DoD News Briefing with Lt. Gen. Ham from the Pentagon

Presenter: Director for Operations, Joint Staff, Lt. Gen. Carter Ham
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GEN. HAM: Just a couple of brief remarks, and I'll get to your questions.

Regarding last week's satellite intercept, as General Cartwright told you last week, various tracking systems have continued to monitor the debris following the intercept, and the assessment now is that the intercept was successful in reaching the tank and that the hydrazine contained therein has now dissipated. Based on the recommendation of General Chilton, the commander of U.S. Strategic Command, over this past weekend we've stood down the forces that were ready to respond should any hazardous debris fall to earth. From our standpoint, this largely concludes the military operations for this mission. The ships and the two missiles -- the two remaining missiles will now be configured back to their normal status.

We continue to provide intelligence and appropriate information to the Turkish government as directed, and as part of that agreement, the Turkish military forces informed us and have now undertaken a limited ground operation against the KGK terrorist elements in northern Iraq. Central Command, European Command and Multinational Force-Iraq are clearly monitoring these operations very carefully.

We're also monitoring the situation in Serbia and in Kosovo.

Our military contribution to KFOR is about 1,600 personnel under the able command of the 35th Infantry Division, are supporting those efforts as required.

There's recently been a lot of interest regarding what our force levels will be in Iraq and Afghanistan, and we talked about that or didn't actually talk much about it last time I was here. But I have a little bit more information for you today, with the understanding of course that this is all conditions-based. And I say that because if you look at recent events, if you look at the attacks recently in Karbala, consider that al Qaeda in Iraq, the Taliban in Afghanistan, are constantly changing their tactics, that these force posture levels truly are conditions-based, and driven by the mission requirements and the assessment of commanders on the ground.

With that understanding, our projection for Afghanistan is that by late summer, we'll have about 32,000 U.S. forces there. That's a little bit more than we have now. We're about 28,000 now. The bulk of that are the 3,200 Marines that will deploy in the coming months.

In Iraq, we're now projecting approximately 140,000 troops there in July. This accounts for the previously announced troop rotations and the drawdown of the five surge brigades and the Marine battalions, without replacement. It also takes into account, as our forces look to transition from leading to partnering and then to overwatch, the need to retain some key enabling capabilities, to help the Iraqi forces with their capabilities: such capabilities as command and control headquarters, logistics, aviation, detainee operations and the like. Again this will be very much conditions-based but that's our projection as of today.

With that, I'd be glad to take your questions.

Bob.

Q General, a question on Turkey.

You described ground operations as limited, and I know that Secretary Gates has encouraged the Turks to wind it up as soon as possible. But I'm wondering if what you see and hear, does it appear to be a limited operation that is winding down? Or does this have characteristics of a more prolonged operation?

GEN. HAM: I wouldn't say winding down, but it does very clearly appear to be -- it appears to be what the Turkish military forces said they would do, of limited depth and of limited duration. We've seen nothing to contradict that so far.

Q General, coming back to Iraq and the troop numbers, so what you're saying is by the time we get to the end of July, we're going to be at 140,000, which looks to me like we're still talking about significantly higher than pre-surge levels in Iraq. Am I reading that correctly?

GEN. HAM: Yes.

We started the surge at about 132 in January of 2007. So with the surge forces that went in, we've focused principally on the five brigade combat teams, but it was much more than that. There was an additional division headquarters, additional aviation, military police, logistics, the detention. The transfer of responsibility for detention operations has not progressed as rapidly as we would like to the Iraqis, so there's a need to have that force sustained as well.

So, yes, it is bigger. It is, by the end of July, bigger than when we started this surge. That's for sure.

Q Weren't the original projections to have about 144,000 there after the surge?

GEN. HAM: Well, there were lots and lots of numbers floating around there about what the projection was. And that's why I think we were careful, and General Petraeus was careful, in his testimony, to not pin a number to it, but rather to focus on the number of brigade combat teams, which will go back to 15 by July of this year. And that will happen, but it is largely those other forces, some of which were deployed as part of the surge, such as the additional divisional headquarters and some aviation assets. Some have been emerging requirements: the detention facility, operators and security forces and the like.

Q And how long do you anticipate the number to remain at 140,000, given the so-called pause in the draw-down of U.S. forces?

