

PRESS CONFERENCE:

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Multi-National Corps – Iraq**

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DATE: NOVEMBER 18, 2007

TRANSCRIBED BY: SOS INTERNATIONAL, LTD.

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JONATHON BLAKELY FROM NATIONAL PUBLIC RADIO

REPORTERS 1-7

***REP1 = REPORTER 1**

***INT = INTERPRETER**

RDML SMITH: Good afternoon. As-Salāmu `Alaykum. I'm joined today by my good friend and colleague, Mr. Phil Reeker, the Public Affairs Officer for the United States Embassy here in Iraq. I'll provide a brief operational update, and then I'll turn to Phil for his comments before we take your questions. Security trends continue to improve here in Iraq. Overall, terrorist attacks are at their lowest levels since January 2006, are 55%

lower now than at the beginning of the surge when the surge began in June, with some areas experiencing attacks levels not observed this low since the spring and summer of 2005. Civilian fatalities have decreased 60% in Iraq during that same period, and in Baghdad, civilian deaths have decreased by 75%, which certainly accounts for some of the increased optimism we're seeing by local civilians and local officials here in Baghdad. We are also encouraged to see that Iraqi security force casualties are down by 40% since the beginning of the surge. You'll recall that often, Iraqi security forces suffer three times that number of the coalition. And on this past Friday, Iraq experienced 33 terrorist incidents. This is the lowest number of any attacks on a single day in Iraq in nearly three and a half years. However, we are still in a fight with an enemy that is determined and has the capacity to conduct barbaric attacks, and unfortunately we are reminded of this daily. November 15th, al-Qaida in Iraq conducted a suicide car bomb attack, ostensibly targeting Kirkuk's emergency service unit. The attack occurred near a school while children were in attendance. On that day, AQI murdered two children, a teacher, a bystander, and two policemen. Eleven children were also injured, along with eight other policemen and eleven other citizens. This act once again shows al-Qaida's barbaric nature and propensity to conduct indiscriminate attacks against innocent women and children. It's a painful reminder of why Iraqis have bravely chosen to reject al-Qaida's ideology and ruthless tactics. On November 13th, Adhamiyah's concerned local citizens found

five suspicious vehicles parked in an area that drew their attention. The citizens marked the vehicles with a black "X" as shown in this slide, and notified coalition forces. Some of the vehicles were fully wired, and others were being prepared to serve as car bombs. The area was assessed to be a car bomb factory, and coalition forces destroyed the vehicles. Iraqi and coalition forces have degraded al-Qaida in Iraq's vehicle bomb networks in Baghdad in recent months, which has contributed to reduced violence here in the capital. But this is a continued effort. We know al-Qaida will continue to reconstitute these lethal networks in order to try and once again raise fears and foment sectarian strife, especially here in Baghdad. Car and truck bombs remain al-Qaida's primary weapon. The alert actions of Adhamiyah's concerned local citizens saved many Iraqi lives that day, and we applaud their efforts. Also in Adhamiyah, al-Qaida carried out a mortar attack on November 14th, which appeared to be aimed at a coalition force base. Instead of hitting their intended target, the mortars hit several residential houses in the surrounding neighborhoods, resulting in injury to four area residents. Much of the violence is currently centered in northern Iraq. Operation Iron Hammer, which has been underway in the past two weeks, continues to target al-Qaida in Iraq operations, and is producing conditions that will enable reconciliation efforts and increased services. To date, Operation Iron Hammer has yielded over fifty weapons caches, including over five hundred mortar and artillery rounds, as well as homemade explosives, IED-making materials,

hundreds of anti-tank/personnel and personnel mines, and over a hundred machine guns, as well as hundreds of suspected al-Qaida insurgents have also been detained. Additionally, the operation has provided a wealth of intelligence on AQI operations and organizations in the north. Also in the north, coalition forces interdicted three separate groups of terrorists attempting to place improvised explosive devices. While car and truck bombs are the primary threats to citizens, roadside bombs are the primary weapons used against Iraqi and coalition forces. On November 13th, coalition forces captured a three-person IED team in Tikrit while they were trying to place a roadside bomb. On November 14th, coalition forces targeted a three-man IED team in Mosul while they attempted to place an IED. The operation resulted in one terrorist killed. And on November 15th, coalition forces monitored a five-man IED team placing a roadside bomb near Baqubah. The subsequent operations resulted in all five being killed. Turning to operations southwest of Baghdad, Iraqi and coalition forces working with concerned local citizens initiated Operation Marne Courageous on November 16th. These operations are focused in the villages of Owesat and al-Betra, located fifteen miles southwest of Baghdad. The objective is to clear al-Qaida extremists from this strategic area in the southwestern belts of Baghdad, establish a coalition presence by building a patrol base in the area, and develop a concerned local citizens program to serve as a safeguard against further al-Qaida activity. While violence is trending in the right direction, a tough fight remains

