

From the Iraq Communication Desk (icd@osd.mil / 703-697-7323 / DSN 312-227-7323)
19 November 2007
AO: jcu

Full Transcript

MG Mark Hertling, U.S. Army, Commander, Multinational Division North and 1st Armored Division

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COL. GARY KECK (director, Department of Defense Press Office): Good morning, everyone. A lovely Monday morning in the Pentagon.

Let's see if General Hertling can hear us. Sir, can you hear us?

GEN. HERTLING: I can, sir. Who's this?

COL. KECK: Colonel Gary Keck, director of the Press Office. Good to see you this morning.

GEN. HERTLING: Good seeing you too, Gary.

COL. KECK: Okay. I think we have a pretty good house today. Again, welcome. Today our briefer is Major General Mark Hertling. He is commander of Multinational Division North and the 1st Armored Division. This is the first time he's briefed us in this format, and he assumed responsibility for his area just last month. So he's kind of a new guy on the block there, where he's at, at MND-North.

He's at Contingency Operating Base Speicher, outside of Tikrit. And with that, sir, I'm going to turn it over to you for your opening comments.

GEN. HERTLING: Okay, Gary. Thank you.

As Gary just said, my name is Hertling. I'm a soldier, and I command 1st Armored Division, which is normally in Germany. We arrived down here in September, took over from the 25th Infantry Division, Tropic Lightning, in MND-North. Many of you know that that's the area north of Baghdad all the way up to the border, about the size of the state of Pennsylvania, if you're from the northern United States, or Georgia, if you're from the southern, and have five ground combat brigades up here in the north with me, about 29,000 soldiers. And we partner with four different Iraqi army divisions, as well as the Iraqi police.

And I'm honored to command the U.S. coalition forces up here, the Army, Navy, Marines and Air Force we have here.

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And what I'm here to talk about today, although I know I'll get questions other than this, is the operation that we just recently conducted and is still ongoing, Operation Iron Hammer. We started it on the 5th of November. It's been somewhat successful in terms of doing the things that we wanted it to do. It was an operation we planned, started planning a few months ago, before we even got into theater, with the 25th Division. And we planned to execute it as soon as we took over the seat up here in Tikrit.

I'd be happy to talk about that but I also know that many of you will have questions on other things, and I'm prepared to try and answer them. So that's my introductory remarks, and I'll take the first question.

COL. KECK: We appreciate that.

I would remind you again that General Hertling cannot see you, so please make yourself known to him when you ask a question.

Kristin, did you -- go ahead.

Q Sir, this is Kristin Roberts with Reuters.

Now, you've only been there a month, but I'm hoping you can give us the state of play in the very northern part of the country, along the border with Turkey. What role if any is the U.S. playing up there? And what is the level of tension if you will? There's been a lot of political rhetoric about what's going on up there, and there's been some lobbying from the Turkish side. But what's really going on on the ground with, you know, between the PKK and the Turkish forces and the Iraqi security forces?

GEN. HERTLING: Well, Kristin, as you know, that particular area is not in our area of operations, but it is in our area of interest. And we're watching it very closely. What I can tell you right now is there has been diplomatic efforts between the Turkish government, the Iraqi government and our government, as you well know. I'm not privy to any of the conversations that have gone in in the diplomatic circles, but we have been monitoring what's been going on up there.

And right now, I think, with the release of the hostages that occurred about -- a little over a week ago, tensions have quelled somewhat. And I think specifically the Kurdish regional government has played a significant part as part of the Iraqi government in helping that situation. And I think it's hopeful in terms of the diplomatic efforts that have gone on up there.

COL. KECK: AI.

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

We've all seen the reports about the reductions of violence throughout the country in recent months. Do you have a sense yet, having been there just a month, as to why that's happened? And specifically can you offer any insight into whether Iran has changed the role that it was playing previously?

GEN. HERTLING: Well, what I'd first like to say is even though we've been here just over a month this time, this is my third tour in Iraq. The last tour was in Baghdad with the 1st Armored Division as an assistant division commander in 2003, 2004.

