

PRESS CONFERENCE:

Major General Kevin J. Bergner, Spokesman, Multi-National Force - Iraq

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PARTICIPANTS:

Major General Kevin Bergner

REPORTERS:

**Ahmed Jassem from Arabiya Newspaper
Colin Freeman from The Washington Post
Steven[ph] Fowler[ph] from The New York Times
Bryan [last name not provided] from AFP**

Unidentified reporters from Al Watan Newspaper and Kul Al Iraq Newspaper

REPORTERS 1-10

***REP1 = REPORTER 1**

***INT = INTERPRETER**

**MAJ GEN
BERGNER:**

As-Salāmu `Alaykum. Good afternoon everyone. Today I'll provide you just a brief operational update and then I'll take your questions. Iraq's security ultimately requires Iraqi solutions. And during the past week, the Government of Iraq asserted the legitimate authority of the state against criminal gangs that threaten the peace and stability of the people of Basra. Prime Minister Maliki stressed again yesterday that operations to strengthen the rule of law targeted criminals who threatened the security of both lives and property. Operations in Basra over the past week were Iraqi conceived, Iraqi planned, and Iraqi led in a province under provincial Iraqi control. They were personally initiated and directed by the prime minister of Iraq and his national security ministers including the ministers of defense and interior. They involved an Iraqi deployment of forces that would not have been possible one year ago and that was, nevertheless, challenged by the distance involved and the capabilities required for such an expeditionary effort. They involved Iraqi special operations forces conducting targeted operations against criminal leaders and their forces. And these operations included an air assault to rescue five kidnapped members of the Iraqi security forces and operations that seized heavy machine guns and seized over a quarter of a million dollars in American currency. They involved operations to secure the port

facilities in Basra, the economic lifeline of Iraq, and the replacement of Iraqi security forces there. They involved the coordination of coalition enablers like air support and intelligence and our assistance with logistics and transportation. They now involve a comprehensive effort, led by the Government of Iraq, to provide for humanitarian needs and the restoration of services for the citizens of Basra. Most importantly, they involved a commitment from the Government of Iraq to take action against the criminals regardless of their political, religious, or other affiliations. Overall, the majority of the Iraqi security forces performed their mission though some were not up to the task and the Government of Iraq is taking the necessary actions in those cases. There also continue to be sustainment challenges particularly in expeditionary logistics over the vast distances involved in this operation. In the surrounding provinces there were challenges as well. Nonetheless, the Iraqi security forces in Wasit, Babil, Diwaniyah, along with the 8th Iraqi Army Division and emergency response units, took the necessary steps to maintain control. While it will take some time for the dust to settle and many challenges still remain, there are already indications that many citizens are working in support of their government. Tribal leaders are engaged and rallies in Diwaniyah, Basra, and other communities reflect an interest by Iraqi citizens in enforcing the rule of law. There have also been some 2,500 local

civilian volunteers who are registering to serve with security forces in Basra. The spike in violence in Baghdad was also a case where criminals attempted to undermine the legitimate authority of the government by creating fear, division, and distrust. This violence included indirect fire attacks fueled by Iranian-backed special groups criminals that targeted the Baghdad neighborhoods and the International Zone. These were deplorable attacks that have caused physical and psychological damage to innocent Iraqi civilians. These attacks have included Iranian-made 240 millimeter rockets that struck near an international organization that is here trying to help the people of Iraq. And indeed, just last night, another case of indiscriminate fire by these elements injured an Iraqi child. One example of the criminals we face is their willingness to not only put innocent civilians at risk in the target area, but also to place the lives of innocent civilians at risk in the places that they fire from. As we have seen in numerous instances in East Baghdad, they have launched indirect fire from schoolyards, civilian neighborhoods, and near municipal buildings. Even as Iraqi and coalition forces are conducting operations in Baghdad and Basra, the fight against al-Qaeda continues. Last night in West Mosul, the Iraqi Army's 2nd Infantry Division discovered and cleared a weapons cache with over 3,600 pounds of explosives and other materials used in fabricating roadside bombs. In summary, this remains a complex and tough

fight where criminals are putting their own selfish desires ahead of the good of all people and causing unnecessary suffering and pain. They indiscriminately kill, kidnap, and intimidate innocent people and seek a return to the violence – violence that the Iraqi people and their security forces have fought so hard to put behind them. No one wants to see a return to the violence of a year ago and it is heartening to see the continued rejection of that violence by the people of Iraq and their willingness to stand up to it even during very difficult periods like the last week. With that, I will take your questions. Yes, sir.

