

PRESS CONFERENCE:

Major General Kevin Bergner, Spokesman and Deputy Chief of Staff, Strategic Effects,
Multi-National Force – Iraq

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PARTICIPANTS:

Major General Kevin Bergner

REPORTERS:

Ali al-Yasi, al-Hurra Television
Ben Shepard from the AFP News Agency
Solomon Moore with The New York Times

REPORTERS 1-9

*REP1 = REPORTER 1

*INT = INTERPRETER

MAJ GEN BERGNER:

As-Salāmu `Alaykum. Good afternoon, everyone. The Multi-National Force joins the citizens of Iraq in condemning yesterday's al-Qaeda in Iraq suicide attack against a family gathering participating at a funeral here in Baghdad. This attack is further evidence of the nature of these extremists, their use of indiscriminate violence, and their corrupt, extremist ideology that targets innocent civilians while mourning the passing of a loved one. Yesterday's barbaric attack is also further evidence of the continuing need to disrupt the al-Qaeda network and keep increasing the pressure on them. To that purpose, coalition and Iraqi forces killed or captured 51 al-Qaeda-in Iraq leaders that were announced during the month of December. This included eight regional, city, or functional emirs; nine that were cell leaders; six that were involved in media and propaganda activities; five that were foreign terrorist facilitators; seven that were involved in vehicle bomb and improvised-explosive devices; and some 16 others who were either spiritual advisors, financiers, intelligence gatherers, or weapons traffickers. The ten most significant are shown on this slide and I'll briefly discuss each one. Awwad Nawar Sabhan Farud al-Shammari was the emir for Beiji. He was involved in extortion networks as well as the movement and employment of foreign terrorists. He was captured in Beiji. Muhammed Sulayman Fizza al-Zobai, otherwise known as Abu Abdullah, was the regional emir from west Baghdad to Fallujah. Over time, local citizens forced him out of the community and he moved to Samarra. From there, he led an al-Qaeda in Iraq network that operated in Salah ad Din and Anbar. We previously announced his death during a press conference in December and are highlighting it here today as the summary of those significant actions from the past month. He was killed in Samarra. Mahmud

Husayn Ubayd al Falahi was the emir for eastern Anbar Province. He was captured near Lake Tharthar and directly supervised the emir of Karma. He had direct ties to Abu Ayyub al-Masri and also coordinated and directed foreign terrorists. He was captured near Lake Tharthar as well. Salam Hadi Alwan was the media emir for the Diyala Province and was killed on December 4th near Khan Bani Saad. He was new in this position having replaced the previous emir who was killed in November. Malik Dhash Sanjir was the AQI finance leader for Baghdad's southern belts. He was involved in the supply of vehicles and material to Baghdad's car bomb networks and was also involved in the training and the facilitation of suicide bombers—including women—for use in attacks against the citizens of Baghdad. He was killed in Baghdad. Natiq Mahil Sarhid Zinad was a foreign terrorist facilitator. He supported the al-Qaeda in Iraq network in Mosul and the movement of foreign terrorists from Syria into Iraq. He is also an associate of Abu Ayyub al-Masri's top advisor so he was captured in Mosul. Ali Hamad Mutar Murayir was a senior advisor who also operated in Mosul. His focus was attempting to justify terrorist actions by perverting the Koran. He was also involved in murder, police intimidation, and car bomb attacks as well as hijacking fuel trucks. He also had direct access to Abu Ayyub al-Masri. Sa'ad Hamid Mahmud Nusayf was a foreign terrorist facilitator who operated near Samarra. He provided logistical support for foreign terrorists operating in Salah ad Din and also supported the media and propaganda network and he was captured in Samarra. Abu Jarrah was a foreign terrorist facilitator who operated near Mahmudiyah. He was responsible for the movement of foreign terrorists in areas south of Baghdad as well as supporting the logistics of al-Qaeda leaders. He was killed in Mahmudiyah. And Muhammed Khalil Ibrahim was the deputy leader for the al-Qaeda in Iraq network operating south of Baghdad. Ibrahim was a key planner in numerous attacks against coalition forces operating in the Mahmudiya area and was also involved in the facilitation of foreign terrorists and weapons. He was also killed south of Baghdad. Even as operations lead to the capture of extremists, the Iraqi courts are prosecuting them. On Sunday, Iraqi judges in Iraqi courts found two al-Qaeda in Iraq terrorists guilty. Umar Wadala Dodz al-Zagana was also known as Abu Nur. He was found guilty of terrorism by the Iraqi courts. He had been an al-Qaeda in Iraq emir—the military emir—of Baghdad and was involved in over 800 attacks against Iraqi citizens and Iraqi security and coalition forces. Abu Nur was also involved in the brutal deaths of four Russian diplomats and was the mastermind of the attack on Sadr City in late 2006 that involved five suicide car bombs. Also found guilty of terrorism on the same day, was Kalad al-Mashadani, also known as Abu Shuhed. Mashadani was captured on the 4th of July of this year...of last year, excuse me; 2007. He was the senior Iraqi in the al-Qaeda in Iraq organization and was the al-Qaeda overall emir for media and propaganda activities in Iraq. After being detained, Mashadani is the individual who talked in detail about the foreign leadership of al-Qaeda in Iraq. He specifically stated that the Islamic State of Iraq is a front organization for al-Qaeda and serves to mask the foreign domination of its leadership. He also revealed that Omar al-Baghdadi is a fictional character or figurehead created by Abu Ayyub al-Masri, an Egyptian, to give al-Qaeda in Iraq's foreign leadership more of an Iraqi face. Iraqis have increasingly rejected al-Qaeda in Iraq and their indiscriminate violence, the Taliban-like ideology, and the barbaric torture and intimidation. On Monday, leading sheikhs in Anbar and Salah ad Din provinces rejected Osama bin Laden's recent remarks stating, "What the loyalists of bin