To answer your question, I think primarily the reduction in violence has been caused by the fact that the Iraqi citizens, across the board, are tired of seeing people use their country for a traumatic playground.

And the Iraqi people have stepped up, and that's the primary reason. They're tired of the violence. They just want to go back to having their children go to school, farming their fields, running their businesses.

I think the second issue, though, is the increased capability of the Iraqi security forces. As I said a minute ago, we have four of the Iraqi army divisions -- (audio break) -- the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th Division. And in fact, I just spent the day -- just got in a little while ago -- just spent the day with the 3rd Iraqi Army Division under General Kershid (ph).

They are gaining in capability. In fact, during this Iron Hammer operation we just completed, they were a significant player. In fact, they not only did more than I asked them to do, they actually performed quite better than I would have expected when we came in here two months ago.

So I think a combination of the people being sick of the violence, and the fact that the Iraqi security forces, both army and police, are improving across the board, has contributed to the reduction in violence. (Audio break) -- the Iraqi people in this Iron Hammer operation we conducted, we uncovered about -- I think last count as of this morning there were 79 different caches of arms and ammunitions, over -- (audio break) -- ammunition, homemade explosives, rocket-propelled grenades, about 500 RPGs, 50 RPG launchers, a variety of machine guns, over 100 heavy and light machine guns. So an unbelievable amount of weapons and ammunition.

In those 79 cache finds or discovery, about 20, 22 percent of them were due to the tips we received from local nationals, folks who were tired of having violent things going on in their neighborhoods, and they would either tell coalition forces or Iraqi army that there were, in fact,

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weapons in their neighborhood. And in fact, the biggest cache we uncovered was as a result of a tip from a local citizen.

Q And can you comment on the Iran aspect? Have you seen any change in Iran's activities now compared to previously?

GEN. HERTLING: Well, obviously we're -- again, we're watching that very closely. I think the Iranians have made a promise to our government that they are not going to interfere with the security conditions of Iraq. Some of the caches we did find, truthfully, were weapons we believe flowed in from Iran, but we don't know how long they had been there. In fact, as you know, early in the month, right after we took over, we found the largest cache of EFPs that had been found yet in Iraq, and it was obvious that they had come from Iran. But we don't know how long they had been there. So I think -- I'm hopeful that the Iranians are keeping their promise to not interfere with the internal security conditions of Iraq by supplying either arms or equipment or training personnel.

COL. KECK: Thom?

Q Sir, it's Thom Shanker with The New York Times. I wanted to follow up on the Iraqi security forces topic. As you look ahead to your time in command there, how would you balance the kinetic piece with Iraqi security forces with the training and mentoring part of that job?

GEN. HERTLING: Thom, first of all, it's good to hear your voice again. Thom is an old friend.

What I'd tell you is, Thom, that's an interesting question and it -- one that in fact I was talking to General Khurshid (sp) about today. They are trying to expand their force, as you know, although they have -- the number of divisions they have right now, they're trying to make more and it's very difficult to build an army. General Khurshid (sp) has just been given orders yesterday to build another brigade within his division, and he wants that brigade but he's going to have to recruit, train, et cetera. He's currently short junior-level officers. He has the senior-level officers he needs, but it's the younger ones that he needs to train. And in fact, the NCO corps, while it's developing, still needs some help.

The way we'll spend our time, quite frankly, is our sergeant major, Command Sergeant Major Blackwood, is looking right now at helping the Iraqi security forces build the same kind of things we have in our Army, the NCO academies. Some of those exist throughout our battlespace. They're not all standardized. We're going to take a look at maybe increasing not

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only the numbers but the locations of where they are in the space to help improve the Iraqi NCO corps. We have, as you know, the mobile training teams, the MiTT teams, with the different Iraqi army divisions. As divisions get -- as the Iraqi divisions get better and they start forming other brigades or battalions, we'll start shifting those maneuver training teams around a little bit.

