

DoD News Briefing from Iraq

Presenter: Commander, 2nd Brigade 3rd Infantry Division Col. Terry Ferrell

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COL. GARY KECK (director, Defense Department Press Office): All right. Good morning, everyone. I'm Colonel Gary Keck, the director of the Press Office, and I'm -- I guess Mr. Whitman's running a little late, so he may take over from me, but let's go ahead and begin, because we don't want to waste too much of Colonel Ferrell's time.

We have with us today, briefing from Iraq, Colonel Terry Ferrell, commander of the 2nd Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division. He is operating in southeast Baghdad as part of Multinational Division Center, and this is the first time he's spoken with us in this forum. His brigade deployed in May of 2007 as the final surge brigade. And they're based out of Fort Stewart, Georgia.

Colonel Ferrell's speaking to us from Forward Operating Base Kalsu, and he's going to give us a(n) update on what his unit's been doing, and I'm sure he'll then take your questions.

With that, we'll turn it over to Colonel Ferrell. Terry, can you hear me?

COL. FERRELL: Good morning, and yes, I am Colonel Terry Ferrell. I am the commander of 2nd Brigade Combat Team of the 3rd Infantry Division.

And just to give you a little background on the brigade -- (brief audio break) -- last surge brigade, and we arrived in June. And we were responsible -- we were assigned the responsibility for the area -- southwestern area of the Tigris River Valley as part of the 3rd Infantry Division on June 15, 2007. Our area of responsibility encompasses Abu Waitha, Arab Jabour, Hawr Rajab, Adwaniyah, Madhariyah (sp), just a few of the population centers. This was a former Sunni Ba'athist stronghold that became an al Qaeda sanctuary. And the division under Major General Rick Lynch identified this as a sanctuary and realized that they needed a force to come in and deal with that.

From this area, extremists trained, planned and conducted operations. Specifically in Arab Jabour, particularly, it was a safe haven for weapons caches and bomb-making factories, and it became a critical hub for trafficking weapons, bombs and fighters into Baghdad. (Audio break) -- defensive belts and a very detailed C-2 structure across the area that was sophisticated and on the scale of a conventional military force.

This region was a very simple farming area where residents really drew their livelihood from the Tigris. Al Qaeda found it easy to intimidate the people and foster a climate of fear.

When we deployed into the area in June of 2007, we knew we would face a difficult fight to reclaim the ground but quickly discovered a local population that was willing to pitch in and help with the fight. It came down to what people were willing to live with. The majority of the Sunni citizens decided they'd had enough. They realized that it didn't matter what they had to do; they wanted to take back their neighborhoods, regardless if they were Sunni, regardless what tribe, and in many cases, if they were from the same family.

The security provided by the coalition and the Iraqi security forces yielded the opportunity for the local citizens to step up and provide valuable intelligence early on in our operations, as well as for them to start securing key infrastructure, that led to the birth of the concerned local citizens program that we now have in our area.

On top of multiple operations under the leadership of the division, over the first several months we were able to work our way through to get to where we are today. Now here we are December 3rd, less than six months after arriving into theater, we have crippled the al Qaeda in our area and contributed to a dramatic turnaround for the security in Baghdad. We continue to uncover and destroy weapons caches every day, depleting what is al Qaeda's ultimately finite arsenal.

Locally, we've lifted the blanket of fear on these communities, folded them into our security apparatus and gotten to a point now where we can slowly begin turning our focus to reconstruction and capacity building. All these things are a buffer against future al Qaeda -- (short audio break).

But al Qaeda's not letting this territory go without a fight. We have one of Iraq's youngest and most fragile concerned local citizens programs, but it really only started to stand up in form in September. And then during this time, we've got to the point we've formed five concerned citizen programs across all of the brigade's operational environment.

Al Qaeda wants to strike while they're still weak, and over the past months, insurgents have hit concerned local citizens checkpoints in two areas in our operational environment, in both Hawr Rajab and Ad Diwaniyah. In both areas, the concerned local citizens suffered from losses but they stood firm. And in conjunction with the Iraqi security forces and the coalition forces, they were able to defeat the insurgents' attack and continue to stand in their positions and maintain the security in their towns, and we continue to go forward in the towns today.

