POST

AHMED JASSEM FROM AL-ARABIYA

REP1-2

LODGE: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you very much for coming here this afternoon. Let me please start by introducing Secretary of State for Defense for the United Kingdom, the Right Honorable Des Browne, MP. And on his left, Lieutenant General Rollo, Deputy Commanding General, MNF-I. The Secretary of State was in Basra yesterday and arrived late last night and has had a number of meetings and calls in Baghdad during today. He will shortly make a statement after which you will have the opportunity to pose a few questions. Can I ask that when you are invited to pose a question, can you please clearly state your name and indicate which news organization you work for? Secretary of State.

BROWNE: Thank you very much. This is my seventh visit to Iraq since I became Secretary of State for Defense some eighteen months ago. I've had the opportunity during this visit to have some very useful discussions with the Democratic Government of Iraq, with coalition partners, and with senior British military commanders. I'm glad to say that these discussions have taken place in the context of an improving security situation across Iraq and increasingly capable Iraqi security forces and government institutions. Most notably of course from my perspective, the Iraqi government and the coalition commanders have now agreed that Basra province should move to provincial Iraqi control in mid-December. I pay tribute to all who have made this significant event possible, and in particular of course, the British Forces whose commitment and sacrifice has been at the heart of this

success. Although significant progress has been made, the job is far from over. And it's imperative that the gains that we have made are sustained and the hard won opportunities which now present themselves are taken. Britain will continue to play its part. We remain committed to fulfilling our international obligations to the Iraqi government and to its people. In my discussions this morning with Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, we discussed in some detail how Britain and the international community should continue to deliver this commitment. And as I discussed this morning with Defense Minister Abdul Qader, following transition, the British-led Multi-National Division Southeast will continue to support the training and development of Iraqi forces. This will be a joint effort between General Graham Benz and General Morhein and will include the 10th and 14th Divisions of the Iraqi Army. We will for the time being continue to maintain British forces capable of acting in strong support of Iraqi forces for as long as is necessary. This requirement will reduce as the Iraqi forces develop. Security is of course only one part of the necessary mix. It is also vital, as Prime Minister Gordon Brown emphasized, that we work together to deliver tangible economic initiatives to give people a stake in the future of their country. To maintain Iraq's development, long-term healthy Iraqi economy, it is vital. This was the focus of very constructive discussions today with Prime Minister Maliki and with Deputy Prime Minister Barham Salih. And I made clear the

UK's continuing commitment to support the Iraqi economy, particularly in the south. Thank you very much.

LODGE: Thank you. Can I invite the first question please?

BROWNE: Gentlemen over there on the left.

REP1: Speaking Arabic

INT: Ali Jafar from [unintelligible] A few days ago the Saudi Monarch King Abdullah said that Britain didn't team well with terrorism. Is this about the role of the British forces in Basra, especially now that Basra is now the scene of international conflict?

BROWNE: Well, I first of all say it not appropriate to conflict these two issues. I mean I think my colleague in government Dr. Howells explained in some detail the government's response to King Abdullah's comments as they were reported in the context of his interview with the BBC. And as far as Basra is concerned, I am very clear that there is progress taking place in Basra at the moment. It was expected by some that when the British forces withdrew from Basra City itself, there would be a significant deterioration in the security there. That has not happened. The level of security has been sustained, if not improved, and of course the people of that city are no longer subject to the significant level of violence that was directed against the British forces and our allies when we were based

particularly in Basra palace, and that has substantially improved security in the city. The Iraqi Army under the leadership of General Morhein and the improving Iraqi police under the leadership of General Gilahl have been able to deal with the security challenges and we suffer ourselves. On the 23rd of October, when the maintenance of the security of that city was challenged, we were able to deal with that without any reintervention from coalition forces or from the UK forces.

LODGE: Thank you. Lady in the second.

HAYNES: Deborah Haynes from the Times. A couple of questions. Will you be bringing in extra troops when PIQ happens in December, just to oversee a smooth transition? And secondly, when the overwatch period happens, how many troops are going to be based in Kuwait? And what exactly is their role going to be?