GEN. HAM: Well, the president made a decision to draw down the five surge brigades, the two Marine battalions by July of this year. And so that's where we are. That's where -- our projection will take us out to that point. And as I think folks in this room are well aware, there is an ongoing process now that General Petraeus and his staff, Admiral Fallon and his, the joint chiefs, are all preparing to say what -- to make a recommendation to the secretary and to the president about what's next. So the 140(thousand) in July is what we project now, and then what's beyond that, we'll have to await the recommendations of those three entities and the decision by the secretary of Defense and the president.

Q But -- I'm sorry. But when do you expect that decision to be made? Would it be made in July? Would it be made before July? Do you have any anticipation as to when that might happen?

GEN. HAM: Well, we hope it would be made before July, but I'm not sure how much more before July. You know, we think -- you know, General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker, we think, will be back here sometime likely in April to make their recommendations, as will Admiral Fallon make his recommendations, the Joint Chiefs make their recommendations, and then decisions will be made for what happens post-July.

Gene (sp).

Q It's our understanding that no decision has yet been made about the pace of future withdrawals. Nevertheless, do you anticipate that sometime this year the troop levels in Iraq would go below the pre-surge levels at some point?

GEN. HAM: Well, there's lots of speculation about that. I think it would be premature at this point to say that. I think everybody -- the secretary of Defense, the chairman, Admiral Fallon, General Petraeus -- have all been clear that further reductions will occur. It is the timing and the pace of those reductions that is the focus of the ongoing assessment to make a recommendation to the secretary and to the president following it. So yes, there certainly is a full expectation that there will be further reductions. When those will begin and at what pace they will continue is premature at this point to talk about that.

Q Just a quick question about the satellite, as you end that whole operation. Has there been any debris from the satellite that's been tracked that actually made it back to Earth, either falling into the ocean or falling on land? Have you seen any sign that any pieces of it actually made it to Earth?

GEN. HAM: There were a couple of tracks that were picked up with debris reentering the atmosphere. Whether or not those were directly attributable to the particular satellite that was intercepted was not possible to be known. And we have not had any reports of debris actually impacting on the Earth's surface.

Let me come over this -- yes?

Q I would like to go back to the Turkish operation. You mentioned that this operation has a limited duration. What can we understand by limited duration? Is it a matter of weeks or months or days?

And before launching this operation, had you informed the Kurdish Regional Government about what the Turkish are planning to do?

GEN. HAM: I wouldn't want to categorize the duration any further than limited because the exact timing will be decided upon by the government of Turkey. The arrangement that is in place is that we have asked -- and this is an agreement between the two governments. We have asked the government of Turkey to notify us and specifically Multinational Forces-Iraq when they anticipate conducting cross-border operations against the KGK terrorist organization.

We also highly encourage the government of Turkey to notify the government of Iraq of these operations as well, and we have been heartened in the recent experience where there had been discussion between high-level Iraqi and high-level Turkish military officials in this regard. So I think that's promising.

Q Senior military commanders are talking these days a lot about conditions-based withdrawals and seem to reinforcing that that's the view right now. But just for the sake of discussion, then, why not the other side? What keeps you, the military, from saying, okay, there's enough progress now and we could go to a timetable?

GEN. HAM: Well, those are the conditions. I mean, the -- I don't think discussion of conditions-based is anything new. Conditions-based is what resulted in the five additional brigades going in the first place, so that was a conditions-based increase. But I think now --

Q Well, let me -- I'm not asking this right. Why not -- why -- why conditions-based and why not go to some sort of timetable?

GEN. HAM: A firm timetable. Precisely because the conditions are not predictable, and there is a desire, I think -- appropriate desire on the part of the commanders on the ground and the regional commander to have the opportunity to assess conditions as they evolve. And those conditions as you're well aware involve not only our own forces, but the Iraqi security forces, the Afghan security forces, the enemy, which, as we say from here, the enemy always has a vote, and the other factors of economic development and reconstruction and political progress. All of those factors weigh in to what the right force level will be.

So I think the sense is that to establish a firm timetable at this point is -- would not be helpful and doesn't recognize the fluid nature of the conflict in which we're engaged in -- both Iraq and in Afghanistan.

Q Can I just follow up very quickly? Do you have a view about the attack against the pilgrims from Karbala, the situation in Mosul? Are these just sort of isolated events, your assessment? Have the Iraqi forces simply not been able to handle the situation? What's with -- (inaudible) -- recent uptick?

