

DoD News Briefing with Col. Mark Dewhurst, commander, 4th Brigade, 10th Mountain Division, and Conrad Tribble, Baghdad-2 PRT, via teleconference from Iraq to the Pentagon Briefing Room, Arlington, Va., Dec. 15, 2008.

COL. GARY KECK (director, Department of Defense Press Office): Well, good morning, everyone. Welcome to the briefing room. I'm Colonel Gary Keck, the director of the Press Office. And I've been asked to moderate this press briefing today.

And it's my privilege to introduce you -- introduce to you today Colonel Mark Dewhurst, who's the commander of the 4th Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division. And with him is Mr. Conrad Tribble, who's his Embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team Leader.

Colonel Dewhurst arrived in Iraq in December of 2007 and Mr. Tribble arrived in March of this year. This is their first time briefing us in this format, so I just want to remind you of our normal rules that when we go to Q and A, please identify your -- the organization you work with and who you are so they who they're talking to. And they're coming to us today from Camp Liberty.

So with that, I'm going to turn it over to Colonel Dewhurst and Mr. Tribble for any opening comments they have. Gentlemen?

COL. DEWHURST: Gary, thank you for that kind introduction. Again, I'm Colonel Mark Dewhurst. I'm the commander of 4th Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division. We're based out of Fort Polk, Louisiana. We're also known as the Patriot Brigade.

I am here with Mr. Conrad Tribble from the State Department, who is the head -- the team leader of the Embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team that works in my area. Before we respond to any question, I would like to have an opening statement from myself and also from Conrad that will talk about our mission to protect the Iraqi population while we also increase their capacity and security, governance and economic development.

Again, we deployed last -- late last November and assumed operations in December of last year. And when I came here, I brought my full brigade combat team, and I fell in on three additional maneuver battalions that were already here as part of the surge.

One of my battalions was detached from my brigade and put on the west side of the river here in Baghdad, while I retained the other three maneuver brigades, which gave me six total maneuver brigades, along with my brigade special troops battalion and my brigade support battalion.

Each of these formations provided critical enablers on the streets and inside the neighborhoods of eastern Baghdad, which has helped make a lot of positive differences since we've been here.

Collectively, we are responsible for three political districts of Karrada, Rusafa and Tisa Nissan, also referred to as New Baghdad. This is a heavily urbanized area with 80 percent of the ministries. We have the Baghdad city government here. We have the -- a lot of the government leaders live in the Karrada Peninsula that we have responsibility for the security.

This area's comprised of a lot of Shi'a Muslims. I do have pockets of Sunni and Christians that also live in this area. And I am partnered with four Iraqi security force brigades that are composed of 11 Iraqi security force battalions. Three of those brigades are national police brigades, and one of those brigades is Iraqi army brigade. They're commanded by highly competent Iraqi brigadier generals. They are very patriotic. They're very aggressive. And they've been working very hard to deliver security and reconciliation and reconstruction to the population over here.

In our area I operate from two forward operating bases. I have three combat outposts, known as COPs, and nine joint security stations, JSSs. And those are where we work with and live with Iraqi security force partners, and we -- we're -- we eat with them, sleep with them, prepare for missions together, go on missions together and train together.

This partnership with the Iraqi security forces has enabled us to increase their capabilities and has led to them receiving many more tips from the Iraqi people that has led to the successful detention of many unaligned extremists and criminals being taken off the streets, which has increased the security here in east Baghdad. The combined effects of these partnered operation has been the cornerstone in our fight against extremists and other criminals.

I like to say that our Iraqi partners are doing a superb job in the transitioning of the Sons of Iraq. In my area I have about 1,200 Sons of Iraq, of which already 400 of them have now transitioned into the Iraqi security forces, mainly to the Iraqi police.

I have about 300 more that are getting ready to start into the Iraqi police academy, starting in the next month.

And I believe our soldiers, in conjunction with the Iraqi security force partners, have set the conditions for increased positive growth here.

We are fully engaged, committed to the security of the Iraqi people, and we are improving their civil capacity here in eastern Baghdad.

Since this time from last year, the attacks have gone down by approximately 50 percent since last December, and the increase in security has been most notable by the

way the people have been acting -- the increase of traffic, the opening of markets, the increase of government services to the people.

