

PRESS CONFERENCE:

Rear Admiral Gregory Smith, Director of Communications, Deputy Spokesman, Multi-National Corps – Iraq

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PARTICIPANTS:

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REPORTERS:

None identified by name.

REPORTERS 1-13

***REP1 = REPORTER 1**

***INT = INTERPRETER**

RDML SMITH: Good afternoon. As-Salāmu `Alaykum. I have a short update this afternoon and then I will be happy to take your questions. To begin, we initially reported on December 10th, a fire at the Daura Refinery which was...at the time we stated was the result of a mechanical failure at the refinery itself. You will recall, on that particular day, there was a series of indirect fire attacks on the Rusafah and Daura areas. A thorough follow-on investigation was conducted; it now shows that the actual result of the fire was, indeed, an indirect fire and mortar that had struck one of the large tanks there at the Daura Refinery. So we wanted to make certain we cleared up that fact from what we had previously reported. We also reported last week on the progress being made within the Iraqi court system. More than 4,000 cases have been tried in Iraqi civil and criminal courts since 2007. There are dozens of courts operating in major cities across the country with over 1,100 judges, prosecutors, and examining magistrates carrying out their responsibilities under the rule of law to hold individuals responsible for their actions. I want to highlight just one high profile conviction in recent weeks. On Thursday, the Iraqi Court found Muhammad al-Mat-yuti guilty of participating in the August Yazidi bombings which resulted in the death of some 500 innocent Iraqis. Al-Mat-yuti confessed to being a member of the Sinjar AQI network, along with Muhammad al-

Afri, the overall mastermind of the Yazidi attack, who was killed by coalition forces during a targeted raid on September 3rd. Al-Qaeda leaders have periodically stated, and as recently as today in an audiotape reportedly released by Osama bin Laden, that al-Qaeda does not kill innocent civilians. However, their actions demonstrate otherwise. The Yazidi bombing, other car bombings, suicide attacks, the torture houses we reported on last week, and other indiscriminate acts of violence have all targeted innocent civilians. Al-Qaeda's extreme, Taliban-like ideology and deliberate disregard for human life has led to its rejection by the Iraqi people. The audio tape released today is entitled, "The Way to Foil Plots." The real plot foiled is the al-Qaeda in Iraq and bin Laden's plot to turn Iraq and the region into a caliphate based on the radical Taliban ideology. The tribes and the Iraqi citizens have rejected this vision, and are courageously working to drive out al-Qaeda from their communities. These actions by the tribes and volunteer citizens have become a central concern for al-Qaeda. And bin Laden attempts to rationalize these setbacks but ignores the most relevant fact—that the tribes and citizens have rejected AQI's ideology and hatred. Coalition and Iraqi Security Forces will continue to pursue and disrupt al-Qaeda and prevent them from re-establishing safe havens and operating bases in Iraq. On Monday in East Rashid, Iraq National Police found two caches after receiving tips from a local

citizen that terrorists were operating near the Al-Kart...I'm sorry, Al Kadhimain Mosque. When Iraq National Police and coalition forces arrived, the suspected terrorists had fled into the mosque. The national police searched the mosque and found two large caches. The first cache included 107-mm rockets. The second cache consisted of mortar rounds, plastic explosives, TNT, grenades and other components needed to make improvised-explosive devices. On Tuesday in Baghdad, Iraqi Special Operations Forces, advised by U.S. Special Forces, detained a suspected terrorist weapons dealer. The suspected dealer is believed to be part of a variety of weapons systems, including mortars, rockets, and medium and small arms. He is also thought to be a possible improvised-explosive device cell leader. Several weapons were also recovered during the raid. And on Wednesday in Baghdad, Iraqi and U.S. forces detained the leader of an AQI terrorist cell. Intelligence reports indicate the cell is responsible for several improvised-explosive device and sniper attacks against Iraqi and coalition forces as well as the kidnapping and torture of innocent Iraqis. Operational results such as these are allowing areas which were once served as AQI strongholds to begin returning to normalcy. On Thursday in Arab Jabour, a governance center officially opened with a large ceremony. The center will function similar to a city hall and will serve as the headquarters for the Arab Jabour Governance