GEN. HAM: Well, the attacks against the pilgrims in Karbala, it's hard to think of a more despicable act than that, of pilgrims performing religious duty and to have these terrorists attack them.

The response by the Iraqi security forces, I think, has been -- now, this is -- remember what this is. This is a million people. And so, you know, to provide absolute security for that, I think, is beyond the measure of anyone to be able to do that.

So it's -- it is a terrible event that has occurred. Sadly, there have been attacks, and there have been worse attacks in previous years. In -- ongoing operations in Mosul, primarily led by the Iraqi security forces, are an effort to attack al Qaeda in Iraq in the place where they have most recently appeared. U.S. forces are obviously there alongside the Iraqis and are working very carefully with them, but this is largely an Iraqi-led operation.

Q General, in the north, would you say that the U.S. now has the upper hand against the insurgents there, given the higher level of casualties that we've seen over the last couple months there?

GEN. HAM: I would say that there is increasing pressure on al Qaeda in Iraq everywhere inside Iraq. Again, it is premature to say -- you know, to declare victory or anything, but it is very clear that wherever al Qaeda in Iraq tries to operate, they are increasingly being resisted by Iraqi security forces, clearly by the U.S. and other coalition members, and most importantly, I think, by the people of Iraq. And that's really what's making the difference.

Yes?

Q General, what does it say about security conditions in Iraq that 18 months after the surge began, you're going to need 10,000 more troops or 8,000 more troops in Iraq at that time to maintain stability? Doesn't that mean that it hasn't had the desired effect if you still need an elevated troop number just to keep things steady?

GEN. HAM: I think it means that the conditions are ever- changing. It is important, also, to remember that the Iraqis surged at a much higher level than the U.S. did, and they are increasingly performing their tasks as well. So I would say, rather -- I guess from my view -- rather than look at this negatively, I will say there is an opportunity now to take advantage of the security that has been established by the five surge brigades. And you want to sustain that and not jeopardize the gains that have been achieved. And the commanders have assessed -- the commanders on the ground, the regional commander have assessed that this is the force that is best postured to be able to do that.

Yes, ma'am?

Q Sir, if you added 140,000 troops in Iraq for a sustained period, at what point -- or do you think there will be a point where you can reduce the rotations from 15 months to 12 months, or something less 15 months?

GEN. HAM: Yeah. The desire to get back to a one-to-one home as long as you're deployed and specifically for the Army to get back to 12-month deployments is a very, very high priority. I think you've heard just about every senior leader that we have mention that. So this is an important factor. Premature to say that in July we'll be able to do that, but that's being studied very, very hard by -- again, by the commanders on the ground, by the Army staff led by General Casey here and by Joint Forces Command, who has the joint responsibility to provide the forces.

The clear desire is to get back to one-to-one for the Army, 12-month deployments, as soon as practical.

Q Well, there's been a lot of talk about a pause and not going below 15 brigade combat teams any time soon. Is it possible for you to have 15 combat brigades in Iraq and at some point still go back to a one-to-one? Is that feasible that you could go, for example, six months at 140,000 and still be able to get troop numbers -- troop rotations down from 15 to 12 months?

GEN. HAM: If it were that simple, if it were directly tied only to the number of brigade combat teams, then we'd be able to answer pretty definitively at this level deployment length would be x. But there are so many other factors to include, other global demands that are existent that we have -- that we have for our forces; the need for reset, reconstitution; some of the units will still have to be -- are still undergoing transformation. So there's -- and, of course, the Army and the Marine Corps are both growing. So all of those factors make it too uncertain to be able to pin a precise number to say if we get to X number of brigades, then we'll be able to go to this length of deployment.

What I would tell you is that this has very, very high level of attention here with the military leadership from the chairman and chief of staff of the Army on down, and as soon as it's practical, they certainly will.

(Cross talk.)

We'll come back.

Q I want to ask you two questions on Turkey. The Turkish government has gone out of its way the last couple of days to credit both the quality and quantity of intelligence shared by the U.S. to Turkey. Two questions: the first is, was there specific U.S. intelligence shared that led to the Turkish ground assault? And secondarily, the Turkish government has also said that there is no daylight between it and the U.S. as far as the failure of the Kurdish government to take necessary steps to prevent the need for this assault. Is there a belief that the KRG should have done more to stop the PKK and thus stave off the need for an assault?

GEN. HAM: I think the secretary of Defense said it best, by stating that the solution to the KGK terrorist problem is not solely a military problem. There is a military aspect to it, but there are other avenues to resolve that difficulty.

