

Media availability with Secretary Gates, enroute to Copenhagen, Denmark, prior to Bucharest Nato Summit

SEC. GATES: Well, first thing, the only thing I'd say by way of introduction is that I just want to extend my condolences to the Maupin family. As you know, his remains have been found and confirmed. He disappeared, was taken in April of '04, I think.

STAFF: April 9th

SEC. GATES: Right. Every single one of these is a tragedy, both for the individual and for their families, but this has been especially difficult for the Maupin family because of not knowing for almost exactly four years. So I just wanted to extend my condolences.

I guess I can say a word about the reason for visiting SHAPE. I wanted to come by and get an update before Bucharest on ISAF and Kosovo as seen from the vantage point of General Craddock and his senior staff, do a signals check with General Craddock before we arrive at Bucharest. There probably won't be much of a chance for that. We got briefings also on KFOR, on the NATO reserve force and then on some restructuring proposals and efforts that are under way at NATO. So a pretty broad brief. And I gather you guys got mostly the same except your video had sound -- (inaudible).

I'm going to Denmark in no small part because I think Denmark has been one of our most steadfast allies, been active in Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosovo. The Danes have played an important and tough role in Afghanistan, and in fact, I'm told, suffered a casualty just today after suffering two about a week or 10 days ago. So this is an ally that in my opinion is really punching above its weight, and I wanted to visit and basically thank them for that. It's also been 10 years since an American Defense secretary was in Denmark. I thought maybe it was time for a visit.

So I'll stop there.

Q    Speaking of allies, in Afghanistan, what are your expectations in terms of some breakthrough at the summit in fulfilling the troop requirements that you see for both combat and training?

SEC. GATES: Well, I think there -- I would expect there to be some announcements. But I think they're still up in the air, but there's been enough kind of in the wind that I think that that's a good possibility. I think that the prospects are good for a good, strong unanimous statement by the alliance on Afghanistan and why we're there.

Q Did you take anything away in particular from your briefings today? Was there anything you learned today that you hadn't -- that you weren't already aware of? Were you struck by anything particularly on Afghanistan?

SEC. GATES: Not on Afghanistan. I would say that I was -- I learned some useful things with respect to the NATO reserve force. I'd -- to be honest, I'd been somewhat skeptical about it, given the stress on our forces and on everybody else's forces, and the difficulty of meeting requirements in Afghanistan and so on.

But I -- but during the course of the briefings, I learned that it has proven to be a useful vehicle particularly for smaller countries to get support from their parliaments for military modernization so that they can participate. The same way with training; it gives them experience in joint operations that they wouldn't otherwise get because they have to be certified to participate.

So I think that it probably will not reach its full potential as long as so many nations are engaged as heavily as we are in Afghanistan and, for us, in Iraq. But I think it serves a very worthwhile purpose, and I'm much more supportive of it now than I was when I went in.

Q Going back to Afghanistan, do you think that the summit, in effect, will put you over the hump in terms of requirements or is there still a long way to go?

SEC. GATES: Well, they're -- the --

Q And also in terms of the allies?

SEC. GATES: Yeah, the CJSOR is pretty -- has a pretty ambitious requirement out there in terms of two more maneuver battalions, more trainers.

We -- there's still an unmet requirement for -- I think 3,200 trainers, most of whom will be for the police. Our Marines will take on some of that burden, but even they would represent only about a third of the requirement.

So I don't -- I would be surprised if we saw commitments in Bucharest at a level that would fully meet all the requirements of the CJSOR. But we'll just keep working at it.

Q (Off mike) -- you referred to both combat and trainers?

SEC. GATES: (Inaudible).

Q (Inaudible) your thoughts in extending the (inaudible)?

SEC. GATES: Well, the United States has been supportive of it all along.

Q Could you anticipate going as far as issuing those invitations at the summit?

SEC. GATES: I don't know. (Inaudible) -- that secretary will rise to his bailiwick. (Chuckles.)

Q We haven't seen you in the last several days to ask you your thoughts about what's been happening in southern Iraq lately, and in Sadr City and quite a few developments last night. What do you make of that?

SEC. GATES: Well, I think that we've all known at some point that the situation in Basra was going to have to be dealt with. I mean, it is the economic lifeline of the country, and to have it under the control of a bunch of thugs, and gangs, and militias over the long term is unacceptable.

And so I think all of us in the government were pleased to see Maliki -- Prime Minister Maliki -- be willing to take this on and take the initiative and go down there himself with Iraqi forces to try and resolve the issue. And we obviously are hopeful that he will achieve most of his objectives, and I think at the same time everybody's eager to see calm return as well.

Q The Iraqi forces have acquitted themselves basically well? Are you --

SEC. GATES: I think they've -- I think, based on what I've seen, the limited reporting that I've seen -- because they are mostly doing it, so we don't have a lot of firsthand information -- they seem to have done a pretty good job. And we're providing some of the support, air support and so on, that we've talked about in the past, where if we were in an overwatch situation, we would back them up but not be doing the fighting ourselves.

Q (Inaudible) your concern that some Mahdi army supporters have said that this is basically prime minister using the armed forces to fight an intra-Shi'a conflict ahead of the election?

SEC. GATES: Well, I've seen that, but I'm -- I don't think that that's the case. I don't think that's why he -- I mean, those politics have been going on now for quite a while, and so I don't see anything that would have prompted this action based on a political agenda, other than bringing Basra under control.

He's talked a lot about going after the lawless and the people are basically just the gangs, and I think that's how I see it.

Q Any risk to the drawdown if the violence does continue?

SEC. GATES: I'm sorry?

Q Any risk to the drawdown if the violence does continue?

SEC. GATES: Of the surge brigades?

Q Yeah.

SEC. GATES: I have not heard anything along those lines. I think we'll probably get more finality on that when General Petraeus is back. But I have not heard or seen anything that would indicate a need to change the plan at this point for the first five brigades.

Q/STAFF: Thanks, guys.

SEC. GATES: Okay.

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