REP1: Ahmed Jassem... [Asks question in Arabic.]

INT: Question from Arabiya Newspaper. General, we expected from the Iranian interference and from what happened in Basra and we know very well that the population in Basra and Basra is an important place and the interference made by Iran in Basra. What is your stance from this interference and why the British forces hand over the security to the Iraqi forces in Basra? And we know that the Iraqi forces did not perform in a good way regarding the challenges—recent challenges in Basra. The second question. For each and every fight there are preparations. And the fight in Mosul which we expect to start, hopefully, in a few days. Are there any preparations

so we can protect the Mosul Dam and other vital institutes in the city because the terrorists always target those vital institutes and dams. Thank you.

**MAJ GEN
BERGNER:**

Okay. Let me start with your—the last part of your question first and point out that General Riyadh, who leads the Ninawa Operations Command along with General Muta'a, who commands the 2nd Iraqi Army Division and General Khorshid, who commands the 3rd Iraqi Army Division and the newly appointed director of police in Ninawa province, Brigadier General Khalid, are deeply engaged in Mosul in addressing the security challenges facing the people of Ninawa. They have deployed their forces to secure the critical infrastructure. They are very aware of the threats that are unique to places like the Mosul Dam, for example. And they are, as I mentioned in my remarks, actually conducting operations that are increasingly effective. Last night's operations was by the 2nd Iraqi Army Division. It targeted a weapons cache with over 3,600 pounds of explosives material and components necessary to make roadside bombs. And that was an Iraqi Army operation that located, seized it, and removed those explosives before they could be used. So in Mosul, even as operations have continued in Basra, Baghdad, and other communities, there is a very concerted effort underway. And

it will continue. It will continue and they continue to make progress there. The second part of your question was about Iran and the role that Iran is playing in Iraq and, specifically, I think you asked relative to Basra what their influence was and so forth. You understand that the Government of Iran has made a commitment to the Government of Iraq to take a constructive role in improving the security situation in Iraq. And we look forward to them fulfilling their pledge to halt the flow of weapons, of training, of funding, and of other resources that the criminal groups are dependent upon here. We know that they are dependent upon them going all the way back to last year when Qais Khaz'ali told us in his own words that there was no way that special groups could conduct the attacks that they were conducting then without the support of the Iranian Quds Force and their network that was training, equipping, funding, and assisting special groups in undertaking these criminal activities. We have seen the continued use of Iranian-manufactured and supplied rockets, mortars, and explosively-formed penetrators. And in fact, we have captured individuals who tell us that they have recently been to Iran and been trained by those Quds Force operatives. So we look forward to them fulfilling their pledge to the Government of Iraq in such a way that it reduces the prospects of violence like we have seen in the last week. And the last part of your question I think was about the Iraqi security forces. And let me just point out

that there is no question, both Minister Abdul Qadr and others in the Iraqi security forces have acknowledged, that there are challenges that they are still working on relative to the Iraqi forces. The majority of the Iraqi security forces performed their mission and continue to perform their mission and fulfill the mission with the guidance that they have been given by their government. There are those who have done less well. And the Government of Iraq will address those cases and will figure out what happened in those cases. And they'll address the requirements whether they be disciplinary or whether they be training or whether they be a combination of the two. But I think it's important to acknowledge that the majority of Iraqi security forces continue to perform their job and there is a great deal of courage there as well. Shukran. Shukran jaziilan. Yes, sir.

REP2: [Asks question in Arabic.]

INT: Question from Al Watan Newspaper. General, the Iraqi minister of plans said that the smuggling of oil in Basra is the reason behind these recent clashes. So is there any serious plan to eliminate the smuggling of oil, not only in Basra but also in other provinces? This is one question. The second question. There are some houses for people who are not connected with armed men in Sadr City and

Shoala and those houses were demolished without an—and this happened due to the air strikes by the American helicopters. And you know very well that it's a street fight and it's a guerilla fight that's going on. Thank you.