BROWNE: The answer to those questions is comparatively straight forward. As far as PIQ is concerned. The fact of PIQ and our ability to be able to handle the security file of transition security to the Iraqi forces is a function of our assessment of their ability to be able to handle security. So it will be absolutely unnecessary for us to augment them at the point at which they are taking over security. So we will continue through that transition process on a path of reduction as the Prime Minister explained. We plan

at the moment to have about 500 troops who will principally be involved in logistics, based outside of the country, particularly in Kuwait.

LODGE: Thank you. Gentleman in the front row here.

REP2: Asking question in Arabic.

INT: My question to Mr. Browne. What is the significance of your visit to the governate of Basra? Do you have a new working plan?

BROWNE: As I said in my opening remarks, I have been here in Iraq seven times in the last 18 months. On each occasion where it has been possible, my visit has been both to our troops in the south of the country in order that I can see for myself what they are doing and what is happening there and be briefed by our commanding officers and others, including those who work in the PRT, about what progress we have been making. But it is also important for me to speak to government ministers here in Baghdad so that if necessary I can ensure that they get the level of support that is necessary to build on the work that we are doing in the south, but also to discuss with them, as I said in my opening remarks, the security situation across the country and our shared objectives of generating opportunities for the people of Iraq to be able to live in peace and to take advantage of the economic opportunities that this country provides. So I have the same type of conversations every time I come, addressing the same issues. And because I've now had them in seven separate occasions, I can see whether

progress is taking place or not, and unequivocally I see progress taking place on this occasion.

LODGE: Thank you. Gentleman at the end of the second row.

MARQUEZ: Hello. Miguel Marquez with ABC News. And this may be a question better for the General to answer, General Rollo. Now that we kind of see the light at the end of the tunnel, it doesn't feel exactly like victory. And maybe you could give me a sense of where you think things are versus where maybe where you wanted to be when you left. Obviously there's great competition amongst different groups in the south. The violence, while maybe contained to some degree, we also here things in Diwaniyah. There have been areas or bases I think that the Brits pulled out of last year where there was some rioting that occurred afterwards. I'm not entirely sure of the location. I'm not sure if you guys were in charge of that one. But there are clearly a lot of tensions in the south. And I'm curious if you could give us your impressions of where you're leaving things.

ROLLO: I don't think it's our victory that we're talking about. What we're in the game of is handing over to the Iraqi authorities as soon as we feel they are in a state to do that, and take it forwards. That has been our aim throughout, and it's our aim now. We've handed over three provinces. There have been security issues in I think each of them. And in each case they've been dealt with by the Iraqis with minimal or no help from us. And people are pursuing their normal lives there. Basra is the largest, the

most complex, the most politically difficult. But we have made progress there, and that's what PIQ will signify come December. But it's the Iraqi's future, not our victory, that we're talking about.

LODGE: Next question please. Gentleman at the end of the third row here.

CLARKE: Just a couple of questions. It's David Clarke from Reuters. First question, 2,500 at the base. Is that sufficient number to secure the base and make sure that crucial supply lines are kept open? Or will that have to be supplemented by other coalition forces? And another question, not about Iraq to the Defense Secretary. How comfortable are you that troops in southern Afghanistan are not being stretched?

BROWNE: 2,500 at the base is that enough? Yes. I mean that, frankly, the simple answer to it. The number is fixed by the tasks that we have agreed with our coalition partners and in consultation with the Iraqi government that we will carry out. And of course our primary responsibility is to secure the safety of those people whom we deploy into that environment. You would not expect it to be anything else. The actual figure is a troops-to-task figure, based on military advice, with exactly the focus that you implied in your question ought to be the priority. And that is the security of those whom we ask to do this work. As far as southern Afghanistan is concerned, we have a significant deployment of troops into southern Afghanistan, particularly in Helmand province. Although our troops

operate across other provinces. And as we speak, you know, with other members of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) there on operations in Oruzgan province, which is principally the responsibility of our allies and partnership with the Australians. It is no secret that the international community has not met the commanding officer's requirement in terms of his description of what was absolutely necessary for that operation in the best of all possible worlds, but we are increasing day by day the commitments of other countries. They may be comparatively small commitments, but they're very important because the niche capabilities. The proof of the pudding in my view there is in the eating, and we have overmatched the insurgents, in principal the Taliban there every time that we have met them. We were promised by them this year that there would be a spring offensive. It never materialized. If there was spring offensive at all, it was by the ISAF forces. I firmly believe, as do those who serve us in that part of the world, that we are making progress in very, very difficult circumstances, but equally well. I continue in every international opportunity and every international context I get to encourage those who are with us in Afghanistan to support us in the best possible way that they can.