Laden do contradicts Islamic principles and its moral standards.” These courageous Iraqi citizens reject al-Qaeda in Iraq and its violence, its death, extremism, and oppressive practices. Every day we also see the Iraqi security forces continuing to grow, develop their capabilities, and shoulder more of the responsibility for security in Iraq. On Saturday, in Rustamiyah, the Iraqi Military Academy graduated 229 newly commissioned officers for the Iraqi Army and for the Iraqi Air Forces. This class is the second group to graduate from the one-year program. Of the 229 graduates, 44 have been selected as pilot candidates and are slotted to go into the Iraqi Air Force. These pilot candidates will return to the academy for English-language training before being admitted to the Kirkuk Flight School. Also on Sunday, nearly 200 soldiers from the 6th Iraqi Army will graduate from maintenance school at the Muthana Air Base; and this is the school’s first graduating class. Its members are set to help bolster the Iraqi Army’s ability to effectively manage its maintenance and equipment support programs. Together with the Iraqi security forces and this new group of leaders, we will continue to pursue those who terrorize the Iraqi people. We know it will continue to be a tough fight and one that will test the courage and the strength of the Iraqi people, the Iraqi forces, and the coalition forces. But even amidst this tough fight, the Iraqi forces and the Iraqi people are standing up, they are rejecting extremists, and reclaiming their neighborhoods, their communities, and their lives. With that, I am happy to take your questions this afternoon. Yes, sir.

REP1:

Asks question in Arabic.

INT:

Question from Ali al-Yasi, al-Hurra TV.

MAJ GEN BERGNER:

Shukran.

REP1:

Continues in Arabic.

INT:

Question from Hurra. There is a statistic that indicate that the number of death and casualties among the Americans in 2007 reached to 900 soldiers and it’s the highest number of casualties among the American soldiers. How would you ascribe this and why this high death rate among the Americans despite the security situation has been improved? And what is your expectation for 2008?

MAJ GEN BERGNER:

Well, 2007 has been a year of enormous sacrifice by coalition forces, their families, and their friends. It has been a year of very tough fighting. It has been a year where coalition forces have pursued the enemy in places which had become safe havens and operating bases; had been places where the enemy was able to prepare defensive positions if you will. And it was a year in which the United States significantly increased the number of forces on the ground here in Iraq to support the surge of offensive operations. So the year that has seen a significant amount of progress is also a year that has involved an enormous amount of sacrifice as you mentioned. And a sacrifice which we all owe an enormous debt of gratitude to our fellow soldiers and to their families for all that they have done and especially those who have made the ultimate sacrifice. Shukran.