**MAJ GEN
BERGNER:**

Yeah. Well, let me start with the second part of your question if I could. We have great respect and we take all possible precautions to protect Iraqi citizens from the effects of the violence that is being perpetrated in their neighborhoods. And one of the features of this enemy that plagues the Iraqi people is the enemy's willingness to locate himself in and among the Iraqi people – innocent Iraqi people – in and among houses and neighborhoods that have no ill will and respect the rule of law and in and among municipal buildings and other structures that are important to the people of Iraq. And when they've used those facilities to launch indirect fire attacks or to attack Iraqi security forces or to attack the coalition forces, those criminals – and by their very actions – are placing the innocent citizens at risk. It's the nature of this enemy that we all face. We will continue to take all of—every prudent measure that we can to protect the innocent people from that violence that comes from criminals putting themselves in places that endanger innocent civilians. In regard to the smuggling challenge, Prime Minister Maliki said at the onset of the Iraqi effort that there were those who were using government

institutions and other legitimate businesses to subjugate the rule of law and that part of that challenge included smuggling and that that was part of the purpose of the effort to improve the rule of law in Basra and the operations there. And in the last couple of days, the Iraqi security forces have specifically gone to the port facilities of Basra to re-establish legitimate authority and control over those in an effort to not only restore control of the port facility, but the prosperity of Iraq, the prosperity of the Iraqi citizens that flow through those ports in such a way that it does benefit all of the people of Iraq and it is accountable to the Government of Iraq. And so that has been a part of the purpose and the focus of operations is to reduce the smuggling challenge, not only there but in other places as well. Shukran. Yes, sir.

REP3: [Asks question in Arabic.]

INT: The chief of integrity by proxy said that...

[Interpretation not provided for 18 seconds.]

REP3: [Continues in Arabic.]

INT: Fada[ph] Jamussa[ph], who is the chief of integrity by proxy, gave information to Prime Minister Maliki and also to the speaker of Parliament that the governor of Basra is responsible for smuggling

oil outside Iraq into other countries. So what is the role of the Multi-National Forces regarding this information?

**MAJ GEN
BERGNER:**

Let me just ask the interpreter. I think it was the feedback for your headphone and I couldn't hear it when he first started. So could you go back one more time, please?

INT:

Yes. Sir, he's saying that the chief of integrity by proxy said that Prime Minister Maliki, oh, he gave Prime Minister Maliki some information regarding that the governor of Basra is responsible for the oil smuggling. He's responsible for the smuggling of oil in Basra. So what is the stance of the Multi-National Forces from this?

**MAJ GEN
BERGNER:**

Well, I am not aware of the information that you passed along but it is something that is at the center of what the prime minister committed as part of the operation and that was to restore proper accountability and responsibility for the wealth of Iraq to the Iraqi people. And exactly who is involved and exactly what the implications are of that is something that the Government of Iraq, their security forces, and their appropriate investigative bodies will ascertain. The operations that are underway will improve the prospects of them being able to carry out those kinds of efforts to improve accountability. Shukran. Yes, sir.

REP4: [Speaks off microphone.]

MAJ GEN BERGNER: Actually—I'm sorry. We made eye contact. He was just about to speak. I'll come right back to you.

REP5: [Asks question in Arabic.]

INT: Question from Kul Al Iraq Newspaper. What is the total number of the casualties due to the recent attacks?

MAJ GEN BERGNER: Yeah. The minister of interior and the minister of defense are actually the sources of that information and they are, as you would expect, assessing exactly what they are; coordinating with the minister of health and the hospitals to develop a detailed accounting for what the effects of their operations have been. And we are working with them to get the best information and data they can provide to us and that's something we're still working on.

REP5: [Asks question in Arabic.]

INT: Regarding the casualties in the Green Zone—regarding the casualties in the Green Zone due to the attacks.

MAJ GEN BERGNER: Yeah. One of the things that we have—one of the issues that we

have wrestled with and we have settled on an approach for is we try not to be too descriptive in the effects that indirect fire are having in the Green Zone or in the International Zone so as not to provide a criminal element with a clear understanding of exactly what his attacks have achieved. And I will confirm for you what we have released up to this point and I'll provide that to you right after the press conference. Shukran. Yes, sir.

REP4:

Colin Freeman with The Washington Post. A couple of different questions if you can bear with me. First of all, you said that there was an international organization that was struck. Could you give me more detail? Was it inside the International Zone and the name of the organization? Also, on the Green Zone, have you made any success so far, I guess over the past week, in capturing or killing those criminal elements who were responsible for the attacks on the zone? And also, on Basra, a lot of people have—a lot of commentators have said over the past week that Maliki's inability to disarm the Mahdi Army was a failure of the campaign. And I wondered what your view was on that point. Thanks.

