

PRESS CONFERENCE:

Lieutenant General Lloyd J. Austin, Commander, Multi-National Corps – Iraq

DATE: April 23, 2008

TRANSCRIBED BY:

SOS INTERNATIONAL LTD.

PARTICIPANTS:

Lieutenant General Lloyd Austin

REPORTERS:

**Owen Fay from Al-Jazeera
Alissa Rubin from The New York Times**

**Unidentified reporters from The Christian Science Monitor, Al-Safir Newspaper,
and others not identified by name or media organization.**

REPORTERS 1-13

***REP1 = REPORTER 1**

***INT = INTERPRETER**

**LT GEN
AUSTIN:**

As-Salāmu `Alaykum and good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. Thanks to everyone for joining us today and I look forward to continuing to work with you in the future. I am Lieutenant General Lloyd Austin. I'm the commanding general of the Multi-National Corps – Iraq. Our 18th Airborne Corps headquarters, transitioned with the 3rd Corps headquarters about two and one-half months ago. And since that time, I've had the opportunity to see most of the country and the conditions on the ground first hand. And I've also had the opportunity to talk with a lot of service members and coalition and Iraqi leaders. And I'm absolutely encouraged by the enormous progress that I've seen so far. And over the next few minutes I'd like to share with you some of the things that I've observed since I arrived here and then talk about where I see the Multi-National Corps – Iraq going over the next several months. But before I begin, I'd like to take just a moment to recognize the United States Army Reserve. Today they celebrate their 100th anniversary of serving our nation. The Army Reserve has supported our nation in every conflict [and] in every humanitarian assistance mission since its inception. And I can truly say that we could not accomplish our mission without them. And now I'd like to briefly address my observations over the last two and one-half months. You know, nationwide we've experienced a 60% drop in violence

since the level of violence was at its highest last summer. And while this change is significant, we understand that our progress is certainly fragile. Our major objectives continue to be securing the population, developing the Iraqi security forces, expanding civil capacity, and helping the Iraqi government to extend essential services throughout the country. And these three areas are not independent efforts; they must be synchronized across the spectrum of activity. I'd like to discuss just briefly what I've witnessed in Basra, here in Baghdad, and also in Mosul. As we look to the south to the City of Basra and the government-led operation against criminal elements, we see a much improved Iraqi security force. And while they do not have all the components required to be self-sustaining, they have improved considerably from where they were just a year ago and they are in control of the city which is allowing humanitarian assistance to reach the citizens of Basra. The Iraqi security forces are taking the fight to these criminals and I'm very optimistic about what I've seen first hand in my visits down there. Many units in the ISF deployed out of sector on short notice to conduct complex operations in the city and they are doing very, very well. And as we move north to Baghdad, we have coalition units partnered with Iraqi security forces operating against criminal elements that have been violating the law and harming innocent civilians. And the Iraqi security forces and coalition forces are

aggressively pursuing these criminal elements that are launching rockets against the seat of the Iraqi government located in the International Zone. Now we've identified the point of origin for the vast majority of these attacks to be in and around Sadr City. The Iraqi security forces are determined to eliminate the criminal threat. And while our forces attack confirmed criminals using very precise techniques, these criminals haphazardly launch rockets that oftentimes injure or kill innocent civilians and destroy private property. And they've demonstrated that they are a real threat to the population. And the people of Sadr City are tired of the unnecessary violence. And our goal in Sadr City is to eliminate the criminal element, to enforce the rule of law, and to improve the quality of life for the people. And the special groups' criminals that continue to hurt the people with their irresponsible and violent actions must be brought to justice. In the north, in and around the city of Mosul, we have seen al-Qaeda attempting to regroup and consolidate. And operations over the past several months have pushed al-Qaeda north to Mosul. We've seen al-Qaeda alienate itself from the population because of their extreme and brutal methods. And they know that they've lost the support of the people. However, al-Qaeda remains our primary security threat because of the potential for high-profile attacks. The coalition forces along with the Iraqi security forces have been taking the fight to al-Qaeda in the north. And we will