The intelligence that we share with the Turks -- you know, we have a long-standing intelligence-sharing partnership with our NATO ally. I don't want to get into the

specifics of what and when we provide, but it is very close, and we have the forces in Turkey to help them use the intelligence that we are able to make available to them.

Q Sir, again on the force levels, how important a factor is the continuation of the cease-fire by Sadr? Can you characterize that at all?

GEN. HAM: Well, it is important, I think. And that is clearly one of the factors that we believe has led to a decrease in violence over the past couple of months. So it was encouraging to see that he has extended that cease-fire, and we'll hope that that cease-fire will hold and that his followers will abide by his direction.

Yes.

Q General, do you have a general idea about whether the Turkish offensive is succeeding? In other words, is what they're doing now worth doing it? And second, the Turks want to buy some ten used Cobra attack helicopters from the United States, and these helicopters are presently being used by the U.S. military. Do you see any chance for a sale?

GEN. HAM: Foreign military sales is outside of my purview as an operator, so I can't address that. And it would be more appropriate for the Turks to comment on the success of their operation, not for us to comment from here.

Q General, in December, Secretary Gates said that he may not even be able to make the decision on whether to reduce the deployments from 15 months back down to 12 months until mid- to late fall of this year, which would put it October-November, I guess.

Do you have any idea that that decision might be closer than that?

GEN. HAM: Well, I think there's a desire very clearly to get back to one to one if we can, certainly less than 15 if that's at all possible for the Army forces. But again, as to when that decision will be made, is being studied very carefully based on the pace of the reductions, and I believe that he'll probably wait until the spring assessment, the post-July assessment, before any decisions are made.

Q If I could --

Q Just one quick -- go ahead.

Q If I could just -- on this question of the deployment, I mean, I know it's complicated and a lot of factors being looked at, but is it a fact that as long as you have 140,000 troops in Iraq, 32,000 in Afghanistan, that you're not going to get back down to 12- month deployments with those kind of numbers?

GEN. HAM: I would not say that's a fact. They are -- there are just too many elements that can -- that are in play here to say that for sure. That's a fact. Because remember that the Army is also starting to build its strength, so that has a factor in there as well.

All I can tell you, John, is that we really do seriously want to get back to one-to-one, get the Army at less than 15-month deployments as quickly as possible, but at this point it's premature to say at this force level we'll be able to do that.

Jamie ?

Q Well, the 32,000 U.S. troops that will be in Afghanistan, is that an all-time high of the number of troops the U.S. has had there?

GEN. HAM: It is, yes.

Q Could you address a little bit what kind of benchmarks you'd like to see out of the Iraqi security forces that make -- that affect these troop levels and, you know, flush that condition for us a little bit?

GEN. HAM: Sure. It's the -- you know, the ongoing process of evaluation, the training and readiness levels that the Iraqi security forces and the Afghan security forces are able to achieve, and that is best manifest by the provincial Iraqi control process, which presently nine of the Iraqi provinces have gone through that process. And I say that because that's not purely a military equation. That's a joint decision arrived at between Multinational Force-Iraq and the Iraqi government as to when the conditions are right to make that transition.

So the provincial Iraqi control, I would say, would be very much a leading indicator as to when the Iraqis are able to assume ever more responsibility.

Q Is there are a specific number of provinces, for example, that you have to get to before you can start looking at that condition as being met?

GEN. HAM: Well, I mean, each province is looked at independently, and there are a couple that are being assessed right now. And so it is very likely that throughout the remainder of 2008 we're going to see a number of other provinces go through the provincial Iraqi control process.

Q As you look to drawdown more brigades, are there any kind of lessons learned that General Petraeus has shared with the Joint Staff about how to do it given the experience last December-January with the brigade that already came out? Are we looking for anything different there, any different approach?

GEN. HAM: I think that's a -- that's the reason -- one of the reasons why General Petraeus has asked for a period of assessment to make sure that we have that factor just right. It becomes increasingly difficult, you know, when you take out the 20th

brigade combat team, but you've still got 19 to spread around and cover the battlespace and to partner with the Iraqis, that's not so bad. But when you get to 18, 17, 16, 15, it becomes increasing complex to do. So you want to make sure that we do this just right, and this is another reason for some of the other -- for why some of the increase above 132; for example, additional aviation assets. Well, as you have fewer U.S. forces around the country, but you still have transition teams, Provincial Reconstruction Teams and the like in other places, well you want to make sure that you can reinforce those very, very quickly. So you need -- you need, perhaps, more aviation than you did before because you don't have the same ground presence.