Council and the Concerned Local Citizen groups. Local Iraqis will be able to bring concerns over public services and other political issues to the Arab Jabour leaders at this new center. In early December, several local Baghdad businessmen were the recipients of micro-grants from the Multi-National Corps–Iraq. One market owner purchased two new freezers, a generator, a refrigerator, and increased his store’s inventory. A butcher was also able to buy a new generator, a freezer, a scale, and more cutting tools. A street-side vendor purchased popcorn stands and a rotisserie oven. Though small in nature, micro-grants such as these are enabling thousands of businessmen and businesswomen to both maintain and expand their entrepreneurial spirit, providing not only a livelihood but essential services in their neighborhoods. Efforts such as these, along with improving security, are leading to a development of economic outlook for 2008 inside Iraq. Positive elements such as these are encouraging, as Iraqis continue to dedicate themselves to the building of their country from the bottom up. We still have a tough fight ahead, and remain committed to the fight as we look forward to the new year. 2008 will have its own set of upturns and downturns, but we remain positive that the progress will continue as the new year unfolds. And with that, I’d be happy to take your questions. Yes, sir.

REP1: Asks question in Arabic.

INT: Question from al-Salan[ph] News Agency. Could you give us statistics on the human casualties that the American forces suffered ever since toppling Saddam's regime? And also, the American casualties ever since 2007 until now.

RDML SMITH: Well, I don't have the specific numbers. I can get those for you afterwards. In both the...you shouldn't call it the casualties in Iraq. 2007 began, clearly, at a very high mark month-to-month at the beginning of January all the way through June, July and August we were seeing coalition and Iraqi Security Force casualties that were extremely high. Those numbers began to come down in the August, September and then onward into December. And now, in the month of December, we are seeing possibly one of the lower months of coalition force casualties in recent memory. Also, you should note that the coalition force casualties are outnumbered by the Iraqi Security Forces, who suffer losses at two to three times that of the coalition. They are, indeed, the front line of this war against terrorism in Iraq. And I guess, as importantly, the Iraqi citizens themselves have suffered greatly at the hands of al-Qaeda and other terrorists. And their losses, again, are a grim reminder of the really terrible outcomes of such a war, such a terrorism that has taken place here inside Iraq. And so, those numbers are reminders of the

work that we've got yet to do as in this month alone, in December, we still have car bombings, there are still suicide attacks, our forces are still taking the fight to al-Qaeda and to other extremists and will continue to do so in 2008. Yes, sir.

REP2:

Thanks. Happy New Year. Two questions. First of all, this being the anniversary of Saddam's hanging, is there...have there been any activities that you would say would be associated with that particularly in...whether here or in Tikrit or any other parts of the country? And the second question; I believe there was a car bombing Friday which was near several auto parts plants. And I'm wondering if you can speak to the investigation of that. But also in a larger picture, is there some concern that perhaps, be it al-Qaeda or be it JAM-splinter groups, they're just kind of lying in wait and waiting for a false sense of security and all the sudden, again, you have, you know, a car bombing. You know, and this...apparently this bomb was left in a parked vehicle for quite some time, and then it goes off. So just wondering if there's a general false sense of security going on right now especially with individuals apparently just kind of waiting for a good time to do something and then they do something fairly big like Friday's bombing.

RDML SMITH:

Thank you. Well, two questions, I guess, and then we'll start with

the Saddam issue. I'm not...we've not seen any operational reporting today of any increased violence anywhere in Iraq associated directly with the anniversary of his death. And so, to that I can report to you. As far as the car bombings go, we reminded, I think, everyone that both al-Qaeda and other militants here in Iraq are still very much determined to use car bombs and other means of destruction against innocents. In this case on Friday, as you pointed out, a large car bomb blew up. It's hard to know precisely what the motivations were and whether, again, as you point out, it was there for some time and then triggered by some other means. Our investigation continues in that area as well does the Iraqis'. I think as far as the false expectation goes, certainly not one on our side. We have made no such projections of peace at hand. We realize that the security in Iraq is very fragile, very tenuous...and that at any moment indiscriminate attacks could occur at any place in Iraq. There is no place in Iraq today that is safe from terrorism. And part of our responsibility, along with the Iraqi Security Forces, is to continue to drive out the networks that make these bombs, find the financiers, find the bomb-making suppliers, find the networks associated with that to avoid a car being allowed to be parked in a city street and then blowing up and killing innocents. That's really the responsibility that we continue to have and will pursue in 2008.