ahead, and progress will be uneven. Violence is still too high in many areas in Baghdad and across Iraq. But coalition and Iraqi security forces do have the momentum. The increased effectiveness of Iraq's security forces and the groundswell of citizens who have courageously decided to oppose terrorists are vital factors for this improved security. I will now turn to Mr. Phil Reeker.

REEKER: Thank you very much Admiral. Ladies and gentleman, a pleasure to be back with you again today for this briefing. I just want to add a couple of notes to what Admiral Smith said in terms of events we've seen this week that echo what he said about the role of not only coalition and Iraqi forces in increasing the security environment, bringing down the violence, but also the citizen input which is a vital part of this effort. I had the pleasure this week of attending a ceremony for the ribbon-cutting of the new facility for the TIPS-130 National Hotline Center. I think many of you may have been there. You were familiar with this. It is through citizen input calling the 130 TIPS number, where responsible citizens have allowed authorities to detain hundreds of insurgents, terrorists and criminals, and led to the recovery of hundreds of weapons caches that no longer endanger Iraqi and coalition lives. And the new facility has been a terrific joint project from the Multinational Security Transition Command under Lieutenant General Dubik, along with Major General Jones of the Civilian Police Assistance Training Team, our acting Deputy Chief of

Mission Ambassador Charles Ries, and the political-military counselor of the Embassy, Ambassador Marcy Reese also attended the ceremony to launch this new facility, which now will provide forty operators and workstations, with room to increase up to eighty, as necessary. This is the national hotline center, and that complements a series of local hotlines around the country that have been very effective in providing citizens an opportunity to report to authorities when they're aware of behavior, activities that threaten the security of their neighborhoods. So that's an important factor in this process. I also wanted to point out another item that may have missed some of you. We like to talk a little bit about Provincial Reconstruction Teams, and this week it was very interesting to see one of our embedded Provincial Reconstruction Teams which is attached to the 1st Iron Horse Brigade combat team here in Baghdad. It's called the Baghdad 5 Embedded PRT, that's part of the 1st Cavalry Division. And together with the PRT and the military forces working with them, they have purchased over two hundred pieces of furniture from a factory in their region here in Baghdad which is newly reopened as part of the project that they have started. The PRT partnered with the brigade combat team to restart seven of twenty-seven former state-owned enterprises which they assessed, given the regional economic impact that those projects could have. One of those was this furniture factory, and to get the factory started, the brigade was able to buy fifty pieces of furniture. This has helped re-employ a number of people at this factory. And as we

discussed many times before, these increased opportunities for employment are a priority, not only for the government of Iraq and the local governments, but for coalition forces and for the United States government assistance program for Iraq as well. This will allow a lot of other factories to begin working. People working, of course, and having jobs helps the economy. And the furniture that we've been able to purchase from this factory then will be donated to schools, to government buildings, and to microfinance loan offices throughout the Taji region north of Baghdad. So again, this is possible because the recent reconciliation efforts have provided a safer and more secure area that has enabled the Iron Horse Brigade to shift from their primary focus of security to providing vital services, rebuilding and assisting Iraqi-led efforts in communities to help them become self-sustaining. So looking at the small business opportunities, public works projects, this is something where our Provincial Reconstruction Teams, partnering with local Iraqi authorities and citizens, are making a real difference. And we'd be happy to get you more information on this and many other projects. With that, we will turn it over to your questions.

COOKSON: John Cookson from al-Jazeera English news channel. These figures are impressive by any standard. How important is it now for Iraq's politicians, the senior politicians, to settle the differences and get their act together so this political momentum to bring peace to Iraq?