**MAJ GEN
BERGNER:**

First, there are quite a number of international organizations inside the International Zone and we will not talk in detail about the effects of the indirect fire relative to any of them other than to point

out that they are part of the international community that's here trying to help the Iraqi people move forward, trying to help improve the circumstance as only international organizations and non-governmental organizations can do. And my specific remarks actually were that it struck near such an organization and that's the level of fidelity that's appropriate for us to discuss. And I would point out though, also, that there are civilians living in the International Zone. There are members of the Government of Iraq. Many of you have offices and/or places that you operate from there. And so there is a vast population of people in the International Zone who are affected by these attacks. Relative to the criminal attacks, indirect fire attacks that have been conducted, Multi-National Division – Baghdad, the Iraqi security forces have made a very concerted effort to reduce the capability for them to continue to launch these attacks. It has resulted in at least six, that I'm aware of, six different incidents of indirect fire cells having been located and engaged either in the process of preparing for such an attack or as they were in the midst of the attack. There have also been detentions of individuals associated with these indirect fire cells and we are continuing, just as you would expect us to do, a very robust effort to reduce the criminals' capability to target not only the International Zone, but the civilian neighborhoods in Baghdad that are being targeted as well.

REP4:

And the question on Basra and if you could talk about the success of the campaign as it relates to disarming the Mahdi Army there.

**MAJ GEN
BERGNER:**

Well, first of all, I would start off by saying that the focus and the target of operations there has been criminal elements; irregardless of their affiliation; irregardless of their political or religious association. It has been against criminal elements and it continues to be such. Now, this has been a tough week by anybody's measure. And it's been one that has been well focused and it's one that there is still a very great deal of work to do, not just in terms of security operations, but also in terms of expanding the presence and size of the Iraqi security forces there. I think the prime minister has established a goal or an initial objective of adding some 10,000 additional members of the Iraqi security forces. He has also established a focused effort with the Council of Ministers to improve the provision of basic services and to help restore the provision of basic services to the citizens of Basra. And there is an effort underway and a Government of Iraq-led effort underway to ensure there is not a humanitarian challenge of any sort on the heels of this operation. And I would point out at this point there is not. There is—there are significant humanitarian assistance stocks being shepherded at logistics bases there and they are available and are

being made available to the population there. So that's the focus and this is an operation where there is still a great deal more work to do, not just in terms of security, but in terms of the other aspects of restoring the rule of law. Yes, sir.

REP6: [Asks question in Arabic.]

INT: I'd like to thank you for giving me the opportunity. But we see the situation and the security situation in Iraq ever since the Multi-National Forces took over the security in Baghdad. And there was an evaluation that General Petraeus is requested to give an evaluation in April, that is a few days ago[sic], to the Congress. The question is, this assessment or will be coinciding with the toppling of the former regime and also with the—so Petraeus is requested or will be asked about the security situation in Iraq now. We used to follow up the security development and the progress through the increase of the American troops and their awakening and also the reduction of the militias. Do you think that this third element or event[?] that is happening now will have an influence on Petraeus' assessment that will be provided to the Congress in April? Thank you.

MAJ GEN BERGNER: Well, first of all, let me point out that the timing that drives Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus' testimony in

Washington is derived by our Congress. They direct and they were the ones who set the timing for the commander and the ambassador to come back and testify. The nature of that testimony is one where General Petraeus will provide a very candid, forthright assessment of places where there has been progress, places where more progress is necessary, and places where we can work in different ways, perhaps. Most importantly, it will be a candid and forthright assessment of the situation in moving towards our objectives. There is no question but that the security challenges, the violence of the last week, are part of that report and they will be part of that report. And what we're doing to help the Government of Iraq and their security forces restore security and to preserve the hard-fought gains that you and your—so many other Iraqis have achieved will be part of that as well. So it will be a candid, straightforward assessment of places where there has been progress, where progress still needs to be made, and it will include, without question, the circumstances and the challenges that we saw in the last week. Shukran jaziilan. Yes, sir.

REP7:

Steven[ph] Fowler[ph] with The New York Times. Two questions. First, did the Iraqis consult with MNF-I in advance of what they did in Basra and elsewhere? Did they give MNF-I time to liaise and get approval or MNF-I to sign off on what they were going to do in

advance? And secondly, we saw in Diyala a couple of months ago, the Americans went in first and the Iraqis only came in afterwards. Now we see the Iraqis doing it themselves and coming up, by what I think most people would regard, as well short. What does that mean for how much longer it's going to take to train them or bring them up to scratch?