So that's our plan to continue to keep pace with the Iraqi army. You know, they've learned the basic infantry tactics, and the four divisions that are in our area of operations are all infantry divisions.

Two of their division commanders have already conducted joint air assault operations with our forces. General Khurshid (sp) -- (audio break) -- he could begin that training. So we're not only conducting the joint operations with them across the board, but we're also contributing things like aviation platforms, intelligence. We're bringing in some of their intelligence officers into our operations center here at Camp Speicher, to better share intelligence. And it's really quite frankly exciting for me to be here, having seen the Iraqi security forces back in 2004 and seeing them now; it's a night-and-day story.

Q Sir, it's Pauline Jelinek of the Associated Press. If I could follow up on the reduction in violence, it seems that a reduction is being, you know, reported overall in Iraq, but that many of the attacks that we hear the most about appear to be in the northern areas. Is that correct? Do you -- what do you see happening, for instance, in Mosul? Are attacks going up there or just not going down as much as elsewhere, and Kirkuk as well?

GEN. HERTLING: Yeah, thank you for reminding me of that. I was reminded of that by General Odierno just the other day. And in fact it is occurring. And if you simply look at a map of Iraq, you understand why it's occurring. Great success by the Awakening movement in Anbar has pushed some of the al Qaeda fighters to the east, into our area. Some of the great success in the Baghdad area has pushed some of the al Qaeda fighters to the north in our area. And as you saw just a few months ago, when Tropic Lightning was still here, they had a pretty tough fight, code-named Arrowhead Ripper, in the Diyala province.

So what you're seeing is the enemy shifting, and in fact whereas attacks -- all types of attacks, but specifically IEDs -- have decreased throughout Iraq, and they have in fact decreased in our area, in MND-North areas, our -- (audio break) -- highest of all of the provinces in Iraq. That's why it's so critical -- my number-one mission remains continue to pursue al Qaeda in our area. And we're getting help from the locals and the Iraqi army and police to do that.

So I would have to answer your question honestly by saying that the attacks are still much higher than I would like here in the north, but they are continuing to decrease in numbers and scale of attack.

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You asked specifically about certain places like Mosul and Kirkuk, and I'll add Baiji and some areas around that particular triangle, maybe still some attacks ongoing in Muqdadiyah.

So we're continuing to pursue the enemy in those areas, but yes, there is still certainly some existence of the enemy in some of those areas in the north.

Q Your voice cut out. We lost some of the audio. You said IED attacks are down across Iraq, and I think you said down in the north as well. And then you said, but our something something are the highest. We couldn't hear what you said.

GEN. HERTLING: I think what I said at that particular point was MND-North is still the highest -- still has the highest number of attacks in all of Iraq, even though our numbers have also decreased in numbers and style.

And if I could, I'll add one more thing. You are still going to read about spectacular attacks. We are seeing al Qaeda and some of the insurgents specifically target Iraqi police and, in some cases, the CLC groups and the so-called Awakening movements because those are the softer targets. So whereas our attack numbers have decreased and continue to decline, the attacks that are still -- (audio break) -- against Iraqi security forces as they're continuing to build up, and I think that's because the enemy realizes that they are going in capability. And if there is any kind of chance of stopping the representative movement of the government, that they have to attack the security forces.

Q (Off mike.)

GEN. HERTLING: In my area?

Q Yes.

GEN. HERTLING: Okay, in my area I'll give you an example. In June, there were -- and I'm thinking off the top of my head -- there were 1,830 IEDs placed in the MND-North area. In the October time frame, there were about 900. I track it by day and compare it to the previous month, and when I receive my -- (audio break) -- we're talking specifically just IEDs, I want to say that we had 466 as of the 19th of November this morning, and for the same period of time last month through the 19th of October, there were 520. So it's still continuing to go down, and what's critical about that is, as you know, October was the month of Eid and was somewhat of an off month, and attacks decreased significantly. So the fact that we're still under the current glide path for the same period of last month tells me that's good.