REEKER: While I think obviously, as Secretary Rice herself has said from Washington and as Ambassador Crocker has reiterated here, it is very important that Iraqi leaders continue to work toward reconciliation, work toward taking the important steps required to move things forward now that the security situation has allowed that to happen. The improvements that we've seen in security have set the stage for a number of things in the economic sphere and certainly the political sphere. We need to remind ourselves, of course, that the fight is not over. I think it's important, as Ambassador Crocker mentioned this week at the Baghdad forum, to remember that we still have determined enemies, terrorists, extremist militias, and we will still face a significant security challenge. But now it is time to focus on the fight for many other things in terms of basic services, water, school, jobs for the people here in Baghdad and other parts of the country. And so it's important that the Iraqi government focus on that, both at the federal and provincial level and local level. They have a huge challenge, of course, to break the grip where it exists of bad actors and restoring the authority of the state and showing to the citizens of Iraq that the state can work to provide the services as well as the security that they need. So that is the message that we continue to share with our Iraqi counterparts. And the embassy, along with the multi-national forces, continue to facilitate that process, both in the security sphere, but also in

working in the economic, political, and indeed, the diplomatic operations as well.

REP1: Yeah, back to the...hi, Phil...back to the reconciliation, you've been saying it's important for them to work together for a while now. And I wonder if you can talk about what progress that you're seeing. And also we're not seeing a lot of progress. The de-Baathification law is still stuck, along with the oil law. What is the embassy doing to try to prod the government to take more action toward these reconciliation efforts?

REEKER: Well I think it's important to remember what the embassy's role is in working with the elected government of Iraq, and that is to help them facilitate, to provide advice as we have in terms of capacity-building in ministries, working closely with government leaders, with all the political fora to help them look for opportunities for the accommodations and the mechanisms that they need to find toward reconciliation, which will help the political process move forward. Iraqis are going to achieve political reconciliation, but as Ambassador Crocker said in his September testimony, and has said since then, it does take time. But we have to remember that a lot of these issues are almost existential, indeed are existential in nature, and they do require time and a certain amount of patience. An important thing for the government of Iraq—and for all the political factions to remember—is that they have a window of opportunity

now, and that is what we keep reminding them. A number of these laws, a number of legislative initiatives as you know we've tracked for some time, and it has been a difficult challenge for Iraq's leaders to move forward on them. What is not as well known, and I don't think gets as much coverage as might be warranted, is that Iraqis are executing budgets better. They're getting money from the central government to the provinces. That's a very important part of the overall reconciliation, and an important part of making the government structures under Iraq's constitution work and operate. They've passed budgets. They've passed a law on investment. They've passed a number of other lesser known legislative things. So obviously Iraq is not out of the woods yet. As I said, we have to pay attention to security still, but the leaders have to take advantage of this opportunity to continue serious work in focusing on the most important matters at hand to move the country forward, because not only does the international community look and expect that progress based on the assistance that we are providing them, but I think it's very important that the Iraqi people are looking to their leaders to provide them with progress, with security, with services, with jobs, and it is legislative activity that is going to lead to that.

REP2: Asking question in Arabic.

INT: Question from al-Hared TV. I have two questions. First, to Admiral Smith and the other to Mr. Reeker. Today there was mortar attacks or

rockets that targeted the American bases, or “joint security centers,” as you call them, in al-Shad neighborhood and Banuk in eastern Baghdad. Do you have any information regarding this attack? This is the first question. The second question to Mr. Reeker. Actually, there are what they call a crisis and that the national reconciliation should be based on a fixed foundation, and some see that there is a crisis between some American people, personnel in the American Embassy and also some personnel in the Iraqi government. Particularly, in working on establishing awakening groups in some areas. So some reject and some apply for that. Some also refuse those things. So the question is, does all this has an impact on the national reconciliation?

RDML SMITH: Thank you. On the first question, before coming over here, I received an initial brief on this morning’s rocket and mortar attacks. As you point out, there were multiple locations. Right now, we’re obviously working our way through assessing the attacks, which did occur, and the level of damage. We do not have any reports of any deaths. There were some casualties associated with those rocket attacks. There were some infrastructure and equipment that were damaged as a result of those attacks. And that’s our initial report as of this hour.