So all those -- all those factors are being evaluated in this period of assessment.

Q And when will we see the next announcement, in effect saying the units coming out without being replaced?

GEN. HAM: Well, I don't know. I think that's the process that's ongoing right now. General Petraeus, Ambassador Crocker, we think, will be back here sometime in April to make those recommendations. And sometime following that, there'll be a next set of decisions.

Q I thought you said last week there'd be more.

GEN. HAM: Of the five, yes. Of the -- yes.

Q I meant of the five that we're already talking about coming out by July.

GEN. HAM: Oh, the five, yes. The next --

Q (Off mike.)

GEN. HAM: March will be the next of the -- I'm sorry, I misunderstood you, I'm sorry.

Yes, sir? Let me -- somebody who hasn't had a question?

Q About Turkey again, General. Could you say that there's a general consensus between the Turkish military and the U.S. military in terms of the timing of this operation and when it will -- it can end?

GEN. HAM: The Turkish military does not ask, nor do -- nor does the United States military provide approval for these missions. It isn't that kind of a relationship. It is -- we have asked and the Turkish military has agreed to provide notification so that their operations do not come in conflict with the Multinational Force Iraq's operations inside of Iraq. So I wouldn't say that it was -- it isn't, again, a situation of approval. Having said that, we've -- they did notify us that it would be of limited duration and of limited depth, and so far, everything we have seen is consistent with that.

STAFF: (Off mike) -- two more.

GEN. HAM: Okay.

Q I just wanted a clarification, again, on the other troops, not the combat troops who formed part of the surge. When it was originally described to us, I think, it was about 21,000 combat troops, 21,500, and the rest were enablers, different elements of various descriptions. Is it basically the case that none of those extra troops are going to be able to be drawn down, that they will either have to stay or be replaced? And isn't that disappointing, if that's the case, that all of those elements have to stay?

GEN. HAM: It's not none, and it's not -- it's not exclusively those that went in as part of the surge. There were already some planned increases in force levels in some

other areas that the command had asked for, and subsequent to the surge, there have been other -- we call them requests for forces, that have come from the commanders. So it's a combination. So some of the enablers that deployed as part of the surge will not be included in that post-July number, but some of them very clearly will be.

Q Could you just briefly give us a brief description of what -- of those enablers, what kind of jobs they have? Military police, or what kind of jobs are we talking about?

GEN. HAM: Logistics is a piece of this. Obviously, as you take five more brigades in, you need that. And interestingly enough, as you take five out but you still have these transition teams and provincial reconstruction teams and increasingly, the Iraqi security forces, which are operating out throughout the country, they too require logistical support, and that's -- I think as you're well aware, that's a capacity or a capability that has not been fully developed in the Iraqi security forces. So they are largely reliant upon us for some period of time.

Military police is another one, partly to help the Iraqi police stand up and improve their capability, partly as a result of detention operations. So that's an increase that may stay as well, and aviation we've talked about. And then lastly recall that now the 3rd Infantry Division headquarters, that went over as an extra divisional headquarters, that division headquarters will be replaced as well, so that's a good thing.

Q Were the military police and the aviation services, were they the ones that were being deployed in addition to the surge?

GEN. HAM: It's both.

Some of them were part of the surge. Some of them were to meet requirements that either predated the surge but hadn't yet deployed, or new requirements that emerged over the past few months.

Okay. We'll take one more.

Q Have you already received the request for forces to replace these enablers, particularly the aviation assets?

GEN. HAM: We have most. Central Command has provided us what they expect the force level to be over the next several months. We think there probably are a few other requirements that are still being worked in the process. But by and large, we have received those requests.

Okay.

(Cross talk.)

Q Thank you.

A couple of weeks ago, commander of the missile forces, Lieutenant General Henry Obering, said that in addition to planned missile defense capabilities in the Czech Republic and Poland, there was a general plan for work for a third component of an X radar in Turkey or the Caucasus or the Caspian.

Are you talking about this with the Turks? If yes, is there any progress?

GEN. HAM: You ask really good questions, but they're not in my purview as an operator. So I think we can probably ask the J-5 folks to answer that question. It's not an area that I'm conversant in. I'm sorry.

Okay, thanks.

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