

Presenter: Commander, Regimental Combat Team 1 Col. Lewis Craparotta, April 21, 2008

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DoD News Briefing with Col. Craparotta from Iraq

MR. BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Well, good morning and thank you for joining us. Let me just make sure that Colonel Craparotta can hear us.

Okay, this is Bryan Whitman, at the Pentagon.

COL. CRAPAROTTA: Yes, good morning. I can hear you fine, thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you for joining us this afternoon and for taking some time to give us an update on your area of operations and to take some questions from the Pentagon press corps.

Today our briefer is Marine Colonel Lewis Craparotta, who is the commander of Regimental Combat Team 1. His unit began operations as part of Multinational Forces-West in January, and this is our first opportunity to talk to the colonel since he's taken responsibility in that AOR. He is speaking today from Camp Fallujah. And as is our normal format here; he's going to give you a brief overview and then take some questions.

So thank you and let me turn it over to him.

COL. CRAPAROTTA: This is a chance for me to share with you the progress being made here in al Anbar to talk a little bit about the success that the Marines, sailors and soldiers are having on the ground. So I'll just take a few minutes here to take about our mission and the accomplishments of these great men and women.

I think you're aware that RCT-1 operates in an area that stretches from the western borders of Baghdad out past the western edges of Ramadi. It's about 5,000 square miles with a population between 1.1 (million) and 1.5 million people, and it includes the cities of both Fallujah and Ramadi. Our number one priority here is protection of the population, so I'll quickly discuss security and the threat that we see to security.

I would characterize the enemy in our area as being neutralized. We still see occasional AQI violence in the area, and we're very watchful to ensure we don't allow a resurgence of AQI activity. Most people believe that AQI has fled al Anbar, at least for the time being, and it's our responsibility to make sure that they can't reestablish themselves back in our area.

To secure the population, we operate daily with our Iraqi partners. We spend a great deal of time with both the Iraqi police and the Iraqi army. For the most part, the Iraqi army units are operating outside the urban areas.

We've got military transition teams that live with these forces and that work with them every day.

In the urban areas, we've partnered with the Iraqi police, and by partnership, I mean we have Marines, sailors and soldiers who live with the Iraqi police in certain areas, 24 hours a day. They train together, they operate together, and they work together to improve security. The development of the Iraqi army and the Iraqi police in Anbar is the result of both the time we've invested and the relationships that have been developed. I think I could characterize it as mutual respect between our forces with the common goal of protecting the citizens. And both the army and police have some outstanding leaders here, and they've risen to the occasion and in many cases -- in almost all cases have earned the respect of the population.

As you all know, we do a little more than security, and because of the improvements in security we spend, quite frankly, a great deal of time working alongside our State Department partners assisting the Iraqis with local governance, identifying reconstruction projects for critical infrastructure, implementing rule of law and basically

improving the overall quality of life for the citizens here. So I'll quickly just cover a couple other points.

First, I'll say that we're working very hard, and in many cases, we're transitioning responsibilities to the Iraqis, and they're restoring governance in their local areas. We see local governance prospering, with mayors and city councils taking on more and more responsibility daily, and they're beginning to establish links between the cities, the districts and the provincial government. These local governments, the mayors and the city council, understand their responsibilities to the citizens, and they work very hard to represent the people that they work for in their district with the provincial leadership.

In the economic area, we're working to restore small businesses. We're coordinating both minor and major reconstruction efforts. We're working side by side with the Iraqis to restore essential services. And again, in coordination with our State Department partners, we're making some investments in agriculture, restoring irrigation systems and helping to put some farmers back into the fields out here in the fertile ground along the Euphrates.

So from my perspective, we're seeing a great deal of progress being made. We believe that AQI has largely fled the area for the time being. We continue to target them whenever possible. And we've put our Iraqi partners in the lead in many areas. We're now seeing both economic and government -- governance progress, and I think, as a backdrop, I'll probably just stop here and take your questions.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, very good. We'll get started. Go ahead, Courtney.

Q Hi, Colonel. This is Courtney Kube from NBC News. Twice during the opening, you used the term "for the time being," that al Qaeda has fled or out of your area for the time being. Are you concerned about a reemergence of al Qaeda? We've heard some reports that they may be filtering back into Anbar. Can you update us on that or what exactly you meant by "for the time being"?

COL. CRAPAROTTA: Yes, Courtney. I think, by saying "the time being," what I meant was -- I don't personally believe that they're defeated. I think there's always a chance that they could come back into the area. So I can't make a guarantee, although we're working every day to make sure that that doesn't happen. So that's what I meant by "the time being."