continue to pursue them and we will not allow them to regain any ground that they've given up in the past months. And so looking ahead, our goal is to defeat al-Qaeda in the north while holding our gains in the key cities across the country. And we've disrupted al-Qaeda and they've lost support—the support of the population. And we'll work to expand the reach of the Government of Iraq in the south by leveraging our provincial reconstruction teams and this will aid in building capacity in those areas. We'll also work to improve the logistics capabilities of the Iraqi security forces so that they can become more self sustaining in the future. In closing, I see a tremendous amount of potential for the future of Iraq. The Iraqi security forces are developing very well and I've seen them operate in Basra, Baghdad, and in Mosul as well as many other areas in the country. And they're fighting very hard to provide security for the country. And over this next year, I am committed to working with the Government of Iraq and the Iraqi security forces in providing for the population. And finally, I'd like to say that I'm very impressed with the performance of our soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, and Coast Guardsmen, and our coalition partners as well. I truly am impressed with the fortitude and the motivation of our young men and women. And every day they are on point, walking the streets, talking with the Iraqi citizens about their concerns. And they are, indeed, creating a return to normalcy. I know that we'll

face tough challenges in the future but I'm confident that there aren't any challenges that the coalition and the Iraqi security forces cannot overcome together. So thank you very much and I'm ready to take your questions. Yes, sir.

REP1: General. [Unintelligible.] Christian Science Monitor. You mentioned that the Iraqi security forces do not have all the components yet to be self sustaining. I'm wondering if you could develop that a little bit – what it is that's lacking, what you will be working on?

LT GEN AUSTIN: Great question. As we said before, the Iraqi security forces still need to build out certain combat enablers to ensure that they are, indeed, self sustaining and can stand on their own. Some of those enablers include logistics as I mentioned earlier. They also include the ability to call for and adjust fires. The ability to conduct medical evacuation and those types of things. Okay. Next question. Sir.

REP2: [Asks question in Arabic.]

INT: Question from Al-Watan Newspaper. General Austin, you've mentioned that al-Qaeda is our main goal as we know. And

recently, as you have mentioned, we have seen that there has been an up tick in the criminal activities by the criminal groups in Diyala. Do you have a clear vision or a clear strategy to control these or this province because we see that there is a concentration on Mosul only but not Diyala? Thank you.

**LT GEN
AUSTIN:**

Okay. I didn't hear the interpretation there so I'm going to...

INT:

Sir, would you like us to repeat the question?

**LT GEN
AUSTIN:**

Okay. Can you restate the question, please? Okay.

UNIDENTIFIED: Now?

**LT GEN
AUSTIN:**

Interpreter, are you there?

INT:

Yes. Sir, he's asking—we know that al-Qaeda is our main focus and we know that. And despite the fact that we have seen that there has been an up tick in the criminal activities especially in Diyala. And he's saying that you've talked about a concentration about fighting

al-Qaeda in Mosul but you haven't said anything about Diyala and the criminal activities there.

**LT GEN
AUSTIN:**

Yes. I think your question was in reference to our focus on al-Qaeda and the fact that you've observed an up tick in the area of Diyala. We continue to remain focused on defeating al-Qaeda in the north. And while we think that Mosul is an important city to al-Qaeda, we recognize that that organization will continue to conduct criminal activities throughout the entire north. That includes cities like Diyala, in and around Tikrit, in and around Mosul, and some activity in Tal Afar. So our focus will be to tamp down all of the al-Qaeda activity in the entire region in the north and eventually bring about the demise of al-Qaeda. Yeah. Sir.

REP3:

[Asks question in Arabic.]

INT:

There is a high coordination between the Iraqi forces and the American forces based on the operations. But the Iraqi forces suffer from the street fights and that made a high training. That's why the people in Sadr City suffer from the—or are between the militias and this war. Is there a new strategy to fight the militias and especially these street fights?

**LT GEN
AUSTIN:**

Our approach all along has been to fight as a coalition. And so as a coalition force, we clearly depend upon the Iraqi security force and the Iraqi Army in particular's capability to tamp down the violence. We have activity in Basra, in Mosul, and in Baghdad. But I think between, you know, with the combination of our efforts and the close coordination between the Iraqi security forces and the coalition forces, we've been able to manage things in a very, very good way thus far. And my forecast for the future is we'll continue to do so. I think the Iraqi forces continue to improve in their performance and that will only add to our capability. But for the foreseeable future, we'll continue to do things exactly as we have been doing and working in close coordination with each other. Sir.

REP4:

[Asks question in Arabic.]

INT:

Question from Al-Safir Newspaper. A few days ago we've heard that the secretary of defense said that the American troops will be decreased or the level will be decreased. And we know that the number is 160,000 and it will be decreased to 140,000. Will this number be enough to go through the fight against the terrorists? Will the 140,000 be enough to carry on the fights against the terrorists?