And two recent examples I like to point out of positive atmospherics has been the successful Ramadan and the conclusion of Eid that just finished. Both of them, as you know, are highly important Muslim observances that off -- went off very well.

This mission, however, is far from over. There's still a lot to do. There's a lot of things changing on the ground that we have still get after each and every day with our Iraqi security force partners. And we are committed to doing that.

And with that, I'd like to transition over here to Conrad, who has his -- some opening comments on his extraordinary efforts of his team and how they've been working on the governance and the civil capacity.

MR. TRIBBLE: Thanks, Mark.

Yep, my name is Conrad Tribble. I'm a career FSO with -- Foreign Service officer -- with the State Department. And I'm -- been here since early April, as the good colonel said.

I had a nine-person team. You're all familiar with the PRT concept, I'm sure. We are embedded with this brigade. Around Baghdad there are -- there were nine original EPRTs with the nine brigades at the time of the surge, the initial surge, and now we've reformulated, and it's now six EPRTs with the six brigades that are in Baghdad.

My team is nine people. It's a mix of State, USAID and civil affairs Army Reservists. We are -- they're experts in governance and business and industry and in agriculture, primarily, and we work directly with the brigade both at the brigade level down to the battalion and company levels, even. We get out an awful lot with the military. That's how we move. It's a very well-integrated operation that I'm very, very proud to be a part of.

The five main areas that we're working on are everything on the other side of the spectrum from the security issues that Mark was talking about. Governance -- primarily, it's helping the Iraqi institutions develop better and more effective ways of delivering essential services -- sewer, water, trash and so forth.

We do a lot of political development, focusing primarily now on elections and support for parties and candidates, and just in general the electoral process that's starting in this -- in January of 2009.

We have a lot of programs focusing on business and economic growth in our area. Again, at the sort of local level, we do -- we're working with a lot of NGOs, trying to develop a civil society, the whole network of NGOs and professional associations that

makes up a society, that makes things happen outside of government, government intervention and government control.

And finally, we're doing some programming in support of reconciliation among these communities that we mentioned earlier: Christian and Sunni and Shi'a, the mix that's in our neighborhood.

I can give you plenty of specifics, if you're interested, on some of those programs, but what I wanted to say kind of in general is just that even in the eight months that I've been here, and certainly compared to last year, the change has been enormous. There really has been a lot of progress here. We drive out and you see businesses open in ways that you just didn't see six or eight months ago. There's a booming retail market here. There's a lot of small industries that are starting up.

There's obviously still a lot of economic problems, a lot of other issues, but the government is moving forward on essential services. Political parties are becoming active and the political scene is becoming a very active one in the run-up to elections here -- in a very positive way, not in a negative way. I can get out to areas that I would never have been able to get to six months ago, in terms of -- where there was heavy fighting in June, we were just up there last week doing agricultural projects in an industrial school. So there's lots of change that I've noticed in my time here.

I would say -- I would go so far as to say that in a lot of our areas we're beyond counterinsurgency. We're really into a development phase. And that means that our mission has changed a little bit. We're focusing not so much on individual symptoms or specific neighborhoods, but it's really about the system that is or is not in place to address the issue, whether it's sewer or water or economic development. We're trying to get away from a focus on small projects, and look at the processes that have to be in place on the Iraqi side.

Really, what it comes down to is trying to help the Iraqis develop Iraqi solutions to their problems, not impose or deliver our solutions. This means fewer projects on our side. It means less U.S. money spent. And gradually, the trajectory over the next six to eight months, I suspect, is going to be in that direction, and that's a good thing.

And really, it all boils down to building up the Iraqi capacity to run their city, run their services, manage their economy, manage their whole society in a way that enables us to leave and know that stability and security are going to stay.

That's the big picture for us. We'll be happy to take any questions now.

COL. KECK: All right. Thank you, gentlemen. That was very informative.

Let's go ahead, start with Tom.

Q Colonel, it's Tom Bowman with National Public Radio. There's a lot of talk about whether U.S. forces can leave the cities, Iraqi cities, in June. Do you think that's achievable in the area where you are?