Q How much longer, in your estimate, do you think that you'll need to have U.S. Marines, U.S. forces there in your area, to continue to hold back al Qaeda?

COL. CRAPAROTTA: Well, I wouldn't put a timeline on it, Courtney. I think as the Iraqi security forces continue to develop and continue to take the lead, you'll see less and less involvement from U.S. military. And when they tell us that they're ready, we will pull back. And somebody certainly a little bit above my pay grade will make the decision that it's time to pull out U.S. forces.

But for right now, I think, the Iraqi security forces still to some degree need our help in making sure that AQI doesn't infiltrate back in as we push them out of other areas outside of Anbar. And that's what we're going to continue to do for the time being.

Q Ken Fireman from Bloomberg News.

When you say that you don't think AQI has been defeated, what leads you to believe that? Do they still have some base of popular support in Al Anbar that would allow them sort of an entree back in?

COL. CRAPAROTTA: There is absolutely no base of popular support in Anbar. In fact, I would tell you, it's just the opposite.

If you ask the people and if you ask the Iraqi security forces, they'll tell you that there's no chance of AQI coming back to Al Anbar. They've seen too much murder and too much intimidation.

But we also know that this is a pretty smart enemy. It's an enemy that tends to come back where they started. And both Ramadi and Fallujah are key cities, or were key cities, to AQI.

So it's something that we're going to keep an eye on, just to make sure that we don't give them an opportunity to get back into Al Anbar.

Q Colonel, it's Meredith MacKenzie from Talk Radio News Service.

You mentioned the Iraqi security forces need your help in keeping AQI from coming back.

What lessons learned have the Iraqi security forces in your area gained from the recent fighting in Basra and the events that have passed with the security forces there?

COL. CRAPAROTTA: I'm sorry. I didn't get your question. Can you repeat that?

Q You mentioned that the Iraqi security forces in your area still need help in keeping AQI out.

What lessons learned have the Iraqi security forces in your area gained based on the recent fighting in Basra and some of the issues that have come up with Iraqi security forces there?

COL. CRAPAROTTA: Yeah. I still -- it's very distorted. I don't know if it's a different mike. But I missed a very important portion of your question that prevents me from answering it.

MR. WHITMAN: Let me see if I can assist with this.

The question goes to lessons learned in Basra and if the ISF in your area have taken any lessons learned from the recent fighting in Basra.

COL. CRAPAROTTA: I don't know -- well, I only know what I read about the Iraqi security forces in Basra. But I will tell you that the Iraqi security forces, both the army and police, in Al Anbar are, in my view, some of the best in this country.

We have invested a significant amount of time. I can -- for the army, the Marine Corps has put transition teams with the army. They live and work side by side with the army, and our army forces are some of the best that this country has to offer. And I would say the same thing at this point with regard to the police. We have been living and working with the police for the better part of the last year, and they have developed very, very quickly. We've still got some challenges integrating some of their logistics, but I think these are some of the best Iraqi security forces in the country, based on the training and the time we've invested in them. And I don't see a comparison, with these forces, with what I've read happened in Basra.

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead, Andrew.

Q Colonel, this is Andrew Gray from Reuters. You've talked about al Qaeda in Iraq being largely neutralized in your area, but we did hear about a recent bomb attack in Ramadi. What can you tell us about that and what it says about the strength of AQI? Do you believe they were responsible, or was that someone else?

COL. CRAPAROTTA: Yeah, I think you're talking about the suicide vest last week in a restaurant outside of Ramadi. And we're not sure at this point whether that was AQI or whether that potentially was politically motivated.

I'm not sure what else I can offer on that, but we don't really know. It was a -- was -- the individual was a little bit younger than your hard-core AQI. So we're not really sure what the motivation was behind that attack.

Q To follow up, Colonel, when you say "politically motivated," what kind of factors might have been involved there? Can you expand a bit on that term?

COL. CRAPAROTTA: Well, I think it goes back to the tactics of murder and intimidation. And in this case there are some of different political parties that are trying to get a leg up, if you will, on one another. And if it's not AQI-related, then potentially it can be some of this political infighting, this power struggle prior to what they expect to be elections in the coming year.

Q Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: Mike?

Q Colonel, it's Mike Mount with CNN. Sticking with this AQI theme, you said they were largely defeated, but in your opening statement you did say there was some AQI activity still. Can you maybe expand a little bit on how much you're seeing there since your arrival and just in terms of some quantification for us, and maybe a bit about who their -- or what their attacks are focused on, whether it's U.S., Sons of Iraq or Iraqi forces?

COL. CRAPAROTTA: Okay. Yes.