**MAJ GEN
BERGNER:**

The prime minister and his government did inform us of their intent to move additional forces into Basra to deal with the growing criminal threat that they were concerned about. We agreed to support their efforts although no specific planning or requests had been initiated. And the prime minister implemented the decision on the exact timing and the scope of operations as an Iraqi decision. And they did that, remember, in a province that is under provincial Iraqi control. A province where it is the sovereign Government of Iraq's authority to take such a decision. In terms of the performance of the Iraqi security forces, the vast majority of Iraqi security forces performed their mission. There were those who were unable to do so and, as I mentioned, that will be a—that's being addressed by the Government of Iraq and their Iraqi security force leaders and the minister of defense and the minister of interior. In terms of what that bodes for the future, I think a useful perspective might be to take a look back. And as you said, this is an instance where the

Government of Iraq asserted itself, made a decision on the employment of forces, and took a very difficult position, in all honesty, to deal with the criminal elements that are plaguing the Iraqi people there in Basra. So the fact that they took such a decision and they were committed to it is significant and I think is a reflection of the seriousness with which they take their responsibility for security, in particular in a province under provincial Iraqi control. And there is no question that there is still much more work to do in developing and strengthening the capability of the Iraqi security forces and we have said that for quite some time. That will include addressing their logistical capabilities. That will include improving their own transport capability to move their forces, especially in an expeditionary effort like this where some 6,600 additional forces have been moved to Basra to support their operations there. And it will also include the planning and the coordination with civil authorities and that aspect as well. So there—no question. There are challenges. There are also several instances here that reflect a significant improvement just in the past year. Yes, sir.

REP8:

Bryan from AFP. Can you give a sense of what's happening in the ports in Basra? Has the Iraqi Army taken over total control? Is Fadillah still there actually running the cranes and the trucks, et

cetera, or is this all being taken over by the Iraqi Army?

**MAJ GEN
BERGNER:**

My understanding is that two battalions of the Iraqi Army accompanied by a company of Iraqi Marines entered the ports and relieved the individuals who were providing security there and have established security there with those forces now in place. I don't have a good sense of exactly what operations the port is still engaged in and exactly who is operating things. We will follow up and we'll get you what we can—what we do know about the actual operations of the port. Yes, sir.

REP9:

[Asks question in Arabic.]

INT:

Sadr City—is it still under siege until now? And there is a curfew in Sadr City. Will there be a military operation by the Multi-National Forces there with the Iraqi forces in Sadr City? Will there be a joint military operation in Sadr City?

**MAJ GEN
BERGNER:**

The operations that have been going on at Multi-National Division – Baghdad's area along with the Iraqi security forces have continued to take – exactly what you would expect us to do – the appropriate actions against the criminals who are targeting the Iraqi people, the coalition, and the Iraqi security forces as well. Exactly what operations will evolve into the future will be a result of that

continued effort. And so we are taking very seriously the indirect fire threat that comes from some of those neighborhoods as well as some other neighborhoods as well. And we continue to focus our effort on those criminals who are conducting the attacks, not on neighborhoods; not on specific parts of the city; not on a specific district. It's against the individuals who are conducting the attacks. Shukran. I have time for one more. Yes, sir.

REP10: [Asks question in Arabic.]

INT: I'm from Khadamiyah District and Khadamiyah and Sadr City and Shoala are still under siege now. No cars can get in and out and the food there is—the food and—is missing there and everything is—the prices are so high and this caused a tension among the people themselves. So is there any kind of procedure? I'm not asking about the stance of the Iraqi government, but your stance from the situation. Do you approve that there will be a growing tension among people so that there will be enemies in an indirect way because—due to the operations that are going on those days?

MAJ GEN BERGNER: Yeah. No one wants to see a return to the violence of a year ago. And no one wants to see a return to the sectarian difficulties that that violence generated. And so all of us – whether we're part of the coalition forces, whether we're part of the Iraqi security forces – are

taking every measure that we can to find those criminals and reduce their capability to perpetrate violence in all of the neighborhoods of Baghdad and other communities in Iraq. We understand, too, that the difficulties of the last week, the levels of violence that Iraqi citizens endured have made it very difficult in some neighborhoods to have the normal flow of food and other commercial products that are so necessary. The Council of Ministers met with the deputy prime minister chairing it. They have developed a plan to restore the transportation necessary and the flow of food and water and other basic staples. And they are looking closely at each neighborhood in terms of easing the restrictions on curfews—imposed by curfews and other measures that will limit the ability of Iraqi citizens to move around relative to the ability to ensure security in those neighborhoods. And so they are looking at those measures and they are considering, in neighborhood by neighborhood, as the security situation levels off how they can ease the restrictions that the Iraqi citizens are facing. We take it very seriously and we understand the hardship and imposition that it creates. It's also one that is necessary for the time being to help improve the security so that those other things can happen. Shukran jaziilan. Shukran. Ma'salama.