**LT GEN
AUSTIN:**

Well, we've said all along that, you know, our decisions will be based on the conditions on the ground. The president, the secretary, and General Petraeus committed to the American people that they would endeavor to reduce our footprint from 20 to 15 brigade combat teams. But we've always said that, you know, all of our decisions are based upon the conditions on the ground. And currently we see that with the amount of forces that we have, of course, in conjunction with the Iraqi security forces, we'll be able to handle the challenges ahead. But again, all of the decisions in the future will be based upon conditions on the ground.

REP5:

[Asks question in Arabic.]

INT:

Alil[ph] Biyati[ph]. You have talked about the militias and al-Qaeda and there are those who motivate the militias to act against the government and the coalition forces. And we have seen, a few days ago, most of the Iraqi politicians and leaders ask the government and they asked the Parliament to expel the Iranian ambassador due to what he has talked about the internal interference into Iraq's affairs. So what's the response or the stance of the coalition forces regarding this? Thank you.

**LT GEN
AUSTIN:**

I'm not sure I understood your question. Could I get you to ask that again?

INT: The Parliament and the government ask that the Iranian ambassador be kicked out because of some of the statements he made about Iraq. So what do you think about that?

LT GEN AUSTIN: Well, I think that this is a sovereign country. And I think that the prime minister, you know, it's not my position to evaluate any decisions or comments that are made by the prime minister. Again, I'm focused on the security of the country of Iraq and working in conjunction with the Iraqi security forces. Next question. Sir.

REP6: [Asks question in Arabic.]

INT: How would you assess the situation in Sadr City and when do you think the operations will end?

LT GEN AUSTIN: I think the situation in Sadr City is such that we continue to have criminal elements that use Sadr City as a place to launch rockets and mortar fire against the citizens of Iraq and, as such, they have injured a number of innocent civilians and damaged property and they continue to do so. We've worked very hard along with the Iraqi security forces to reduce the numbers of rockets and mortars that have been fired from that location. We've taken some measures to prevent or to slow down the criminal elements' ability to

resupply himself with rockets and mortars and I think we're making progress there. In terms of how long this will last, I think that this will come to an end much sooner if we can get the Iraqi people to help us identify who these criminal elements are and bring these people to justice. Again, their irresponsible behavior is causing some pain and suffering to innocent Iraqi civilians. Next question. Sir.

REP7:

Hi. I was wondering, sir, the other day Secretary of State Rice said that Muqtada al-Sadr was in Iran and asking his fighters to go and die while he was in Iran implying that he was hypocritical. I was wondering if you share her views. And then also, she referred to both Jaish al-Mahdi and special groups as being behind the problems in Basra and also, I believe, these things like the rocket attacks on the IZ. So I was wondering if MNF-I agrees with her assessments on both fronts.

**LT GEN
AUSTIN:**

Well, I certainly agree with the secretary from the standpoint that I find it very interesting that the leader is in, you know, not in this country – in Iran – and encouraging people to continue to conduct certain types of activity and he is not in the country. Now, we do not attribute what we've seen in terms of some of this criminal activity to JAM. We—that is—based upon our assessment [it] is the

result of irresponsible activity on the part of special groups criminals. And those special groups' elements continue to foment violence and really are interested in their own—in progressing their own agenda.

REP7: So is there a difference in viewpoints between MNF-I and the secretary on what Jaish al-Mahdi is doing and the special groups because she seems to be implying that Jaish al-Mahdi as a whole was involved in activities.

LT GEN AUSTIN: I did not want to convey that there is any sort of daylight between us and the secretary. What I do want to convey is that as the Multi-National Corps – Iraq commander, my focus is on those criminal elements that are violating the law. And so, you know, our current focus is to bring those criminal elements to justice and we'll remain focused on that until we get security re-established. Yeah. Sir.

REP8: Owen Fay from Al-Jazeera. General, you spoke earlier about synchronizing various different groups as you move ahead – the different elements, the Iraqi government and the armed forces and everything. Can you speak a bit about how the Awakening Councils is going to be a part of that? The threats that they are facing right now, particularly in the last couple of weeks. And then also can you

expand a little bit about the plans to integrate many of their fighters into the Iraqi security forces over the next year or two years?