REP1:

Asks question in Arabic.

INT:

And what are your expectations in 2008? Do you think the attacks will continue? Will there be also more casualties among the American soldiers and sacrifices?

MAJ GEN BERGNER:

Well, I would first say that all of us start this year with a full understanding that this is still a tough fight. It will continue to be a tough fight and so we fully expect 2008 to be a place where there continue to be significant challenges. But those challenges are going to be approached with an increasing number of Iraqi security forces. They'll be approached with an increasing commitment by the Iraqi citizens at the local level to reject al-Qaeda and to work more closely with Iraqi security forces and with the coalition force. And so 2008 will see a continued tough fight but one where we will see increasing commitment and involvement of Iraqi forces and the Iraqi people. And that should be encouraging. Shukran. Yeah.

REP2:

Thanks. I was wondering with the arrests that were made, specifically or especially the ones in December. Do you think that they will have any immediate, tangible affect on the security situation here in Iraq? Of course, they were from all parts of Iraq and they were obviously high up on the chain there. But it seems like right now if you look at yesterday's bombing, if you look at today in Basra, it seems like a lot of the violence is scattered, splinter groups. It's very random. So when you get people high up does it still have the same type of affect?

MAJ GEN BERGNER:

Well, first let me start by saying that we have said all along and we fully understand that al-Qaeda seeks to continue to have the capability and—they do still have the capability—

to conduct these horrific attacks, barbaric attacks that target innocent civilians in their effort to try to incite sectarian tensions and lead backwards to the sectarian violence that plagued Iraq in 2006 and the early part of this year. The effort that we describe this afternoon in terms of these operations against the al-Qaeda network in Iraq represents the continued need to pressure that network and to continue to disrupt its ability to direct operations, continue to interdict its ability to bring in foreign terrorists, and to continue to interdict its ability to choose the time and place of conducting its attacks. That requires a continuous effort on our part and that's what coalition and Iraqi security forces with, increasingly, the support of the Iraqi people are seeking to do. And that's what these actions were a result of. You saw some mention in this summary that it is a geographically diverse effort. And that's another key aspect of operations is to keep the pressure on those who involve themselves in al-Qaeda in Iraq wherever they are to pursue them and to keep the offensive focus on pressuring that network. And so we are very much in a pursuit mode if you will. Go ahead.

REP2:

A follow up. What can you tell us about today's incident in Basra, if anything?

MAJ GEN BERGNER:

The facts there are still developing and I will follow up with you after the press conference. Shukran. Yes, sir.

REP3:

Asks question in Arabic.

INT:

Amat Harmadi[ph]. Question from a-Jazilah[ph]. At the beginning you had mentioned that you've detained large numbers of al-Qaeda in northern Iraq but, however, the southern provinces also witness from time to time some security operations and attacks against the Multi-National Forces and the local Iraqi forces. What happened in Basra a few days ago makes us wonder that the British forces decided to withdraw from Basra in case the British forces withdrew from Basra and there was a void over there. As American forces or as MNF, let's say, will you send some troops to this province, to Basra?

MAJ GEN BERGNER:

Well, first let me point out that when the Multi-National Division in Basra transferred the security responsibility as a result of the change to provincial Iraqi control to the Iraqi forces; that was done after quite a deliberate and well-phased transition. It started with the development of a Basra operational command which is, as you know, led, commanded by Lieutenant General Multan[ph]. It is also supported by an Iraqi police

leadership under Major General Jalil. It's involved the deployment of additional Iraqi Army forces to help address the security needs of Basra. And what we have seen is the beginning of an increased cooperation between Iraqi security forces—both Army and police—the citizens of Basra, and the political leadership of Basra. Many of the challenges that exist in Basra are a result of criminal activity and they require both political security solutions that are working hand in hand to address those security challenges for the citizens of Basra. The transition to provincial Iraqi control is not one that will be absent violence. But it is one that is taken once the Iraqi forces and Iraqi civilian leadership have achieved a level where they can deal with the security challenges in their province. And so that's the distinction that exists in Basra today is the ability of the Iraqi forces and the Iraqi civilian leadership there to deal with what we all know will be a continuing challenge to restore and improve the security situation for all the citizens in Basra. And so this is very much within the realm of the Iraqi security forces to deal with and they will deal with it as they are increasingly with the support of the Iraqi political leaders and the Iraqi citizens there. Shukran. Yes, sir.