What it shows is al Qaeda is desperate, by launching -- (short audio break) - concerned local citizen checkpoints. By attacking these perceived soft targets, they're giving the Iraqis the chance to demonstrate their capabilities. It's an encouraging development, actually. Despite the violence, it embodies the security relationship that we're working for and as the coalition force is seeking to establish with the Iraqis.

With the combined efforts of the coalition, the Iraqi security forces and the concerned local citizens, our area has experienced a dramatic drop in attack and violence. In the meantime, the towns of Arab Jabour, Abu Waitha and Madhariyah are experiencing rebirth through the hard-fought efforts of the people. Schools are back in session. Stores are opening. Markets are starting to pick up. What you see is local citizens are taking back their towns. We see this across all of our region. They want a normal life. They're starting to get back to that normal life.

From our side, we're using tools that we have -- I have available within the brigade and through the division to assist them in the process. We're using the CERP program -- Commanders Emergency Relief Program -- and microgrants to bolster and expand their progress, to assist them along the way. Where we're going to go over the next few months to help some of these communities as we continue along the security line, we're also going to focus on other lines as we want the lines of operation, specifically in the area of transitioning governance and economic development, we're going to assist the local Iraqis to use that to better themselves and to help us as we continue to fight against al Qaeda.

We'll continue to move out quickly incorporating our embedded provincial reconstruction team to increase the capacity of our allies along those lines. Much like the kinetic fight that we fought for the last six months, an increased chance of success will

occur if we surge just as hard on those lines of operation. We've worked hard to establish attainable end states. So we'll submit the full-fledged security and develop -- (audio break) -- for future development of Iraq as opposed to a sanctuary for insurgents.

Along the transitional line of operation, we're not only going to continue to train and conduct operations with the Iraqi army, but we're going to start to work with Iraqi police. Our area does not have Iraqi police, but through the efforts of both the coalition and the Iraqi citizens that we're working with, we're going to stand up new police stations in Abu Waitha and Hawr Rajab. So we'll see the recruitment, the training and the operational aspects of police stations starting to form in those areas.

From the governance perspective, we're working with areas that we're starting with a clean slate. No governance, no type of council members were there so we're starting from scratch. But you see councils are starting to form in these areas, so we're building the basics and we're tying them back in to the local districts as they get a voice and work all the way back into the -- (audio break) -- government of Iraq. That's a good news story that we want to continue to build off of and watch as that grows.

From the economic side, we see growth already starting to take place. You see shops opening, you see stores opening, you see people getting businesses back up and running. We will continue to work that through a very aggressive small and large business development process, utilizing our PRTs -- EPRT to make that project work. And then we will work very aggressively through the agricultural revitalization programs that we have ongoing to get the farmers -- the process they need to get the farming back up and running. That is an ongoing process that we see growth and potential there, and that's -- the locals want to get their farms running. That's a good news story.

And then public works programs. Working back through the local government and working through the provincial government, we see that as an avenue that many of our concerned citizens can transition to and work to, and that is something -- (audio break) -- very much forward to engaging.

Everyone here, coalition and Iraqis, understand how delicate this new found security really is. The insurgents wait like vultures, ready to take advantage of any sign of weakness.

We continue to push hard to capitalize on the security gains that we currently have. And we understand that we will continue joint operations and continually clear the enemy throughout our region. We're fully aware that the enemy will slip back into areas where they think we will not go. But by using mature intelligence sources, we're able to stay aware of the enemy movements and locations and strike accordingly. We're confident that with our Iraqi security forces and concerned local citizen partners, we'll continue the counterinsurgent activities and ultimately defeat the enemy threat to our region.

Many people have speculated on what will happen when the surge ends and U.S. troops begin returning home. That's not a concern for us in my region. The surge enabled the gains that we made so far -- (audio break). This month, we'll complete the bulk of the construction of a new patrol base in Hawr Rajab. That will lead to additional security in that town. And Hawr Rajab is going to be a model community. As we watch that community grow and the leaders take hold of that community, we will be there to work with them and defeat the remnants of al Qaeda in conjunction with the Iraqi security forces there.

You've got to understand, the enemy has finite resources. That's why each enemy killed or captured, each new tip received and each weapon cache found is significant. We're getting better every day at uncovering and exploiting intelligence. And each new event gives us one additional piece of the puzzle in dismantling the al Qaeda network.