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Now, having said that, 466 IEDs in an area the size of Pennsylvania is still about 466 too many as far as I'm concerned.

COL. KECK: Jeff.

Q General, Jeff Schogol with Stars and Stripes. Your predecessor, General Mixon, had talked about the possibility of reducing forces in MND-North by, I think, about half beginning in June -- beginning in January over 12 to 18 months. Do you know where the status of that plan is right now?

GEN. HERTLING: Well, you know, I think he was looking at that as potentially a future action, an operational maneuver, if you will. What I will tell you, as many of you have already reported, the 3rd Brigade of the 1st Cavalry Division is leaving this month. They are currently in Diyala province, and their battlespace will be resumed by another unit, the 4th of the 2nd Brigade out of Fort Louis, Washington.

But I'd prefer not to talk about or make conjecture about what's going to happen in the future. I think that's counterproductive to what we're trying to do, and quite frankly, what we will do is go after the enemy. So any potential future force, we'll save until we make those decisions, but I think we're on a pretty good glide path. The fact that the Iraqi army is improving in capabilities is going to contribute to that, and they're taking over more and more battlespace every day. So we'll see where that goes.

And by the way, I don't think -- because I happened to be there standing off to the wings when General Mixon made that statement, he didn't say they were going to reduce by half by January. He said something else at that point.

Q I believe he said beginning in January, not by January.

But if I could ask a quick follow-up question, as you mentioned, the 3rd BCT 1st Cav is leaving. What challenges does that pose, having one less brigade in your area of operations?

GEN. HERTLING: Well, what I'd tell you, the only challenge I see quite frankly is spreading another brigade out, bringing them in to work with the -- to work the partnership with the Iraqi division there. And quite frankly -- (audio break) -- into that area, is very familiar with the battlespace, part of the battlespace. He'll get familiar with the rest of it.

And there are some challenges in terms of moving the forces. But quite frankly what I think has happened is that our units across the board, no matter what type, Marine, Army, Air Force and some of the Navy folks that are with us as well, have become very agile in adapting to

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the battlespaces and making the relationships. And what has caused that to be as easy as it has been, in some cases, is the fact that we've got a partner now. We've got this partner called the Iraqi security forces, and they're speaking the same language tactically and operationally that we are. And they're going after the same enemy that we are, so that eases that transition a little bit.

COL. KECK: Julian.

Q General, Julian Barnes with the Los Angeles Times.

I wonder if you could tell us a little bit more detail about your assessment of the strength of al Qaeda in your area, relative to the other parts of the country. And also tell us a little bit more. You talked about the spectacular attacks that are going to continue -- maybe if you could put a little -- tell us a little bit more about how your strategy for deterring or preventing those attacks in the major cities that are in your area of operations.

GEN. HERTLING: Yeah, I can.

I certainly won't give you any numbers on what we think the al Qaeda figures are for MND-North. Because first of all, I'd probably be wrong. Secondly every time we say, hey, they're decreasing in actions or capability, suddenly they commit a spectacular attack, or one VBIED goes off, and it's front page headline saying, hey, Hertling just said they're reduced in this area, but they just blew up a bomb.

So I won't talk about that. What I will talk about is during Iron Hammer, we detained -- (audio break) -- throughout the battlespace. We continue to hold a little less than 200 of those for questioning. We are getting some very interesting intelligence from those individuals we've detained.

They are giving us a feel for the organization, what challenges our enemy is having, and we plan on attacking those things and continuing to pursue -- and that's the term I repeatedly use with my soldiers -- we're continuing to pursue al Qaeda in the northern areas of operation, and our Iraqi army partners are doing the same thing.

In terms of the bigger cities, there are certainly cells remaining in all the key cities in northern Iraq that are under our area of operation, and we're doing our very best on a daily basis to break those cells down. We've had success, but it is still going to be a very tough fight to eliminate those terrorists and insurgents and extremists completely from those areas.

I hope that answers your question.