REP4:

Asks question in Arabic.

INT:

Question from Al-Hayat Newspaper. Last year witnessed a release of so many detainees, Iraqi detainees, including where members of al-Qaeda and actually now in... living in Ghazaliyah neighborhood. So will you also start re-operating in al-Ghazaliyah neighborhood after releasing some of those from Bucca and Abu Ghraib? Because those al-Qaeda members are now in Ghazaliya neighborhood and Abu Ghraib. Will there be new operations, new clearing operations that used to do... last year, that is? Will you do operations again?

MAJ GEN BERGNER:

Let me just ask my interpreter to sort of step back and roll the question up.

INT:

Yes.

MAJ GEN BERGNER:

You're fine. I don't need you to ask it again. I just want...

INT:

Yes, sir. Go ahead.

MAJ GEN BERGNER:

...you to say it in my ear one more time.

INT:

Sir, he's asking about saying that last year so many prisoners and detainees were released from prisons like Bucca and Abu Ghraib but within those detainees members of al-Qaeda were also released and they went back living in the Ghazaliyah neighborhood. So the question is...

MAJ GEN BERGNER:

Yeah. Okay.

INT:

...will there be other operations?

MAJ GEN BERGNER:

Yeah. I got it. Shukran. Thank you. First of all, I would point out that we continue to work very closely with the Iraqi security forces and the Iraqi civilian leaderships in all the districts to ensure that the gains, the hard-fought gains that have been achieved in these different neighborhoods and different communities are sustained. And the way to sustain them is by the Iraqi forces continuing to partner with coalition forces and to continue to work even more closely with the citizens at the local level who are the ones who will provide information and help team with Iraqi forces and the coalition in such a way that the terrorists don't have an opportunity to reignite the violence. There is also the need for reconciliation. And there is a need for those who were once fighting against citizens to find a way to be reconciled. And I don't know specifically who the detainees are that you reference but I think that you've heard from leaders of our detention operations that there is a great effort underway to carefully screen, to work closely with Iraqi officials in returning those who are no longer a security threat to civilian life, and allowing them to regain a position in Iraqi society. They do that very carefully; it involves an oath administered by Iraqi judicial authorities and a commitment on their part, a legally binding commitment, to not participate in terrorist activities. And so it's a challenge both at the community level that will require the continued effort of the coalition and of the Iraqi people working with the Iraqi security forces and it's also one where the commitments that are made will be fulfilled by those who are allowed to return and re-establish their lives. Shukran.

REP4:

Asks question in Arabic.

INT:

Do you think that those people who went out of prison that are members of al-Qaeda, do you think that they will...are you sure that they will stop their terrorist activities?

MAJ GEN BERGNER:

Yeah. Well, first of all, we screen very carefully those individuals who are being considered for release from the coalition detention facilities. We screen them very carefully for the risk that they represent to returning to violence. We screen them very carefully for the suitability to return to their neighborhoods. We require a commitment on the part of...on their part—a legal commitment on their part, an oath if you will—that they will not return to acts of violence and so forth. And all of that is done in a way that is intended to return only those individuals who have the best prospect of rejoining society and not resorting to violence again. And so we all have to have the courage to work towards that purpose. I think that what you've heard from General Stone and from others suggests that there is a process in place that gives a high likelihood that those individuals who are returning have a high prospect of doing so peacefully and not returning to the terrorists. The other point is that the neighborhoods these individuals return to are increasingly places where the rule of law is being enforced in tandem between the Iraqi forces and the Iraqi people so there's a better situation in many cases for them to return to a place which is better suited for them to follow the right path. Shukran. Yes, sir.