REEKER: Let me try to answer your question, and it may have been slightly lost in translation. I’m not entirely sure the focus of it. I think it’s important to

remember that reconciliation is a process for Iraqis. This is something that the Iraqi people look to their leaders to accomplish. It's something that all Iraqis need to participate in. It's not an easy thing, given the history not only of the past couple of years—the sectarian violence—but certainly the many decades under the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. So, cognizant of the history and the context in which Iraqis find themselves today, this is something that takes an effort by all those involved. The United States and many in the international community, including the United Nations and its new expanded mission in Iraq, have undertaken to do what we can to help that process. But it is an Iraqi process. We can advise, we can help build the capacity for political entities, for ministries to be trained to learn about processes. But ultimately, this needs to be an Iraqi-led effort. The Iraqis have gone to the polls. They've elected leaders at a local level, at provincial levels, and a national government, and they did that with an expectation that their representatives would work on behalf of all Iraqis to bring about these changes. So this really remains fundamentally an Iraqi challenge. And it's a challenge that we all are encouraging the leadership to step up to and make a real difference while we have this opportunity to move ahead.

RDML SMITH: I think your question focused also on the concerned local citizens, and I'll just point out there is universal agreement that this is a program that makes sense for Iraq. The real question is to the level of effort that

should be applied towards this program, how much resources should be applied, and the long-term goals and objectives of the program. The U.S. coalition effort began, as you know, in Anbar, with the Anbar awakening, and it has now grown to over 70,000 concerned local citizens. Those individuals are providing security in areas where Iraqi security forces are unable to provide sufficient levels of security. The Iraqi government understands that, and is working towards building the capacity of the Iraqi security forces to eventually take over their responsibility across Iraq. So concerned local citizens offers that transition. And I believe that, again, the Iraqi government—at the highest levels, and throughout the government where they're involved in this program—understand that, and are beginning to work through the process of bringing in a better understanding of who the groups are, individuals, and how best to transition those individuals that want to move into a police or an army unit how best to do that.

REP2: Asking question in Arabic.

INT: Admiral, I have a follow-up. You said that the percentages, about 55% decrease of the violence, is actually decreased to 55% after the surge. How would you describe these different attacks that happen now and then in Baghdad, as we witnessed today? So how would you describe this? Is there a new kind of operations? They're trying to make new operations

for those groups so that, you know, like they're kind of restricted in their movements. So how would you describe these operations now?

RDML SMITH: Thank you. This is an important question, because I think it goes to the heart of an understanding that needs to be clearly communicated, especially from here, and especially by all of our leadership, both Iraqi and U.S. The fight that we're up against, the enemy we're up against, has not gone away. Today's particular mortar and rocket attacks demonstrates that the enemy has the capacity to wage violence indiscriminately against coalition, Iraqi, and often as I pointed out earlier this week up against citizens, in the case of school children, of al-Qaida. No one's claimed it yet—the responsibility for this morning's attacks—but it remains clear that Iraq's enemies are purposeful in their nature. They see one objective, and that is to disrupt the progress that's made to date, and I think will do all they can to try to achieve that. And we will do all we can, along with the Iraqi security forces, and, more importantly, the Iraqi people, to make certain that does not happen. And that's why Operation Marne Courageous has been launched this week, to go to an area where al-Qaida is still there, still trying to remain in power, and to make certain that they do not have the capacity to operate in a sanctuary, operate in areas where they're making car bomb factories as I pointed out, and then move those car bombs into Baghdad. So there is an enemy out there that's

determined, purposeful, and very capable. And we need to keep our eyes focused on that particular enemy and enemies of Iraq. Thank you.

KAPLOW: Thank you. Just a basic question. Larry Kaplow with Newsweek. When you referred in the beginning to the lowest level of attacks, I think you said maybe sometime in 2006. One question will be, when in 2006? But also, what's the measure for that? Are you using, like, total attacks over a month, or average attacks in a week, or what's that based on?

RDML SMITH: We, of course, calculate attack trends on a daily basis, and then aggregate those to month. And what I'm referring to specifically is that the overall attack levels are at their lowest from a monthly point of view since we've seen back in January 2006. You could go day-for-day if you'd like to, but in essence, we try to keep things marginally on a month-to-month basis. And they are 55% lower than when the surge began in June. So that's again to keep it from a month-to-month basis. But some areas have actually experienced levels not seen since summer of 2005. And as I pointed out earlier, there was a day this past week where the number of attacks on that day—now we're back to a day—had not been seen since May of 2004. So, depending on how you want to look at the data, I've just described a monthly comparison and also a daily comparison.