Sir.

REP3: Asks question in Arabic.

INT: Question from al-Hallat Newspaper. The Iraqi forces announced that they rejected any solely operations conducted by the Awakening groups with the American troops. And the Iraqi troops accused that the Awakening...say that the Awakening groups killed Shiites in al-Daura District. And they were accused of killing Shiites. So do the American forces still conduct operations with the Awakening groups, or are you still waiting to incorporate those Awakenings into the Iraqi forces?

RDML SMITH: The Awakening groups obviously began, again, with the Anbar Awakening; a principal originally started here in early 2007. And it was really the tribal sheikhs and the citizens of those neighborhoods who made independent decisions about the security in their neighborhood and realized that they can be a part of security. So what you have is now, today, over 300 groups across the country who have made a similar decision about their neighborhood. The coalition forces and Iraqi Security Forces partner with the Awakening groups to ensure that they understand their responsibilities to provide security in their neighborhoods. They do not patrol—as you...the word...I think the words you used—with coalition or Iraqi Security Forces. They typically man checkpoints.

They do not conduct independent operations. They are there to provide security for their neighborhood. And so, in each individual instance, you've got a neighborhood group that has stood up against the terrorism in their particular area—whether it be al-Qaeda or in other areas it could be other militant groups, criminal gangs—for the sole purpose of protecting their neighborhood. So I don't want to characterize their operations, their activities as going on patrols, hunting down enemies. They largely are there to protect by way of checkpoints and other static security in the neighborhoods. The responsibility to hunt down al-Qaeda and other militant groups resides solely under the responsibility of the Iraqi Security Forces with support by coalition forces, not the Awakening groups. Shukran. Sir.

REP4: Asks question in Arabic.

INT: Question from Al Watan Channel. Diyala Province is now regarded the al-Qaeda haven. So, why is there any kind of delay in clearing this province? And do you think if Diyala has been cleared, will that result in a good security situation in general?

RDML SMITH: Diyala has been one of the tougher fights beginning earlier this fall when operations in that area took several al-Qaeda prisoners, as well as killed several others and resulted in the disruption of many

of the networks operating in Diyala. By no means, however, was al-Qaeda driven out of the region in Diyala. We obviously recognize that Diyala is an area of significant interest by al-Qaeda. They maintain a presence in the region. Their goals are, as stated previously, were to make Diyala, and Baqubah in particular, the central part of their caliphate. They've been unsuccessful to date in doing so, but by no means have they been driven out of Diyala. The operations against al-Qaeda in Diyala continue today. Both Iraqi and coalition forces operate in Diyala extensively throughout the region to hunt down the remaining elements of al-Qaeda. And I think as you...as we will report to you in the coming weeks ahead, continued operations; not only in Diyala, but other regions where al-Qaeda is operating. So, no—the area of Diyala remains a central front of operations because that is where al-Qaeda still remains a threat and forces—both the coalition and the Iraqi—are still in the area to provide security and hunt down remaining al-Qaeda operatives. Sir...front row, please.

REP5: Sir, On the 28th of this month there was an attack on a Turkish convoy that was on its way home in Mosul. Do we have any information about that?

RDML SMITH: You said a Turkish convoy...

REP5: Yes. That was headed by American troops, was on its way home and there was an attack.

RDML SMITH: I'd not heard that report. But I'll be happy to take the question and we'll try to get an answer for you after this press brief.

REP5: Thank you. Thanks

RDML SMITH: Thank you. Yes, sir...second row.

REP6: You mentioned the audiotape by Osama bin Laden. He seemed to have focused on Anbar, on the Awakening in Anbar. Are you taking special precautions to protect the Awakening people there as there may be repercussions from these kind of threats?