And then how many would have to be left behind for training, logistics and other jobs like that?

COL. DEWHURST: Well, in my area, you know, one of the things we constantly do, in fact, my year I have been here, we've continued to readjust our forces.

I can tell you, you know, when I first got here, I had six maneuver battalions. I now have four maneuver battalions, which has been a decrease of 1,500 soldiers that used to operate in my area. But that's been offset by the increase in Iraqi security forces working in the area.

So as we look out, and again I know the date that has been thrown out there is June of 2009, as we look out to that date, I think there will be room again for a maneuver of our forces. And I know we're working, at the higher levels, what our actual -- will we still be in the cities or not in the cities?

And a lot of that has to do with the Iraqi government making that decision, of whether we stay or not and what capacity that we do stay in. But I do believe we will still be working and doing training and advising.

Q How many of your forces would have to stay for training and advising?

COL. DEWHURST: That's really hard to say, to give an exact number on that, what that force will be, because it's not only my area. It's the surrounding areas. And as we continue, at the higher levels, work where are forces are to be positioned and how they're being positioned. And that will change the dynamics on the ground. And also the Iraqis also change the positioning of their forces and where they're based at.

Q Dawn Casey, Talk Radio News Service. My question is actually for Mr. Tribble.

You said some of the areas you were assisting in, with governance, and you would give some specific examples of helping with the essential services there. I am really curious what sort of help you are helping them with and, you know, what the programs are.

MR. TRIBBLE: The big picture is, the mantra that we use is pretty much the same one that the military uses on the security force side -- coach, teach, mentor.

We have a small team of governance advisers: I myself along with some in the brigade as well as a couple of my EPRT team members. Essentially what we're doing is

getting out to the municipal city, the city municipal works department, its various offices and affiliates in the city, in our district.

We're just helping them identify their priorities. It's just a constant engagement with them.

We're training them or helping them to train them on things like planning, budgeting, resource management; how they link their needs to resource requests to their higher headquarters, to the city government; things as mundane as how do they track service requests from customers or from the neighborhood councils that identify neighborhoods where the sewer is backed up. A lot of it is very mundane and it's just daily, weekly, talking to them, working with them, and sort of showing them ways to do things.

And at the same time as we work at the -- really at the sub- municipal level, then there's the -- a Baghdad PRT above us that's engaging with the mayor and the sort of leadership of the city, trying to push down resources to the local -- to the local government.

So if you came out and saw it, you'd see us going to the municipal works departments; looking at their equipment; talking to them about how they manage their equipment, how they deploy it; helping them develop plans for trash pickup and that sort of thing. It's all very -- very, very nuts and bolts and not particularly glamorous, but it is in fact, I think, having some effect.

COL. KECK: Okay. Daphne?

Q Hi, this is Daphne Benoit with Agence France-Presse. I had a questions -- I had a question regarding IEDs. We are told that the number has gone dramatically down in Iraq during the past year. Is it the case in the area that you're responsible for? And more specifically, have you noticed a decrease of EFPs, particularly? And if so, would -- did you see that as a decrease of Iranian support for the insurgents?

COL. DEWHURST: I'd be glad to answer that question on the IEDs and the change we've seen since we've been here. When I first took over the mission last December, IEDs -- EFPs, as you just mentioned -- were a daily occurrence. And what's happened is over a time -- and we did, as you know, late March, have an increase in activity -- and really, our offensive operations with our Iraqi security force partners really took a lot of the extremists off the streets, a lot of leaders, that really decreased the amount of IEDs and the type of IEDs.

The EFPs have gone down dramatically. And a lot of that is because of the cache clearances. We've been able to clear a lot of those. We've taken a lot of the extremists off the streets. Their leaders have fled the area -- no longer coming back. And a lot of the Iraqi people now are leading us with tips to where those cache locations are at.

Now what we're seeing is the IEDs are a lot smaller in nature. They're the very small amounts of explosive, of nuts and bolts, usually focused towards Iraqi security forces or local nationals in the form of intimidation. And plus I should add to that, that is more of a result because Iraqi security forces are out there more in the front. They're doing more of the cordon clearances, more of the offensive action. So naturally they're also receiving more of the attacks. But the level of IEDs are dramatically reduced in my area.