We've seen actually very little AQI activity. We average about two incidents a day. And when I say incidents, it includes anything from a cache find to an IED find. So it's not necessarily related to an attack.

Most of the AQI activity that we've seen here, since my arrival, we've had a few suicide vest attacks that you're probably aware of. We had a vehicle IED just about a week ago.

All those attacks have targeted Iraqi security forces, because the enemy understands that the Iraqi security forces at this point is the biggest threat to them. And the Iraqi security forces are good enough that the enemy can't overtake them.

So most of their activity is focused again on murder and intimidation, to see if they can take down or reduce the effectiveness of the Iraqi security forces. And at this time, they haven't been able to do that.

Q Colonel, Paul Krawzak, Copley News Service.

You said there are still challenges integrating logistics with the Iraqi security forces. Could you talk about what the biggest challenges are right now with the army and the police?

COL. CRAPAROTTA: I think the biggest challenge for us right now is vehicles and vehicle maintenance. In particular, I can speak to the police, where we've got vehicles that -- and we have limited capability to do maintenance. And the Iraqis have limited capability, if any capability, to get spare parts for these vehicles.

So when you're out there doing patrols and your vehicles no longer work, you can't do your job anymore. And we're working through that problem. In fact, we met just this past weekend with the provincial police leadership. But that's the type of logistical problem that we're facing right now.

I don't think we have anything that's not -- that we're not going to be able to tackle here. It's just taking a little bit of time.

Q Just to follow up, beyond logistics, are there other challenges?

COL. CRAPAROTTA: Well, there's all kinds of challenges standing up a police force. But I think for the most part, this police force in the last year has progressed a great deal. And they're very, very capable.

So there's no big challenge, no single point of failure that I can identify right now. And I see us, as I said in my opening statement, continuing to progress with these forces that we currently are operating with.

Q Hi, Colonel, it's Courtney from NBC again.

What's your estimate for how many al Qaeda fighters you have in your area -- just a ballpark?

And then also you mentioned, again back to your opening statement, just to pick it apart a little bit more, that al Qaeda in Iraq has fled for the time being.

Where exactly are they fleeing to? Where are you seeing them hiding, if that is it? Are they still in Iraq? Are they fleeing into Syria or what?

COL. CRAPAROTTA: Courtney, I could not even give you a guesstimate on the number of fighters. I could tell you that if I were to answer that question, I would tell you very, very few.

But I think that when we took Ramadi and Fallujah, they pushed the al Qaeda out of Anbar. I think some of them probably went to Baghdad and were since pushed out of Baghdad. Some of them are probably in Mosul and hopefully will be pushed out of

Mosul. And if there's any left, potentially they'll come back, like I said earlier, to where they -- they'll try to come back to where they started. And that's really what we're watching out for right now as we develop the Iraqi police, just to make sure that we don't allow any resurgence of AQI in al Anbar.

Q And are you seeing any evidence yet that they are, in fact, coming back to where they started or coming back to your area?

COL. CRAPAROTTA: No. There's no evidence that they're coming back into Anbar.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, Colonel, it appears as if you've done a great job in answering the questions that we have about RC-West (sic RCT One) and I think it's evidence of -- the number of questions that we have -- how well things are going there for you right now.

So let me bring this to a close by turning it back to you and asking you if there's any thoughts that you have that perhaps we didn't touch upon or that you'd like to convey before we end this.

COL. CRAPAROTTA: Well, I think I'd just close by saying that I hope that everybody back there understands the commitment of the men and women who are over here fighting every day. They continue to do a tremendous job, and they're under some very difficult circumstances. And in all cases, they've earned both the respect and the admiration of the Iraqi people here in al Anbar.

The cooperation of the State Department and the work of the Embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team should not go unmentioned. They've enabled success in several areas for us. And we could not have had the success we've had in economics, governance and reconstruction without that partnership.

And then finally, of course, the Iraqi partners, who in many areas now are taking full control. These are brave men, brave leaders, and they see a future for this province and for this country and they work every day with that future in mind. And they're sheikhs, they're soldiers, they're policemen, they're mayors, they're city council members and each has stepped up for the people and for the future of this country.

So I think we can be proud of the progress that has been made here in al Anbar and I can tell you that we're going to continue along that path, at least for as long as I'm here.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, Colonel, thank you for your time this afternoon. And we do appreciate the update. It's very valuable for us to hear from commanders on the ground. And we hope that we can revisit with you in a few months and see how things are progressing.

COL. CRAPAROTTA: I look forward to it. And I'd invite you all to come out here and spend some time on the ground. You're welcome anytime.

MR. WHITMAN: They said they want to take you up on that offer.