RDML SMITH: Well, I think what you've seen from the audiotape, if you've had a chance to read it today, is an expression by al-Qaeda of its concern over the impact the Awakening groups have had on their movement, the al-Qaeda movement. They recognize that what has been lost in Anbar is the trust and confidence of the people. In fact, I'm not certain they ever had it. Quite frankly, I think what had been gained in Anbar was through intimidation and murdering,

killing of innocents to the point where, at that time at least, Anbarians had little choice as al-Qaeda dominated much of the region. But as the Awakening groups and the efforts of the Iraqi and Coalition Security Forces began to impact al-Qaeda's operations in Anbar and 2007 began, I think, to see a changed environment for al-Qaeda and one in which the Iraqi people, themselves, became the principal opponent of al-Qaeda through, really, a changed perception of what the new Iraq should look like; one that would not be driven by the ideology, the Taliban-like ideology that al-Qaeda offered but, really, one offering a way of life that Anbarians had probably always hoped for which is to live in a peaceful environment, to raise their children, to allow their children to go to school, conduct businesses free from intimidation and corruption. That's what Anbarians wanted, I think, all throughout this and now have been given a chance. So, I think that although the threats made against Awakening members throughout Iraq by Osama bin Laden in this reported tape today is evidence of the desperate nature by which al-Qaeda views that its own survival here in Iraq. Based on the fact that Iraqis have turned against them, I don't know that al-Qaeda has the will or the capacity to really regain strength in Anbar, to answer your question, but I believe that the Anbarians are, I think, further resolved that they made the right choice and that 2008 looks much brighter for them than it did at the start of 2007. Yes,

sir.

REP7: Thank you very much. Asks question in Arabic.

INT: Question from [unintelligible] Newspaper. I have two questions. The Turkish jets that conducted some attacks during the last month and this month also, some of the media have conveyed that the aircraft, the Turkish aircraft took orders from and also approval from the American administration. And through the media, we heard also that the American administration said that it would resolve this issue of between the the P.K.K. and the American troops. Is that true? And the other question is that there are some initiatives of change in the political situation in Iraq. Does America have any role in the political change that's coming on? And there are some reports that say that the Iraqi...that President Talabani refused the...agreement and now Iraq is under the occupation so does the UN and the occupation forces have any role in this agreement, or is it a solely Iraqi issue? And will it also be discussed during the Iraqi-Iranian-American talks in the future?

RDML SMITH: Thank you. First of all, on the recent Turkish incursions into Northern Iraq, as has been stated previously, the P.K.K. is a threat, is a terrorist threat, not only to the Iraqi people but to the Turkish people and, really, to all its neighbors in the region. Certainly the

U.S. recognizes the P.K.K. as a terrorist threat. Turkish operations into Northern Iraq, though, are Turkish decisions. Those are made exclusively by the Turkish Government. Those operations and the targets that they attacked were, again, made by Turkish aircraft through their Turkish chain of command. The U.S. supports Turkey's decision to attack, limited attacks inside Northern Iraq, for the sole purpose of going after these terrorist groups. We stated publicly the U.S. is committed to supporting Turkey in ways of ensuring that Turkey has a clear understanding of where the P.K.K. reside and are operating in Northern Iraq to avoid, really, any collateral damage, any further escalation of violence in Northern Iraq as a result of their operations. The way to resolve this issue, clearly, is through various means; military is among those means. It's not exclusively the way in which this will be resolved. The U.S. continues to work with Turkey, Iraq and other partners through diplomatic means to bring about an end to the P.K.K. And this will not be an issue solved today or tomorrow. It will take the months to come, I believe, again, through many, many initiatives, to bring about an end to, really, the years of violence that have been brought upon the area by the P.K.K. As far as the political initiatives go, there are a series of political initiatives that the Iraqi Government has made considerable progress on in late 2007. Among them, of course, is the pension law, which really allows the beginning of

reconciliation for many of those who had been part of the previous regime's government, allowing individuals to receive, really, payments that they were due in the years of service they provided to the former government of Iraq. As 2007 comes to an end, there's a promising outlook relative to the budget for 2008 that is nearing completion and we expect to be voted on early in the 2008 Council of Representatives period that starts today, as well as the accountability and justice, the de-Ba'athification law, is also very close to being agreed to, I believe, and will have, we think, a positive resolution here in the coming weeks. Those are among just a couple of the key initiatives that are, really, on the horizon. In addition, if you consider the achievement of coming up with a UN security resolution that addresses 2008; that agreement between the Iraqi Government and the UN was made this past month. There also was an agreement, politically, between the U.S. and Iraq to begin to look at a long-term partnership, beyond 2008. Again, those are significant initiatives that one would want to credit to the political dimension of this effort here in Iraq to bring about change. We also saw one of the 18 provinces, Basra, turned over to provincial Iraqi control in December; that's another example of the political determination of this country to self rule and determine its outcomes one province at a time. Your last issue really truly is the Algiers Agreement; it's an agreement, a discussion, a point of