LODGE: We've just got time for one or two more questions now. So the gentleman in the second row, please.

PALEY: Hi Amit Paley from the Washington Post. A number of citizens and observers in Basra have described Mafioso gangland-style of violence there and a rising level of extremism. Can you describe some of the specific metrics that you have that lead you to the conclusion that it's getting better in Basra, and whether you think that – even if it is getting better – whether you think that is an acceptable level of security in Basra?

BROWNE: Well, I mean, I didn't at any stage say that what's presently the situation in Basra was an acceptable level of security. My ambition and my whole focus of my effort is to try to improve the situation in Basra. But we have reached a stage in Basra where it is very clear that if the situation is to improve there, then the Iraqis themselves that will improve that situation. It's the development of governance, of economic opportunities, and of security, and the control and in hands of Iraqis themselves that will improve that. The very obvious metric for the reduction of violence in the city of Basra is that as 80% of that violence was directed against UK and coalition forces, that violence has disappeared from the environment. On no other measure of security has violence increased to my knowledge. Obviously we depend, as you do, and your question implies, you know, and speaking to ordinary Basraris themselves as to what life is like for them. I mean, I am not suggesting that there are not difficulties and that they cannot be characterized in the sort of way that you describe, but there is increasing evidence that the Iraqi security forces, particularly Army and

progressively the police, are improving in the response to that. And I point you to the incident of the 23rd of October, when the Iraqis security forces themselves—and their politicians—dealt with a potentially very nasty set of circumstances.

PALEY: Has that violence not been replaced by infighting amongst your groups themselves? I mean is there evidence that the level of violence has actually gone down overall in Basra?

BROWNE: Well, there is no evidence, unless you are bringing it to my attention, other than anecdotal evidence of an increase in violence in the city. It's not what's been reported to me. And you have to bear in mind I have people who are regularly in touch with interlocutors in the city. I mean, I have to say that the tension between the Shia groups in the south of Iraq is nothing new. This tension existed while we were there in the city. It's the ability of the Iraqi security forces to be able to deal with that is the difference today from when we were there and had responsibility for security of the city.

LODGE: Thank you. Time for one last question please. The gentleman in the front row.

REP3: Asking question in Arabic.

JASSEM: Ahmed Jassem from al-Arabiya. We are fighting terrorism and it is well known that Basra is one of the biggest provinces in Iraq. It has many oil wells, and the terrorists are using these wells to destroy the Iraqi people. How do you deal with this problem? And what's your attitude towards terrorism in general?

BROWNE: Well, I mean, my attitude towards terrorism is well known. I mean, I condemn it wherever it occurs and in whatever guise it appears. I have utter condemnation of terrorism, so I think that's comparatively straightforward. I know that the corruption of the wealth of oil in southern Iraq has been used to support organizations and further violence that your colleague behind you described as a form of "gangsterism" or "mafia violence." I think that probably accurately characterizes the nature of the violence. But as in every community is a matter for the Iraqi people themselves to address that issue. A sustainable future for Basra will be to an Iraqi model, and it will involve the development of leadership from the community and security forces who identify with the culture and norms of that community. I don't think there's any question about that. I think we have made some progress in that regard, and the evidence of the last six or seven weeks, certainly since we came out of Basra palace is quite clear, although there is still a long way to go. As far as the future of Basra and southern Iraq is concerned, it is in my view potentially one of the richest parts of the world. There is the potential to generate an excess of \$30

billion of oil wealth from those lines every year. If everyone would recognize that in those sorts of figures there's enough for everyone, then I'm sure people could settle down and share it rather than competing over who will dominate it, which has been the curse of that area for far too long.

LODGE: Thank you very much. That concludes the press conference this afternoon. Thank you all again for coming.