Q (Off mike) -- figures to illustrate that, sir, or any percentages of the decrease it represents?

COL. DEWHURST: The percentages? What -- I would say where we're averaging -- used to average about three to five IEDs a day, and usually one or two of those would be an EFP -- and that would be back in the April, May, June, July time frame -- down to the point now where we're -- we may have a -- maybe an EFP once a week and maybe an IED or two, a small one -- one or two a day.

COL. KECK: Jim?

Q Colonel, this is Jim Garamone from American Forces Press Service. Can you tell how you're -- how your guys are preparing for the elections next month?

And for Mr. Tribble, you talked about helping set up nongovernmental organizations and professional societies. Can you talk -- can you give us a little bit more about what challenges that entails to you?

COL. DEWHURST: Okay. I'll go with the first portion, just on the elections, on the security aspect as we prepare for those. We work with our Iraqi security force partners. We're doing that right now as they identify the -- where the polling sites are going to be, and we're doing assessments with the Iraqi security forces on those polling sites, assessing the security of those sites and what we need to adjust or what we need to be concerned about so we can protect the Iraqi citizens when they exercise their right to vote.

MR. TRIBBLE: Just one little extra point on the elections. What we collectively as the U.S. government are doing, beyond the security support, is providing some assistance through USAID to the national Iraqi High Electoral Commission.

That's not something that I do; it's just something that the U.S. government is doing.

There is also a lot of training being given by the National Democratic Institute, International Republican Institute and others for political parties and candidates. And some of those candidates are people that we've identified and sort of funnel into this training. It's open to every party. It's not -- it doesn't get involved in selecting any

particular -- favoring any particular candidate or party. But there's other -- but those are some of the ways that we're supporting the elections on the non-security side.

To answer your question about the professional or the civil society, there's a couple things that we're trying to do -- is, you've got -- civil society NGOs in our country, as you know, address needs that somehow aren't met by other systems, either by the government or by the local economy, and there's that kind of need here as well. There's not really a tradition of NGOs in the sort of sense of the volunteer NGOs that we might think of. We're trying to develop that. You can establish -- there are people who want to do good. There are people who want to build up an institution, to help widows and disadvantaged children, and that sort of thing. And some of that we can do just by directly financing specific projects, but we're trying to get out of the handout business and get into a process where we're building up stronger NGOs that can provide training -- Iraqi NGOs that can provide training to newer, smaller Iraqi NGOs and how to do fundraising on their own, how to build a constituency, how to deliver their services.

So a lot of this is -- again, it's capacity-building in the sense of helping local NGOs that want to do good works deliver -- you know, do that more efficiently and more effectively.

The other -- the flip side of that or another side of that is the whole network of professional associations. When you think about civil society, you can imagine business associations, lawyers' associations, Optimists Club, I mean, that kind of thing. We have focused a little bit -- we've focused a lot on the business associations, thinking -- hoping that by helping businessmen and - women organize in -- organize into professional associations, they can help each other, help each other determine how to best get capital and get access to the other services they need, but also become something more of an advocacy organization, not unlike a chamber of commerce might take with a local government, where they might advocate for the regulatory or legal changes that are needed to help them do business better.

So we can provide support. We provide some training. We provide some linkups to U.S. organizations that might help them out and just essentially work with them trying to develop their skills at being a professional association that serves the needs of their members.

Q And if I could just have a quick follow-up, the SOFA agreement calls for all troops to be out of central -- the cities and the villages -- by June 2009. How does that affect the PRTs? Are you going to be moving out of there at the same time?

MR. TRIBBLE: I guess I have to give you kind of the same answer that the colonel gave you. Yes, it will affect us in some fashion. We don't know how. The decisions that are being made about -- I mean planning is obviously under way for how the PRT footprint will be shaped. And I honestly can't tell you now what it will look like, but obviously it will be affected by what happens with the military's footprint. But exactly how, I really can't tell you.

Q Thank you.

COL. KECK: Mike?