In summary, it's been widely reported there has been terrific drops in the number of casualties. I think that it's a bit premature to declare ourselves victorious here. Indeed, the enemy here has shown ability to resurrect themselves simply by the attacks we've -- (audio break) -- and then again in Hawr Rajab.

If not for the continuous efforts by the Iraqis to reconcile and work here, and if crime and intimidation goes unchecked by Iraqi security forces and the government, if there's not significant economic growth, we will see al Qaeda re-emerge in this region that we're currently working. We will continue to work with Iraqi counterparts, fully knowing that there will be tough days ahead. We understand that. But the value of our efforts is much more clear today as we work together to accomplish the mission that lies ahead.

Thank you. I look forward to your questions.

COL. KECK: Courtney?

Q Hi, Colonel. This is Courtney Kube from NBC News.

You mentioned a dramatic drop in attacks and violence in your area. Can you please quantify that? What's the numbers from when you first started back in June till now? And then just give us an idea of what types of attacks you see for the most part in your area?

COL. FERRELL: Well, I would say when we first got here in June we were averaging the first couple of weeks about 42 -- 42 attacks per week for the first several weeks we were here.

And right now, we're looking at about 14 to 15 attacks per week, so that is a significant decrease.

Initially we were looking at IEDs and small arms and indirect attacks. And now predominantly what we are seeing is small arms attacks and some indirect attacks. But those are significantly reduced, and we see predominantly small arms attacks throughout our area of operations.

COL. KECK: Andrew.

Q Colonel, this is Andrew Gray from Reuters.

Can you tell us how much the national political picture affects what you're doing on the ground in your area? How important are these items of legislation we hear are being talked about, the actions of the ministry of interior? How much is the national political picture a factor for you in your operations?

COL. FERRELL: Could you repeat that, please? You're cutting in and out.

Q Sure, I was just wondering, how much is the national political picture a factor for you in your operations? How much do the national political developments -- how important are they to what you're doing there?

COL. FERRELL: Right now, we're very focused down on the ground on what we're doing working day in and day out. And we have a very directed mission that we see: blocking accelerants into Baghdad, protecting the population in preventing sectarian violence, working with the locals from their perspective of the actions there. We have that mission and we go forth every day and do it.

Understanding what's going on around us, it does not have a significant impact on us at all. We have a clear mission, and the soldiers are getting after it every day. It's very impressive to watch what these young men and women do.

COL. KECK: AI.

Q Colonel, it's Al Pessin from Voice of America.

If I could just get you to flesh out the statistics that you mentioned to Courtney, about these -- the reduction in IEDs, do you have any information that might suggest that that has to do with reduction in the supply of EFP materials from Iran, for example, that we've been talking about? Or to what do you attribute the reduction in what are the most deadly weapons that have been used by the insurgents?

COL. FERRELL: Well, specifically in our area of operations, what I attribute the reduction to is the fact that we're finding so many caches. We're eroding his resource -- (audio break) -- where we're located.

You know, once again, we're in a farming region along the banks of the Tigris. Our threat was deep-buried, and I'm sure you've heard of deep-buried IEDs and then, of course, surface-laid IEDs -- no true threat for our soldiers at this time or previously to EFPs. There was deep-buried and surface-laid -- predominantly the erosion of those caches and the ability for him to emplace.

And the presence of our forces and the presence of the concerned citizens has reduced his ability to place them and the ability for him to have the resource to place them.

It's significant when you look at the amount of caches that concerned citizens have turned in. Recently, just this past week, for example, seven caches were identified, and three of the seven were turned in by concerned citizens. In previous weeks, it's been as high as 15 caches identified by concerned citizens -- (audio break) -- and then when you lay out what is inside those caches and the amount of material that can be turned in to an IED, it's phenomenal what they have saved being emplace to use against our soldiers or used against those concerned citizens or just normal citizens walking up and down the streets and driving down the roads.

Q How has that impacted the casualty rate among your troops?

COL. FERRELL: We've been very successful with our casualties recently. We've not experienced any casualties to IEDs for several months, and we continue with the erosion of resources as we look through that. And it all goes back to my belief that we're on the ground, we're amongst the population, living and working with the population, and we're finding his caches. And we're denying him the ability to get out and emplace them and that he does have some way that he can emplace them, then we find it, and the concerned citizens are working with us to do that.