discussion between Iraq and Iran, and it certainly is not one that I would comment on from here. Next question, please. Yes, sir.

REP8: Asks question in Arabic.

INT: Question from [unintelligible]. Regarding Diyala Province, there are some fears by many politicians that the support councils that were formed by the government and also by...that support by the Multi-National Forces, they turned to some groups that actually some gangs that take bribes from people and conduct some things that actually are near or similar to al-Qaeda operations. So does the MNF have intention to incorporate those groups away from the security services because the Iraqi politicians say that the support groups in Diyala didn't work.

RDML SMITH: One of the things I think the Iraqis and coalition agree on universally is that Awakening groups one, again, are done so under the understanding that this is a temporary group that will provide security for a specific purpose and a specific neighborhood. The long-term security of Iraq and Diyala will reside in the hands of the Iraqi Security Forces. Those individuals that are part of these Awakening groups who both have a desire and an ability to serve in those security forces will make that transition in the coming months and years ahead. Most will not; only around 20% of the Awakening

group members have even indicated a desire to be either a police...part of the national police, local police, or the Iraqi Army. Of those 20%, there will be some that will be screened out of that process; some that will not have met all the criteria of the Ministry of Interior or the Ministry of Defense to serve in the uniformed security forces of Iraq. I believe, though, that the responsibility of both the integrity of the groups and their, really, the long-term interests of those groups, the Government of Iraq understands and supports. When there are situations or instances of behavior that does not support an allegiance to the government, is against the people, is corrosive or destructive, those individuals or groups are...have and are going to be vetted out of the system. There is no intent to have groups out there using the name of an Awakening group to serve some other purpose politically, of a criminal nature, certainly. And we have already seen in Diyala region, I believe, Colonel Sutherland, before he left here, mentioned that he had worked with the Iraqi Security Forces to remove several individuals who had demonstrated that they were not really there to support a democratic or a free expression of business and trade or, in the case of security, there was intimidation and other things occurring. So there has been, I think, sufficient recognition of that fact and an awareness that they must diligently look for those individuals who do not meet the criteria and are not serving the best interests of the

people and remove them from those positions. Thank you. Sir.

REP9: Asks question in Arabic.

INT: Question from [unintelligible] Newspaper. Are you aware of the number of the explosive-detection machines that have been brought to Iraq, and do you have any intention to bring more of those machines that detect explosives in the future?

RDML SMITH: I understand your question. I do not have a precise answer for you on the number of machines that have been brought...the number of units that are actually serving in Iraq as detection devices. But we can get that number for you and also determine whether the Government of Iraq intends to purchase more. That will be a decision by the Government of Iraq to make, and I'm not aware of any particular plan to purchase but will certainly look into that and provide information back to you. I apologize. Sir.

REP10: Asks question in Arabic.

INT: A few days ago, the Minister of Interior said that July next year the Iraqi forces will take over the security issue in Baghdad. Do you think that the Multi-National Forces think that this time is enough for the Iraqis to take over, because MNF always talked about infiltration of militias inside the Iraqi Security Forces? Do you think

that the Iraqi Security Forces will be ready until July, let's say?

RDML SMITH: Well, I think the Minister was pointing out that the intent of the government was to continue to pursue development of its security forces into 2008, much like it did in 2007. In 2007 alone, there were 110,000 new members joining the Iraqi Security Forces; a very substantial increase, a very significant responsibility to train and equip that size of force in one particular year. In 2008, we'll continue to see the growth of the Iraqi Security Forces. And whether or not they're able to precisely take over any one region of the country, will remain to be seen. Certainly, at this point in December, 2007, it's hard to predict what the situation will look like in July, 2008. And I wouldn't want to hazard a guess as to what...how much more progress can be made in both the capability of the Iraqi Security Forces, but also in the reduction of the threat and the violence that we currently face. So, I think the short answer to your question is it remains to be seen. And we will continue to work with Iraqi Security Forces to provide all the support necessary to one day provide them the responsibility and the capability of turning over all of Iraq's security to the Iraqi Security Forces. Sir.