Q Colonel, it's Mike Mount with CNN. Going back on the security situation -- as we've been talking about the SOFA, you know, pulls you back out of the main parts of the cities by June, what's your confidence level -- and you've been working with them for some time now -- what's your confidence level with the Iraqi forces and the police in your region? And do you have a high level of confidence that they're going to be able to kind of take control of the area as you start backing off and maybe further down the road, too, as troops are eventually pulled out?

COL. DEWHURST: Yeah, I can tell you from day one -- this is actually my second tour over here -- and the difference from my first tour to the second tour is the -- one is the confidence and competence of the Iraqi security forces and, two, their logistics, their supplies and equipment is much better than it was two years ago when I was over here. And what I have seen in my year of working with them, they have greatly increased their capabilities to -- a lot of the operations now are Iraqi-led, Iraqi-planned, and we are supporting their operations. And that's very encouraging for me as we look forward.

And as I tell my soldiers many times, we are working hard to work ourselves out of a job. And any time when they go out on their own -- the Iraqi security forces I'm talking about -- that's very encouraging. And then they're usually very proud to show us when they've come back off an operation that they were successful in detaining the extremists or criminals and the things they have done.

As we continue through this process, and this is what I think is what's important here, is that we are at this point where the security agreement's been signed. And to me, that's really good news in the progress of the security environment.

However that's now created lots more challenges for us to work through. It's now, okay, we have this agreement; now we've got to work through, how are we going to start withdrawing, pulling back? And how are we going to shape that? Because we want to do that in a very methodical manner because we don't want to lose the security gains that we have made.

And that's one of the things that we're working through now, as we work through this. And a lot of, all my operations I do are combined with the Iraqi security forces.

When I first got here, we were doing -- a lot of our operations would be, about 50 percent would be independent coalition only and 50 percent combined. Now all my operations are combined. And we work very closely together. And now we'll start seeing -- well, we are starting to see, they're starting do more operations independent. And that's very encouraging.

Q Colonel, it's Al Pessin from Voice of America. I want to follow up on this 'troops in the cities' issue.

What percentage of your troops that are based in the cities, would you say, are combat forces versus support or non-combat forces?

COL. DEWHURST: Okay.

I have, I'm composed of six battalions, of which four of them are maneuver battalions, are combat forces. And two of them: One is my support battalion, which is composed of about 800 soldiers total, and then my special troops battalion, which perform various functions, from communications to intelligence to engineer efforts.

Percentage-wise, you know, four are, four are maneuver battalions. Two of them are not maneuver battalions. So that would be about 70, 60 percent, 65 percent combat forces.

MR. TRIBBLE: Just to add a point on that, you know, combat forces is a term that has some -- that may not, that may not be relevant all the time.

When we go out on a PRT mission, we're going out with the maneuver battalion. Is that a combat patrol? Or is that an EPRT mission? Some of that is a question of definition. But we maneuver with the maneuver battalions, on purely non-lethal missions, a great deal of the time.

Q Right. But the Status of Forces Agreement says that U.S. combat troops will be removed from the cities.

Now, there's distinction between whether they'd be based or whether they'd travel through; that's not what I'm asking about. But Colonel, are all of your troops based in Iraqi cities? What I was asking about is at these COPs and these JSSs where the troops are living in the cities, if you have to get all your combat troops out of the cities, in terms of where they're based, what percentage or what numbers would that involve?

COL. DEWHURST: Well, if they all have to move out of Baghdad proper and out into the province, you're talking about, you know, 60 percent of the combat force, but they would still enable to get -- say, for example, Conrad Tribble to get his guys to their engagements and also to engagements that we do with the Iraqi security forces and do in our combined operations, we'd still have to travel back into the city.

Now, a lot of that's still being worked out at the higher levels, and that's why I can't give you anything definite on how that's going to be shaping up. But we are fully aware that that's what the security agreement says, and I know it's being worked at the higher levels.

COL. KECK: Tom, then Luis, and we'll be done.

Q Colonel, it's -- Mr. Tribble, it's Tom Bowman with NPR again. I wanted to follow up on what you said, that as combat troops are removed from the city, you too would be affected. And I'm wondering if you could explain why that would be. The SOFA calls for combat forces to be removed. It says nothing about PRTs. Couldn't you continue to do your work and perhaps partner with these Iraqi security forces? You guys say you're doing so much better.