**LT GEN
AUSTIN:**

Well, you know, the effects that we've seen in places like Anbar where the Awakening Councils have been influential in convincing people to join us in combating criminal elements like al-Qaeda, those effects have been tremendously beneficial. And as such, I think they've been extremely helpful in us continuing to establish a safe and secure environment across the country here. And some of the people who have volunteered to help us will also volunteer in the future to become members of the Iraqi security forces, either policemen or by joining the Army. And certainly we welcome that. And as you might imagine, the Iraqi security force can only absorb so many of those people and they will follow the normal processes of being trained and incorporated into the Iraqi security forces that everybody else follows. So I think that for those people who volunteer to join the Iraqi security forces, that will be much value added. Sir.

REP9:

[Asks question in Arabic.]

INT:

Could you give us the role of the coalition forces regarding the military operations in the hot zones in Baghdad? And we have witnessed recently that the government forces or there is no role for

the government forces in such places. Does that mean that the government forces or the security forces are not ready to carry out such operations?

**LT GEN
AUSTIN:**

Again, we've said over time or over several years that the Iraqi security forces are not yet quite able to stand on their own. And because of that, we work together with the Iraqi security forces to not only complete their training and their equipping—and equipping them, but we also help to provide them combat enablers such as, you know, we do help with some of the logistics. We do help in providing close-air support, medical evacuation, and those types of things. I'm sure that it's not lost on any of you that the general in charge of the overall effort for the City of Baghdad in terms of security is General Aboud. He's a four-star, Iraqi Army General. And he sits with my leadership on a daily basis to plan and coordinate activities. And so, you know, I would differ in opinion with you in terms of the Iraqi security forces not being involved in the security of Baghdad. As a matter of fact, they are very much involved. The leadership is involved in the planning and the conduct of operations on a daily basis. You know I just left a session with—where I sat with General Aboud and the minister of defense and, you know, my subordinate leaders, General Hammond, who is the 4th Division commander. And once again,

we sat and we discussed the security efforts in the city and the way ahead. So I think that Iraqi security forces are extremely involved in the overall effort. Sir.

REP10: [Asks question in Arabic.]

INT: I have two questions. First, regarding the Basra and the fighting in Basra that the government did against the outlaws, as we know that—did the Multi-National Forces also take part in the fight in Basra or did it only gave logistics support? Did you actually participate in the combat operations? Second, regarding the Awakening members, the Awakening members, as we know, received the support from the Multi-National Forces and the Iraqi government do not give so much support and most of the support comes from the Multi-National Forces. Do you think the Awakenings could turn over you in case you stopped supporting them? Thank you.

LT GEN AUSTIN: Well, the first question about the role that our forces played and continue to play in Basra. As you know, again, we helped to provide combat enablers such as close air support and we do provide help with some logistical efforts. We do provide liaison officers and some other types of capability. This has been an Iraqi-conceived, an Iraqi-planned, and an Iraqi-conducted operation from

start to present. We have elements of coalition forces that are embedded with the Iraqi security forces that help to provide them access to our capabilities in terms of air support and medical support and those types of things. And so that's been the same way that it's always been for the past several years. As a matter of fact, when some of the units deployed from places like Anbar, they brought with them those coalition military training teams that are typically embedded in their ranks. And those training teams stayed with them and provided them the access to our enablers. And until, once again, we have those types of enablers, you know, resident in the Iraq security forces, we'll have to continue to do that. So we do play a role but this has been an Iraqi led and planned operation from the very start. And your second question was in reference to the degree to which the Government of Iraq provided support to the Awakening Councils in Anbar. Was that your question?

REP10: [Replies in Arabic.]

INT: The second question was about that the Iraqi government was or didn't provide any support but the Multi-National Forces supported them much more than that. Do you expect that the Awakening Councils could turn over you in case you stopped supporting them?

**LT GEN
AUSTIN:** Well, I'll go on the record in saying that the Multi-National Forces

and specifically the Multi-National Corps – Iraq supports, you know, everyone in this country where we can; not only the folks in Anbar Province, but in every province our aim is to help the people of Iraq as much as we can and enable the Iraqi security forces to be able to help the people of Iraq as much as they can as well. Whether or not the Sons of Iraq will turn on us at any one point in time – an interesting question. I think what we’ve seen thus far is overwhelming support even in the face of adversity. And there were a number of occasions out there where Sons of Iraq members have been challenged and stood their ground and fought valiantly to not only help the Iraqi security forces and the coalition forces but actually, you know, helped to take care of the people of Iraq. So could there be small pockets that decide to misbehave or conduct illegal activity or not stay on their post at any one point in time? Anything is possible and certainly we would not be surprised to see small elements do that. But I think the—overall, this has been a great news story thus far and there’s some real interesting and real good stories out there about Sons of Iraq who have done a great job in supporting the Iraqi security forces.