REP11: Asks question in Arabic.

INT: Question from al-Watan Channel. There is a question among the

Iraqis; everybody is asking what's preventing the joint forces to patrol the al-Saidiyah neighborhood. Everybody says it's a small area but nobody can control it, because the joint forces were able to control a much bigger areas, so why aren't you able to control the Saidiyah neighborhood now?

RDML SMITH: Well, in fact, I think in recent days it was discussed that al-Saidiyah neighborhood will see a combination of Shi'a and Sunni volunteers that will support an Awakening group in Saidiyah neighborhood; provide that extra support inside the neighborhood. I think it's, again, evident that the best security, and often the best information comes from local people as to who are the perpetrators of crime and violence in these neighborhoods. It's encouraging that there are volunteers stepping up to provide that kind of support. And I believe, again, in the weeks to come, you'll see increased and improved security, not only in Saidiyah neighborhood, but in other neighborhoods in Baghdad that continue to suffer from violence, sectarianism. And both with the partnership of the Iraqi Security Forces and these Awakening groups, they'll bring some closure to these concerns. Sir.

REP12: Thank you. Asks question in Arabic.

INT: Many Iraqi people say that the coalition forces by the

American...led by the American forces, came to Iraq to occupy the oil mine...fields and not to free the people. That's what the people say...I don't know. Do you have any comment about this so that the Iraqi people will know exactly about its future? And some say that the American forces came to destroy the Iraqi nation and stuff. So how would you comment about this?

RDML SMITH: Well, I would...one, I would comment that those particular comments, I've not heard in a long, long time. I think the people of Iraq have come to understand over the last four or five years precisely what the coalition is here to do, and that's to provide security for them. The issue of infrastructure, the oil in this country is very much in the hands of the Iraqi Government...very much in the hands of the leadership of Iraq. The security of the infrastructure—the pipelines, the refineries—is a joint security cooperative effort with the Iraqi Security Forces, various other groups that provide security also on a voluntary nature, as well as the coalition, to ensure that what we're seeing now, for the first time, is nearly pre-war levels of output and production in the case of the oil production. The oil revenues were met in early...earlier than expected in 2007, which again, is a testament to, really, the strength of the economy that's based on the oil here in Iraq. The oil revenue-sharing laws that will be considered again in 2008, again, will be

Iraqi decisions about Iraq's oil and Iraq's future. So, I would strongly push back that the...such a view of the Iraqis of the coalition presence is based on anything other than to provide for the security of the people, which I think we've clearly presented that as our objective and our mission here in Iraq. Thank you. One last question

REP13: Asks question in Arabic.

INT: Question from Al Awsat al Iraq Agency. I'm asking about the other American officer said that the coming battle will be in north Baghdad. Could you give us some locations and how much American forces will contribute in that battle in Northern Baghdad?

RDML SMITH: I believe what we've said is that al-Qaeda remains a significant threat in the areas to the north of Baghdad. Mosul remains an area of Iraq where al-Qaeda continues to operate, continues to conduct intimidation and attacks to regain strength, not only over areas in the region but also over infrastructure of governance, local politics if you will, local businesses through intimidation. They are beginning to operate to secure financing for their operations in Iraq, much along the lines of a criminal activity through corruption and so forth. So our activities to go against those networks and remaining elements of al-Qaeda will be wherever they reside. They

currently are, we believe, again, north of Baghdad in the Diyala River Valley and up through into Mosul. And so you'll see—and I won't, certainly, predict from here the locations or provide for you details on the locations of our operations—it's safe to say that al-Qaeda will remain a key component of our operations in 2008, and that much of those operations will reside in the northern provinces of Baghdad, to the north of Baghdad. And I believe that's our last question. I thank you for an opportunity to address you this afternoon and we'll have another press conference here this Wednesday. Thank you. Bye-bye.