MR. TRIBBLE: I guess I'm -- the real answer to that is a question mark. The planning for how the PRT mission will be structured in the next six months or over the course of the next year is something that's, frankly, going on above my head anyways, and so I can't really give you a good answer on that. I just know that obviously we are located with a brigade whose troops may be moving out of the city, or at least some of its troops, and I'm sure that then it will affect us.

But I really can't tell you any details. And it's not because I'm trying to hide anything or anything; we just don't know yet. Those things are being worked out.

COL. DEWHURST: And I think I need to clarify the point here. When you're saying combat forces, every patrol that we have that moves, whether it's moving Conrad and his team or it's moving my civil affairs teams throughout, they have to have the ability to defend themselves. And so any force that we have traveling you can label as that, but we have to defend ourselves, and we have that right to defend ourselves. And so when we move a patrol, it's going to be a force that is capable of defending itself.

Q (Off mike) -- wise for the PRTs to be partnered with the Iraqi security forces?

MR. TRIBBLE: I think I missed the first part of that question.

Q (Off mike) -- wise for the PRTs to be partnered with the Iraqi security forces?

COL. DEWHURST: Oh --

MR. TRIBBLE: Is it wise for the PRT to be partnered with the security forces? Was that the question?

Q Right. Yes.

MR. TRIBBLE: I can't answer that. It's -- that could be an option, but I -- at this point, I wouldn't -- I couldn't answer that.

MR. TRIBBLE: (Off mike) -- wrap it up.

Q Gentlemen, it's Luis Martinez with ABC News. Just a question about your tours. Could you describe what the most surprising development throughout that tour has been for you, either positively or negatively?

COL. DEWHURST (?): If I understood the question, you're asking what has been the most surprising development during our -- my tour here?

Q (Off mike) -- positively and negatively, please.

COL. DEWHURST: Okay. The positive thing -- and this is what I talk about a lot to my soldiers -- there's -- I look at -- there's been four factors. We've had the -- you know, the combination of the offensive operations of the -- of my forces along with the Iraqi security forces has really greatly reduced the violence.

The second factor is the capacity of the Iraqi security forces. After the increase in violence we had in late March, April, May, that really showed that they could do this, and they could do this, you know, leading the way. And that was a very positive effect.

And then what -- that had the effect on the Iraqi people as they started to have more trust in the Iraqi security forces. So more information was coming to the Iraqi security forces in informer tips, because the people decided they were tired of the violence, tired of the extremists, the thugs, the criminals trying to run their lives. So now they've come, stepped forward, and we have lots and lots more tips. That's -- so that's very positive.

And then from that is -- there's -- the government's starting to work hard to increase essential services. And we're starting to see -- what I see across the OE that makes me real excited is the amount of traffic that we have. We have lots of traffic jams. And that's because the people feel more secure and they're coming out to the markets. The markets are flourishing right now. We're seeing a lot of new cars and car dealerships that have opened up.

A lot more new businesses have been opening up. And the complaints I hear from the Iraqi people are no longer complaints about security; it's more complaints about essential services. As they say -- they tell me that security is better. Now they're more concerned about the essential services.

And probably the biggest highlight I'd like to point out before I forget here that -- is the -- in Baghdad, in the eastern part, there is a landmark. It's known as the Mutanabi book market. This is a old, old book market that a lot of Iraqis remember from the glory days that was hit by a VBIED back in March of 2007. Since then, the Iraqis on their own -- through the Iraqi government, the Amanat, which is like the city public works, with their engineers have been rebuilding this book market that is -- we're expecting it to open within the next week or so. And they've been doing this all on their own.

And that is probably the most -- thing I'm so proud of, that the Iraqis have done this on their own without any U.S. monetary involvement. The only involvement we have had has been in teach/coach/mentor and in the -- in the security, and as -- I work the Iraqi security forces on how they're securing this book market.

Probably the -- you asked about the most negative thing. I don't know if it's negative or it's just -- my concern is that there -- what keeps me up at night is that -- is that extremists that still trying to do that spectacular attack. And that is my concern, of trying to find out, get the information, who that is, to prevent that attack from happening in the first place. And that's probably the only thing that still bothers me, is those spectacular attacks are -- still have the potential of happening.