Q Colonel, it's Jim Mannion from Agence France-Presse. It sounds to me like you still have awful lot to do in your area: standing up police forces, setting up governance, getting the economy going again. So the question is: Do you have enough time to accomplish these things?

COL. FERRELL: There's a lot to be done, granted, but you see that every day progress is being made, and what you see if you were on the ground here is the Iraqi government, the Iraqi citizens that we work and live with every day taking responsibility and moving us forward. So there's time here to do it, there's people here to do it. So I don't see that there's a clock on the wall per se as to when it will be done because the

local leaders within the communities are making progress. You see the shops opening. Every day there's a new shop opening. Every day there's someone standing up and moving forward who wants to be a leader of that community, whether it's working on water, working on electricity; if it's making a butcher more responsible, giving him more capabilities from only one goat for a week to five goats per week to 10 goats per week, you see that happening, and it's just the local leaders taking responsibility. So it's being done.

Q Colonel, Jeff Schogol with Stars and Stripes. On November 22nd, al Qaeda attacked concerned local citizens in Hawr Rajab and killed about seven of them. Can you talk about how that effected the concerned local citizens in that town?

COL. FERRELL: Yes, I can. That attack on the morning of the 22nd, concerned local citizens were attacked, Iraqi security forces were attacked, and they stood their ground. As they fought through that, coalition forces, it was a combined effort. So there was concerned local citizens lost that day. They stood through the fight, they defeated the attack, and at the end of the day, the concerned local citizens are still there, the leadership of the program is still intact. And as a matter of fact, today they are still manning their checkpoints, there's more people that are participating in the program, and they are bringing more leadership and more engagement to the town.

The shops opened up the same day. That was what was amazing. When I went into the towns, just an hour or two after the attack, the shops were opened back up, and the citizens -- the leader of the concerned citizens program of that specific area was there on the ground, and he had everyone rallied around him. They were manning checkpoints, and they were -- (audio break) -- coalition forces. And it's the same people there today. They've been there from day one, and they're still there. It's very impressive.

Q If I could follow up, if I understand your earlier comments correctly, al Qaeda is now targeting concerned local citizens, what you say, are just beginning to stand up. How much of a strategic threat is that, that they're attacking the concerned local citizens?

COL. FERRELL: Well, the threat to us and the threat to concerned citizens, they want to come in specifically where our area of operations they see where they've had safe haven, they've had a sanctuary, and as we came in in June and we were able to defeat and push them out of certain areas that they've operated for a year or more -- were sanctuaries. They were able to move from town to town until we had forces in there to either kill or capture them. Now they're not able to do that because concerned citizens are thickening those lines and taking back their towns -- (audio break). The al Qaeda wants to come back in and show that they can dominate. They were able to dominate those local communities; they were able to bring fear and intimidation to the people, and they're not able to do that now.

So the people have forced them out, so they strike back. They want to show that they still have some level of control over the local populace, and they can't. In both cases, in Hawr Rajab and Adwaniyah, the concerned local citizens, just the local people, was able to turn al Qaeda away, and that was significant.

COL. KECK: Jim.

Q Colonel, it's Jim Mannion again. I wanted to go back to the caches that you're finding, and I'm wondering if the munitions and explosives and that kind of thing

that you're finding in these caches are still Saddam-era materiel or is it, you know, more recent stuff that would be coming from other places?

COL. FERRELL: When we find caches, we find caches that potentially have -- the munitions have been there for very long periods of time.

We find munitions that probably were moved around when I came in the first time, in 2001, from one storage facility to the next and buried in the ground. We find caches that are buried deeply into the ground. They're very crafty at how they hide these caches.

In our area, we find some new munitions, small-arms munition-type ammunition, rifle ammunition, crew-served ammunition. That's what we see predominantly here. But in most cases, the mortar ammunition and any type of newness, when you look at it, it's not really that new. It's been around for a while.

Q Is there any sense that they are running out of these Saddam-era munitions that the country was awash in, that you're getting -- you're starting to get to the bottom of that, or is there still an awful lot of that out there?