REP11: [Asks question in Arabic.]

INT: You had mentioned at the beginning that there is a 60% decrease in the level of violence but you’ve also said that the progress is fragile.

Why is that? And why—when do you think the success and the progress in Iraq could be really much better than this? Thank you.

**LT GEN
AUSTIN:**

Well I, you know, I think the reason that it remains fragile is because we know that al-Qaeda is capable of conducting a high-profile attack at any one point in time and creating a lot of casualties. We also know that we've had a ceasefire with Jaish al-Mahdi for—or Jaish al-Mahdi has had a freeze on activities for some time and that's also tenuous. So conditions could change and, you know, the level of violence could spike at any one point in time. But if it does, we'll do what we've always done and we'll work with the Iraqi security forces to address that.

REP12:

Alissa Rubin. News York Times. In the last few days, a little bit more than that, we've seen more suicide bomb attacks using vehicles which was something that had tailed off; we'd actually begun to see somewhat less destructive attacks often using vests. What is your thinking about why those are spiking now – whether it's to try to take advantage of the focus on some of the special groups or JAM whatever you...

**LT GEN
AUSTIN:**

Mm.

REP12:

...whatever groups they are. Why are you seeing that? And is it—you put out a warning – I'm not sure if it was MNC or MNF-I about an increase in suicide-bomb attacks in—on the west side of Baghdad in Karkh and I'm not sure if what we're seeing in Anbar is just that some of them have shown up further to the west and whether that warning also sort of included a larger area or whether you were really just talking about Baghdad.

**LT GEN
AUSTIN:**

Well, we've, you know, one of the things that I said earlier on was that we are going to work hard to hold our gains that we've made over the past several months. We fully appreciate that, you know, as we pressure al-Qaeda in other areas, al-Qaeda will try to get back into places that they have been before. And so I think that we'll continue to see small episodes of that, you know, in the foreseeable future. You know, I think that, you know, throughout, over time, we've seen that same kind of activity as al-Qaeda comes back and tries to re-establish, you know, a car-bomb network or a suicide-vest network and those types of things. And our efforts have been to focus on defeating the networks and eliminating leadership by taking the leadership off the battlefield as quickly as we can whenever we can. So I don't think it's extraordinary to see episodic peaks of activity but I would not necessarily call that a tremendous spike. Again, we'll probably see that same type of activity in the

future. Okay. Next question. Okay. We'll make this the last question if—okay.

REP13: Thank you. [Asks question in Arabic.]

INT: There has been a threat by Sayyed Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shi'ite leader, a few days ago. Is there a timetable for the fight that Muqtada al-Sadr will—so that he will start the fight? Or do you think that there is a policy by the Iraqi government so that the policy set is much better than going to the fight? Do you think that there will be a better policy instead of going to fight in the light of the threat made by Sayyed Muqtada al-Sadr?

LT GEN AUSTIN: I'm not sure that I understood the question there. Can you say that again, please?

INT: Sir, he's saying under the light that Sayyed Muqtada al-Sadr issued a threat of starting...

REP13: [Speaks in Arabic.]

INT: Oh. A few days ago there was a statement made by Sayyed Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shi'ite leader, and he said that he will fight or will launch an open war—and start an open war and is there something better than a fight? Is there a negotiation, a political

solution by the Iraqi government and the coalition forces so that there won't be any war?

**LT GEN
AUSTIN:**

Well, I can't—I certainly can't speak to any activity that's ongoing between Muqtada al-Sadr and the leadership of the Iraqi government. But what I can say to you is that, you know, we certainly hope that Sadr will choose a road of peace and responsibility. And we certainly hope that he will soon begin to influence some of the elements that are—or all of the elements that are shooting rockets and mortars at us from various areas as, in specific, however, Sadr City. But he can influence those elements to cease their activity and hopefully influence the people as well to identify who these criminal elements are so we can bring those people to justice. But, you know, we're hopeful that, again, we'll pursue a road of peace and responsibility. Okay. Well, ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for allowing me to spend a little time with you today. Again, I look forward to working with each of you in the future. The final thought I'd like to leave with you is that our soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines are, once again, doing a tremendous job on a daily basis and we should be justifiably proud of that. Our Iraqi security forces are also doing a tremendous job in upholding their end of the bargain on a daily basis as well. And what we've seen in Basra and in other places around the country is

very, very promising and creates hope for the future. Again, thank you very much and I look forward to working with each of you.