MR. TRIBBLE: The thing that surprised me on the negative side, the most -- and it's been kind of one of the frustrating things or the most difficult things to work with -- is just the -- I guess I call it the legacy of Saddam or the legacy of a repressive regime that still is imprinted in the minds of a lot of the people that we work with. It means that it's difficult -- it's difficult for them to take initiative sometimes.

They know, they see what they'd like to do, if they're working in a bureaucracy whether it's a government bureaucracy or even in a business, but there's still a little bit of hesitation to reach out and sort of take that initiative that we'd like to help them take. And so working on that and sort of overcoming that legacy is still a pretty significant part of our coach/teach/mentor process with -- with a lot of our -- a lot of our contacts.

On the positive side, what I was surprised by is just the incredible resilience of Iraqis, just the citizens of the city who are -- you know, have bounced back from an incredibly destructive two years, give or take, of violence in the city, are now at the point where really things are taking off in many respects. I'm not glossing this over, but really are moving forward. And every time -- there are still attacks, there are still car bombs, there are still other kinds of attacks -- the -- the quickness with which they just brush it off and move it on -- the market reopens, things go on, life goes on -- as a society, that I think is remarkable. It's different from what -- my sense of what it was here a couple of years ago. It's what gives me hope that they really are fed up with the violence and are ready to move on, and are not going to let maybe even the spectacular VBIED attack, let sort of turn things around in any significant way. That resilience of the Iraqis is really something that we can build on and work with.

COL. KECK: Well, thank you much, gentlemen, for that -- those comments. And we have come to the end of our time, so we would like to provide you with an opportunity for any final comments you might want to give us.

MR. TRIBBLE: Hey, thanks. I'll start just real quick.

I want to say thanks for having us. I appreciate the interest. It's important that we have a chance to talk to you all and through you all to the American public about what we're doing out here. I'm obviously -- I'm a civilian, I'm out here working in a military

environment, incredible pride in our -- in our military colleagues and sort of satisfaction at how well we've worked together with them.

There are a lot of civilians that have come over here to Iraq. There's over 800 in the PRT program alone, plus, you know, you name it on the other side. Everybody -- all these are Americans who have sacrificed, who have left families behind, and they're doing good work over here on behalf of the American people.

And I just think it's important to remember that and for you all -- to have that highlighted a little bit for you, that these are people that are making enormous sacrifices to advance U.S. interests in Iraq. And it's important that we recognize that, and I appreciate the chance to share some of that with you.

COL. DEWHURST: I'd just like to add, first, thank you for having us on here today and the questions that you asked.

You know, the security agreement is obviously in the forefront and a lot of your questions are about that, but one of the things we are keeping in mind in everything we do is we respect the Iraqi law and the support to Iraqi sovereignty. We continue to work with our Iraqi security force partners. And how the security agreement will actually be implemented and utilized will continue to be shaped by our leaders above and then implemented by brigades like -- brigade combat teams like myself.

But one of the things I'd be remiss of talking about is our soldiers, the civilians that are with us that make this happen day in and day out. I'm deeply encouraged, very excited about the way my soldiers work with the Iraqi security forces. They are truly partners. They're friends. They share. They work together. They have really overcome language and cultural barriers where they understand each other and work very hard.

But there's one other group, though, that we miss very dearly, and hopefully here at the beginning of the new year when we redeploy we'll see them, and that's our families and our spouses and our friends that have been supporting us since we've been deployed. You know, the gifts, the packages, the e-mails, the phone calls, you know, those are all morale-builders that keep us going. My brigade is -- this is the second Christmas that we've missed in a row, and for about 25 percent of my brigade this is the third Christmas they have missed in a row. So this is, for us, to (stay the ?) course like this is very encouraging.

I just got some great Americans that I'm very, very deeply proud and honored and humbled to serve with day in and day out. And we look forward to getting back there to good old United States and complete our tour, and hopefully this will be the -- for us will be -- we won't have to be coming back in the future. And we wish you all happy holidays.

MR. TRIBBLE: Same here.

COL. KECK: Thank you much, gentlemen, and we wish you the best of luck in your redeployment home. Thank you.

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