REP3: Asking question in Arabic.

INT: Question from al-Ahram newspaper. Question for Admiral Smith. You had mentioned that al-Qaida is trying to renew its activity, particularly in Iraq, in Baghdad. Does that mean that you have many indications that al-Qaida would make new attacks in Baghdad? And question to Mr. Reeker. What is the latest information about the dialogue between Iran and America? Will there be a new dialogue? And what about, also Admiral Smith, the operations in south of Iraq? The third questions was also for Admiral Smith.

RDML SMITH: Thank you. The activities of al-Qaida, I think I wouldn't describe these as new or learned new attacks. In other words, the level of activity that al-Qaida has been able to perpetrate across Iraq has ebbed and flowed, and has been obviously moved from one region to the next. We still believe Baghdad is the focus of their energy in terms of their attacks. We know that still in the belts, as we found out this week with the discovery of this car bomb factory, that they're still very much intent on developing large explosive devices and bringing them to the city to bring into neighborhoods to destroy men, women, and children, civilians and attack Iraqi and coalition security forces, so I'll describe it as still a capacity and capability of the al-Qaida to do so. And that's why it's so important to conduct operations both in the north and to the south, as we're doing with Marne Courageous. So I'll go to your last point. That particular operation

was targeting an area where al-Qaida, because of the damage that had been done to some bridge structures, they essentially had an area of land that they were operating at that unless you were to forge that particular waterway by boat or fly into by helicopter, you couldn't get there. This week, our initial operation resulted in laying a bridge across that waterway. So now we have complete movement back and forth. We're setting up a control operating base there in the coming days, and then again, working with local citizens, eventually turning over that responsibility to concerned local citizens. So it points out that al-Qaida still is there, operating in areas around in Iraq where they have either had traditional sanctuary or still are in pockets, and we're weeding them out and finding out their locations, and destroying their network piece-by-piece.

REEKER: On the question regarding the security talks, the talks about security in Iraq, tri-lateral talks with Iran and Iraq and the United States...as Ambassador Crocker has made very clear, we would expect another round of those talks. There is no schedule at this point, but we do keep that channel open. As you know, there have been three meetings in the past. We have talked about them here. The agenda for those talks, of course, doesn't change. It is restricted to the security in Iraq, and under that framework we would be talking about concerns, our concerns with Iranian activities that detract from security in Iraq, rather than add to it. I think as

a number of you have asked and discussed, we've seen a mixed picture of what's going on. We've talked about improved security certainly, and we've seen some interesting developments over the last few months. For instance, the virtual cessation of indirect fire into the International Zone. I think we've talked about Muqtada al-Sadr's announcement at the end of August calling on the Jaish al-Mahdi to stop its activities. It's unclear to us what role the Iranians might have had in these developments, if any. It's important for us to continue to push the Iranians and to try by various means to bring their practices into line with their stated policy, so it's difficult to read trends reductions. You have to ask questions about what may be behind that. Certainly, as we've discussed here again today, some very effective coalition and Iraqi security operations have reduced the abilities of extremist elements to mount attacks. But we've seen things that we would be interested to hear from the Iranians, their reactions to those developments. So that channel remains open. As I said, there is not a scheduled meeting yet, but we'll keep you posted if we do get a schedule for another meeting at the working level.

RDML SMITH: And just one more point on Iran. It's clear, and we've spoken and as of week or so ago, we did a large presentation here of the explosives that we found, the caches that we've uncovered. Make no doubt...I'll make the point again that Iran has been the principle supplier of weapons, arms, training, and funding of many of the rogue militia groups, the

criminal elements, the special groups as we've identified them working with the Quds force operatives that have trained inside Iraq, have operated here inside of Iraq. We've spoken about that at length. That has not changed in terms of the environment we're seeing here on the ground of still being a large number of Iranian-made weapons still exist here in Iraq. We do obviously believe there are still individuals who are coordinating activities and purposefully carrying out those activities. The degree to which Iran has ceased completely its training, equipping, and financing, and resourcing is yet to be completely witnessed or observed or determined on the battlefield. The trends are going in the right direction. And again, we look for a day when we can make such determinations, and we hope that Iran honors its pledge. Thank you.

REP4: Asking question in Arabic.