COL. FERRELL: You still see munitions out there. I mean, these caches are buried throughout -- once again, this was a sanctuary, and they had time to prepare it. They had time to bury the munitions. And there -- we find new ones every -- new caches every day. We get reports of them throughout, and we go and search them out and find them, and of course the concerned citizens do tremendous work there as well.

But we do see the home-made explosives with just fertilizer. As you know -- I mean, this is not new -- and the HME-type explosives that they can make very quickly is becoming one of the items that we watch for.

And that is because they cannot -- (audio break) -- does not mean the caches are not there, but when you look at the number of caches that we have been able to find on this battlefield, the caches that have been discovered, turned in and destroyed has significantly reduced what he has to use against our brigade.

So we do see some home-made explosives. And we work that aspect, too. Concerned citizens are great about that. They'll turn that in as well, and they're very good about seeking it out and reporting to us and showing us where it's at.

Q Colonel, it's Al Pessin again. Can you give us an idea of how many concerned local citizens you're working with in your AOR? How do you assess their dependability? How do you assess their willingness to work with the Iraqi security forces and under the Iraqi security forces for the long term, and just the ability of that whole Iraqi structure to stand on its own after the surge ends and perhaps a further drawdown beyond that?

COL. FERRELL: Well, to sort of paint the landscape for you, Iraqi security forces within our area of operations -- we've got one Iraqi army battalion -- no Iraqi police, just the one Iraqi army battalion. Currently, concerned citizens-wise, we're in the neighborhood of about 1,200-plus. They are very, very good, very dependable. The leaders that have come forward to be responsible leaders for the concerned citizen programs that are starting to stand up -- like I said in my opening remarks, you know, we're at the point now -- we have five, and they're all new since September. But those that have been for a while in Abu Waitha, Hawr Rajab -- now Adwaniyah is really starting to take shape. But those three specifically -- very dependable; they man their checkpoints; they're in the uniform, the prescribed uniform, so they're easily identifiable.

Their leaders are accountable. They know where they have to be. They work hand in hand with the Iraqi security forces.

The relationship between -- I use the example because of the way the force is arrayed -- the Iraqi security force in Hawr Rajab -- there's a company of the Iraqi army in Hawr Rajab that works with the concerned citizen leader and the group in Hawr Rajab, and it's seamless. It is one of the best relationships that you could imagine. And there's no issue with Sunni, Shi'a; it's Iraqi. It's amazing to watch because the Iraqi army's there and, you know, there's concern back and forth that -- their army, the concerned citizens and all the goings-on, and will they work together? They work well together. We have security -- Iraqi security forces, army and concerned citizens manning the same checkpoint, working together.

And I believe, as we -- (audio break) -- in the near future, actually, you will see that many of the concerned citizens now -- when we first started the program and we first came into the operational environment, you talked to these people about becoming police, becoming Iraqi army, no, they really were -- was not interested in that idea.

But now that they've seen what -- the results they get and they've seen how willing the Iraqi army is there to work with them, and they understand the benefits of the security that is coming from this. We have over 300 recruits that want to become IP -- Iraqi Police. We have many now that are willing to go out and join the Iraqi army. So progress is being made there. They see that this is a long-term requirement to secure their country, and they know they can work together. And if they're going to have any success, they've got to do it, and that's what's so impressive on a day-to-day basis. There's bumps along the way -- (audio break) -- not perfect, and I told you, there's going to be some very tough days ahead for all of us. But if you're here to watch them on the ground, they get after it, they work hand in hand because they are tired of being attacked, they're tired of the threats, and they're willing to do it.

COL. KECK: Okay. Well, Colonel Ferrell, we are at the end of our time. We appreciate you spending this past 30 minutes with us, and as is our custom, we'd like to turn it back over to you for any final comments or information you'd like to provide.

COL. FERRELL: I'd just like to close with telling you that I appreciate you taking the time to be with me today and letting me tell you a little bit about the 2nd Brigade and what's going on in our area of operations with the 3rd ID, but more importantly, what great troopers we have. The soldiers, the men and women that are serving our country and what they get after every day, it's humbling to be a part of it, it's humbling to see the work that's being done, and it's an honor to serve with them. And it's truly impressive the support that we continue to get every day from our nation. We have great kids out here, and we appreciate all the support we get. And thank you for what you do.

COL. KECK: Thank you. Thanks for coming, folks.

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