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COL. KECK: Sir, we lost you just after you said -- (inaudible) -- "go into any speculation on how many al Qaeda there are, but I would tell you that" -- and then we lost you for about 10 seconds. So if you could give us that information, we'd appreciate it.

GEN. HERTLING: Okay. I'm not sure where you lost me, so I'll try again.

But what I said was I wouldn't speculate on the number of al Qaeda and extremists that are in our area because I'd probably be wrong. What I then said was that during Operation Iron Hammer, we detained about 400 of them. I don't know if you got that or not. And we still have about 200 in questioning that we believe are part of cells in the various cities within our area. They are giving us some very good intelligence on the makeup of those cells, who the leaders are, and we're continuing to use that information for intelligence-driven raids to continue to go after these organizations.

And by the way, I'll say this right now. This whole Iron Hammer series was what we call a named operation. It's still ongoing. There's a phase of it that's still ongoing. We're continuing to pursue al Qaeda. But it was so successful, in my view, in terms of linking the coalition forces and the Iraqi army and in terms of their operations that we've decided to do a follow-on operation -- and you'll hear about this in the near future -- called Iron Reaper. I won't tell you what we're going to do during that particular operation, but we're going to continue to pursue al Qaeda and extremists. Whenever you hear the term "Iron" linked with something else, you'll know that something big is going on in MND-North.

COL. KECK: Luis?

Q General, it's Luis Martinez of ABC News. You mentioned concerned local citizens earlier. There's been an incident last week where, I believe, 25, maybe 40 Sunni tribesmen up in the North were killed by U.S. forces. Can you update us on that situation? Was that a case of miscommunication where these forces were misidentified by American forces? Are you considering solatia payments? Can you tell us what are the concerns now that this incident raises for the larger awakening movement up in the North?

And what does this also raise about the concerns about whether there's too much decentralization in bringing in all these concerned local citizens in, so that different units aren't aware of who is actually on their side?

GEN. HERTLING: I counted about 18 questions in there. I'll try and address them as they come up.

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First of all, there's a little bit of a difference between the concerned local citizens and the awakening movements. First, I think it would be important to define what I believe -- (audio break) -- Petraeus believe defines the concerned local citizens. And it has to do with the three words that make up the title. They're concerned; they're local. And they're citizens abiding by the rule of law.

The local piece is very interesting to me. Because as we've developed these, and as different sheikhs and governmental officials have come forward and said, hey, we'd like to build these concerned local citizens in a certain area. That's the critical piece. They are for that certain area and they are linked specifically with the Iraqi security forces, usually the Iraqi police.

Some of the other key issues associated with CLCs, as we call them, are the fact that they have small arms weapons. And that's defined as a rifle or a pistol. They don't go around with RPGs or machine guns or truck-mounted machine guns or things like that. They don't -- (audio break) -- they are very closely watched by both the Iraqi security forces and the coalition forces in those areas, to ensure there's not fratricide on the battlefield.

If you have a guy with an RPG walking out of his area and you detect him with an overhead platform or with a scout or with someone who's out there, they immediately become a target. And we want to keep the Iraqi citizens safe who are trying to keep their neighborhoods safe, so that's a critical piece. They also have special markings. It's been anything from a reflective vest to a reflective belt to some kind of uniform top, depending on the area.

Okay, so that's how a CLC is defined. If a CLC takes it upon himself to be militia-like or posse-like, and leaves his or her area with large-caliber weapons, and goes attacking independently -- (audio break) -- even if it's well-intentioned, it's also extremely dangerous.

That's as much as I'd like to say about that because I do know the incident that you refer to is under investigation. I do know, because I've seen some of the things associated, because the attacks did occur in our area of operations, that their -- it was a well-known al Qaeda safehouse that was attacked, there was an extremely large cache of weapons that was harvested after the attack, and the concerned local citizens that were involved, allegedly, were about 20 kilometers out of their area and had crossed over from the Baghdad battlespace into ours.