INT: Question from an Iraqi newspaper. Question to Mr. Reeker. Al-Zaman newspaper published a few days ago an article saying that the employees of the United States Embassy demanded the embassy of getting them out of Iraq. Is that true? And why are they asking to being moved outside Iraq?

REEKER: I am not familiar with any such report or demand. We're still here, very much so, and in fact, there have been a number of reports certainly in the American press regarding assignments of the Foreign Service to Iraq. I

think there were a lot of misperceptions about how that process works. But, as you may have seen reported already from Washington for the positions opening next summer, that is, over nine months from now in 2008, we have found volunteer candidates in the Foreign Service to come to our embassy in Baghdad to fill these important jobs which are involved in really one of the key foreign policy challenges of our time. I think we have a very broad mix of people at Embassy Baghdad. We work so closely with our colleagues in the Multi-National Forces. It's a fascinating experience I think for all of us to be out here in working with the Iraqi people to try to help them build the capacity, to make the differences necessary for a peaceful, stable, successful Iraq. That's very much what we're involved in. And I think I speak for my colleagues broadly at the Embassy that we're going to keep up that work. So, while there are challenges here, indeed as all of you know perfectly well firsthand, there are challenges to living in Baghdad. There are the security challenges that we've talked about. But there's also a certain honor and great professional responsibility involved in meeting those challenges. And that's very much keeping in the traditions of the United States Foreign Service, which has done this kind of work—expeditionary work, frankly—all around the world for over 230 years.

SALEH: Omar Saleh from al-Jazeera English. My question is to Mr. Reeker. If you can give us an update about the Blackwater investigation. And also

the Embassy's response to remarks made by the Iraqi government spokesman who said that the Blackwater incident was a criminal act, and that they should stand trial.

REEKER: I think, as you know, we are waiting for a report from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the FBI. That report has not come out yet, and so we'll need to wait until we hear the findings that they have made. This is matter on which we keep very engaged with the government of Iraq. As you know, we have formed a joint U.S.-Iraq commission to look at the subject of personal security details, of the companies and private contractors that are involved in that very important work I would note that allows to accomplish the mission that we're here to do. Security is a big challenge, and the role of the security professionals is an important one in meeting that. I think the government of Iraq recognizes that, and so we keep very closely engaged in that commission, which is jointly chaired by the Ministry of Defense. The Minister, and our Deputy Chief of Mission Ambassador Butenis head that commission. We've also met with the Ministry of Interior, which is an important player, and has important equities in the security issues. The goal, of course, is to come up with procedures to make sure there are proper laws and rules and regulations to allow us to carry out the important work necessary around the country in Iraq, but doing it with maximum concern for the safety of Iraqi citizens, Iraqi officials, Americans, and other international actors involved in these

projects which we consider extremely important. And I think the government of Iraq recognizes that, and that's why we're working together to find the best way forward. There are a number of steps that have been taken already being implemented in terms of dealing with some of the things we discovered as a result of some of the tragic incidents that have resulted in loss of life. We never want to see that happen, and so we take steps to make the process as precise and certainly as professional as possible. But nothing particularly new to report in that process. We'll continue meeting with the government of Iraq through the commission process.

KAPLOW: Thank you. Larry Kaplow again with Newsweek. For Mr. Reeker, when I read through the articles that the CPA set out and then were adopted in for granting immunity to some of these...to certain contractors, it looks to me like the contracting authority, in this case the Embassy, has the option of submitting these people to Iraqi courts. Is that the way that you all have read it? And if that's the case, would the Embassy consider handing these people over to Iraqi courts for trial?

REEKER: I am just not familiar with what lawyers may have determined under that. I think that's the type of thing that is being looked at in the whole review of the procedures, the processes under which these contracts are implemented. So, I'm afraid I can't give you a sort of legal advice at this

point. I know that's something that would belong in the office of the legal advisor in Washington. And I'm afraid I'd have to refer you there at this point for any particular interpretations of that.

REP5: Admiral Smith, leaders of the Taji Tribal Awakening Council say that a few days ago, US forces accidentally bombed and killed several dozen of its members, members who were working with US forces against al-Qaida in Iraq and other insurgent groups. What light can you shed on this? What do you know about it? And does it raise any operational concerns or issues in cooperating with these tribal groups?

RDML SMITH: I think, first of all, there was no accidental attack against what we identified as terrorists that were operating in the Taji area. And our operations still confirm that we located and killed in many cases and detained several others who were part of a large cell that have been operating in the Taji area and that had in their custody anti-tank weaponry, also some anti-aircraft weaponry. So heavy weaponry. And that attack was coordinated and conducted by coalition forces. The role of concerned local citizens, I should remind you, is to be part of a concerned neighborhood watch. They're not designed and not intended to be part of any armed militia that conducts operations independent of, or for that matter, alongside coalition forces. That is not the purpose of the concerned local citizens. And so I challenge a little bit of the premise that

they were working with US forces. Now, if there are concerned local citizens who were caught up in that particular incident that particular day, that's unfortunate, but again, our understanding to date is that individuals that were killed and those captured were all participating in an activity that we deemed to be not in the best interest of Iraq, and therefore took operations against those particular individuals. It remains to be seen exactly what role the Taji concerned local citizen group were playing on that day, if they perceived themselves as being participants in a constructive way. But again, our assessment is what I've already laid out for you. And also again reminding you, very important to remind the concerned local citizens of the role they're supposed to play, and the role we expect them to play.

GAMEL: Kim Gamel, AP. Phil, if I can just do a couple of follow-up questions. One is on the reconciliation process. You said it's important for the government to make progress. Can you just give us an update on the progress that you see in this legislation? And also, how important would you say...what importance would you say the US is placing on this legislation? Like you said, it's been months and months without much progress. Maybe it's not so important. Maybe you're starting to focus on other priorities.

REEKER: I guess I'd want to ask you, which legislation? There are a number of pieces of legislation, the de-Baathification piece. These are important laws. We have felt, as you know, that these are important steps for Iraq's government to take, because they will help Iraq move forward on a number of fronts. But they are difficult and controversial laws. They involve, like so many laws in other countries around the world including in the United States, they involve tough issues on which people have very differing views, and they require a certain amount of accommodation and a lot of patient, as Ambassador Crocker has put it, "a tough slog," in terms of working through some of these. I don't think I can characterize for you of how the Iraqis are moving forward on their legislation. It's important to remember that these are, in fact, legislative steps that they highlighted as being important for them too. So I would invite you to talk to Iraqi legislators and leaders, and indeed the Iraqi public, about how they feel that process is working. It's certainly something that we continue to encourage them, we continue to try to facilitate as we can as diplomats any process that can help in that regard to move that forward. But I do think it's important to look at some of the other steps that have been taken. Ambassador Crocker highlighted a few of them when he spoke at the Baghdad Forum earlier this week in terms of the budget, the record development budget that has been worked on. The Council of Ministers took action earlier this week, in that regard a record investment budget. And so we have been focusing a lot of our attention to help agencies in

government develop the capacity to implement and execute on the resources that are now available. So that remains an important part of our work as well. As you know, we have offered advisors and experts to ministries where they may not have the experience or expertise. Others in the international community have done that as well, to help the government perform for the people of Iraq, to provide services, to see economic progress afoot. And so, clearly, these legislative steps are important, and I think the government of Iraq has acknowledged that. Spokesmen for the government have said just that, that there is a huge challenge ahead for the federal government, the provincial and local governments as well, to break the grips where it exists in terms of restoring authority to the state. And we in the coalition have an obligation to help. We have helped, and we're going to continue helping in that direction.

GAMEL: Still one more on Iran. You said you've seen mixed results. But would you say if there was another round of talks, do you see a more positive atmosphere right now? And with some of the progress you've seen with them, Iran showing more restraint, what would you say the motive for that is? What do you think is behind that?

REEKER: Well, I would never want to try to speak for the Iranians. As you note, and as I noted earlier, we've seen some trends, but those trends can be

very difficult to read. There have been reductions in certain types of violence, but as the Ambassador pointed out, you've got to ask the question, "What's behind that?" Not only have there been very effective coalition and Iraqi operations that have reduced the ability of certain extremist elements to act and to mount attacks, but to draw direct lines from that data to say that there are fewer attacks and conclude that there's a particular reason for it *vis-à-vis* Iran's action. That is, I think, something we're not yet prepared to do. As I said, the agenda in the security talks with the Iranians and the Iraqis—these are trilateral talks—does not change. It is about our concerns and security in Iraq and what Iranian activities, many of which we have discussed here and again today have done so, activities that detract from security rather than add to it. What I would hope is if the Iranians have taken action, which may have resulted in some of the trends that we've seen, is that they are doing it because they are falling into line with their stated policy. Their stated policy is to support a secure and stable Iraq, which we believe is also in their long-term interest, as well as most obviously the people of Iraq's long-term interest. So that's the message that we would continue to focus on and discuss when this channel again has another round of talks in it.