Again, I'll say that it is still under investigation to see exactly what happened, if there was miscommunication or if there was, in fact, collusion, but I'd rather not comment on the actual investigation itself. I'd rather just leave it as what we see as the definition of concerned local citizens. And what occurred in that particular incident near Taji and Tarmiya is under investigation.

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COL. KECK: We have time for maybe one or two more. Kristin?

Q Sir, you touched on this a little bit, but I'd like to draw you out on what you see as the difference between the CLCs and militias.

GEN. HERTLING: Well, quite frankly, militias are outside the rule of law, and that's the important thing about Iraq right now is it's developing its rule of law. What I don't think the Iraqi government wants to happen is to go back to the chaos that existed when there was militia toting guns all over the various areas that sometimes occurred in the past. The Iraqi police, the Iraqi security forces, army and police are the contributor to the rule of law.

The concerned local citizens -- (audio break). I think the best way you can define them is as an armed neighborhood watch. They're not to go attacking other things, because it's such a confusing battlespace over here anyway with people not wearing uniforms and combatting the government that this only causes them to be more at risk.

So that's how I would define it. A concerned local citizen is someone who is in a closely stationary position, if that makes sense, who basically stays in his neighborhood, who is linked with the police or the Iraqi army, who doesn't carry large-caliber weapons, and who is contributing to the rule of law. A militia travels around wherever they want to go and has basically sometimes gang wars. It's not a Bloods & Crips situation; it's not a Sharks and Jets situation. That's what we're trying to avoid.

Q (Off mike) -- between militia and awakening?

GEN. HERTLING: The awakening, I see that as something different. And I may be wrong in my definition, but I see an awakening movement as concerned citizens gathering together attempting to contribute to the advancement of the government. That might be sheikhs, it might be imams, it might be local leaders who are pulling their people together and saying, "Hey, let's stop this violence." So, you know, if you're trying to get me to define it even further, I would say you could certainly have an awakening movement with a concerned local citizen group underneath it. It makes sense to me; I hope it makes sense to you.

COL. KECK One more.

Q Just one very quick one, General. This is Courtney Kube from NBC News. You mentioned the IED numbers for the past couple months. What is your estimate for the total percent of attacks that the IEDs constitute in your area? I mean, are they 30 percent, 50 percent, 70 percent?

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GEN. HERTLING: Courtney, I had that information and it's just gone off the top of my head. It's the biggest percentage of attacks. It's being challenged now, quite frankly, in some areas, especially in the large cities, by drive-by shootings as we see the amount of ammunition and weaponry dissipate a little bit. And I think that's because of some of the cache finds that we've been having. But it's still the top of the attack line. So the greater than 50 percent -- and I'm sorry I can't give you that -- I saw the data this morning -- but it's greater than 50 percent of the attacks that we receive are still being caused by IEDs. I can get you that number later if you'd like.

COL. KECK: Okay. Sir, we appreciate it. And we have come to the end of our time. We would like to allow you the opportunity for any closing remarks or any final comments you'd like to make.

GEN. HERTLING: Yeah, I would, Gary. It's interesting to me, having returned here after a couple of year hiatus in Germany, to see the changes that have been made in Iraq.

The security force is improving, as I've said so many times, but the biggest thing I see is the attitude of the people. They want to move forward. There are still challenges within the government and the governmental processes, but it's because they're working through some very, very tough issues, and you all know what those issues are.

But -- and I hope this doesn't sound like a rosy optimism, but I'm extremely glass-more-than-half-full feeling about this whole situation. I think some good things have happened, and it's been because of the Iraqi culture. They've been traumatized for 30 years, and now they're coming out from underneath it. And I think it is a good culture; they are a very good people, and they deserve a chance to move forward.

So I'm very optimistic about what's going to happen in the next few months, and quite frankly, as a professional soldier, there is no place I would rather be -- and the soldiers of Task Force Iron feel the same way -- than right here during this period of history because I think we're going to see some good things happening over the next several months.

But thank you for having me today.

COL. KECK: Thank you again, sir. That was very enlightening.

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