REP6: Asking question in Arabic.

INT: Two questions for Mr. Reeker. Recently, there were news about American supervision about meeting between Iraqi sides and members of

the dissolved Baath party. Is that true? Is there any kind of meeting, and does America have any role in this? And about the economical improvement that you've talked about...there were also news reports that there were American businessmen that entered Iraq to support the Iraqi factories. But there were no outcomes or no new results of the things that they achieved. Is there any development regarding this?

REEKER: On the first question, I'm not aware of any meetings that you reference. I'd have to look into that. But that's not something that I'm aware of. In terms of opportunities for investment, we have made very clear that we would like to see American companies consider opportunities here in Iraq. Clearly the security situation is primary, as the Iraqi people and the government of Iraq themselves know, primary to encouraging people to look at opportunities here. There are clearly great opportunities, and some of those have been recognized. I noted for you on the smaller level, the micro and local level some of the activities we've taken, like our embedded PRT in the Taji area has taken to help restart smaller enterprises, factories. Those too, would benefit from international investment, not just from the United States, but clearly from others in the region and around the world. That's the way the global economy works. So there are opportunities here in Iraq. I think that's one more reason that not only security needs to be a priority, but creating the proper legislative and regulatory environment in which to encourage investment to give

international business, as well as domestic Iraqi business and investors, confidence in their government and the rule of law and the opportunities that exist here in so many sectors, from agriculture to manufacturing. I know our colleague Mr. Brinkley has talked about a number of projects and we will continue working in that sphere in the broader economic part of our work with our Iraqi partners to see that through. So it's an ongoing story. I think it's an important story, and I think there are a lot of opportunities in Iraq. But again, security and then moving forward on the political reconciliation are very key to allowing for the economic growth and stability.

REP7: [Unintelligible] from AFP. Speaking with Iranians again. Any decision by the military on the eleven Iranians still held in custody, especially the three from the Irbil raid?

RDML SMITH: In terms of a decision, no. We've...obviously, this is something we continually to monitor all the detention detainees, all twenty-some-odd-thousand, including the eleven remaining Iranians, to determine whether or not they pose a continued security risk to Iraq. At this time they still do, and they'll remain in detention.

BLAKELY: Thank you. Jonathan Blakely from National Public Radio. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit, if we can go back in time a bit to

the Stryker attack, Admiral I believe it was Wednesday, if you can just give us an update on that investigation. And how would you characterize that attack? Obviously it was a fairly bold move this close to the IZ.

RDML SMITH: Again it's a good example, I think, of the brazen and determined activity that still exists here, especially in Baghdad, by a very determined enemy. And that particular event, which occurred very close to a checkpoint, involved a multiple explosive-formed penetrator, the most volatile and lethal of the IEDs that are built, again with technology, training, and equipping and so forth that traditionally come from Iran. We don't source this one necessarily at this time as having been recently introduced. I want to give that kind of language associated with this discussion. But again, because of the historical influence that Iran has had here in Iraq has produced that kind of capacity. And as I mentioned earlier, a lot of that capacity still exists. That particular Stryker was struck by that array of explosive-formed penetrators, caused significant damage to the vehicle. Obviously resulted in death and injuries to both Iraqis and coalition. What we do know to date is that we believe that there had to be some complacency by security forces in the area. We've got at least a couple individuals that are of interest to us at this time, and our investigation continues.

Well, thank you very much. We appreciate you coming out on this Sunday. We have a briefing tomorrow by Major General Hertling, who is the new Multi-National Division—North commander. He'll be speaking from his location up north, but available to anyone who wants to be here in the studio. I forget what time it is tomorrow, late in the day. You'll see a press release on it. On Tuesday, we're hoping to bring to you here in Baghdad the outgoing commander, Colonel Sutherland, who had responsibility for the Diyalah region. As we've talked about the reducing of forces in Iraq, that's the first major brigade to be reduced. And on Wednesday, Lieutenant General Dubik will be here on the podium to discuss the broader arrange of sticky activities, the port of Iraqi security force development and capacity. Thank you very much.