REP5:

Hi. Ben Shepard from the AFP News Agency. The Islamic State of Iraq has released another video purportedly showing sniper action against U.S. troops. I was wondering how you assess the threat of sniper attack that the Multi-National Force troops face at the moment and the responses that they can consider to counter that threat. Thank you.

MAJ GEN BERGNER:

Yeah. Well, that's a...that has been a threat to the security environment here for quite some time. It is one that our commanders and our forces understand. It's one that we deal with on a recurring, routine basis. So we work very hard against it and it is one that we periodically see in greater numbers at times and, obviously in those circumstances, we target our operations accordingly to counter that threat. Yes, sir.

REP6:

Solomon Moore with The New York Times. I was wondering if you could kind of be specific about what we're seeing in the last week or so. It does appear that there has been an increase in the number of attacks against, certainly, the Awakening members and against ISF. And the second part of my question is, you know, how much, you know, do you think that the Awakening Council members have the stomach to withstand these kinds of attacks and still remain loyal at least to the U.S. Government?

MAJ GEN BERGNER:

Okay. That's a good question, Solomon. The first thing I would say is the level of attacks and the focus that they might have on the concerned local citizens and those who are part of the Awakening movement are perhaps one of the clearest indications of the importance that these Awakening movements and concerned local citizens are having on improving the security situation in Iraq. And the fact that al-Qaeda is targeting them is clearly an indication that they are concerned about it and that this grassroots movement, if you will, has changed the dynamic. And it is perhaps the clearest evidence of Iraqi citizens rejecting the Taliban ideology, the corrupt practices, the indiscriminate violence that the Iraqi people no longer accept and are rejecting. So I think that the concerned local citizens and those leaders in the Awakening movement have already proven their courage and their willingness to stay committed to the path they've chosen. We have seen concerned local citizens attacked south of Baghdad in significant numbers and stay on their posts, thwart the attack and stay there even after the attack. They have suffered losses. We have seen, perhaps most visibly, Sheikh Satar brutally killed in Anbar Province; and immediately thereafter, not only replaced, but replaced by a family member, his brother who was willing to step forward and assume responsibility and to help continue to lead that movement. So I think the courage of the sheikhs of the tribes and the courage of the sons of the tribes is something that's actually already being tested and they are already answering that call with great courage and great commitment.

REP6:

Asks question off microphone.

MAJ GEN BERGNER:

I'll look at the numbers, Solomon, and see if there is a quantifiable up tick and we'll come back to you with exactly what that shows. Yes, sir.

REP7:

Sir, you were talking about al-Qaeda... Il[ph] Glasnost Agency; Affec Tafari[ph] here. But there is another threat in the north of Iraq, especially for Turkey: the P.K.K. There is information that troops of P.K.K. are moving inside Iraq. What are the Multi-National Forces doing against this threat? Or are you doing anything about it? And how close can the Multi-National Forces work with the Iraqi Army against P.K.K.?

MAJ GEN BERGNER:

Okay. I think everyone agrees; certainly the Government of Turkey, the Government of Iraq, and the United States have all identified the P.K.K. as a terrorist organization and understand the national security threat that it particularly represents for Turkey and the citizens of Turkey. It's an important bilateral issue between the Government of Iraq and the Government of Turkey to not only find the military means to deal with that threat but

also to find the economic, political, and social actions that are necessary to address the causes that support this terrorist threat. And so that's the direction and that's the path that must be pursued. Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari has spoken on the same point as well as Secretary Rice in their recent discussions here. And that continues to be the focus of their efforts in finding bilateral ways that Turkey and Iraq can work more closely on that issue. Thank you. Yes, ma'am.

REP8:

Asks question in Arabic.

INT:

Question from al-Nuf[ph] Press. How would you describe the phenomenon of using female suicide bombers by al-Qaeda especially that there was a female suicide bomber that blew up herself in Diyala and, thus, caused so many casualties among the civilians?

MAJ GEN BERGNER:

Well, it is another indication of the depths that al-Qaeda is willing to go to perpetrate violence and to target innocent civilians. And the fact that they will, in addition to suicide bombers, they will use women in that role as well. We have seen that in other places besides Diyala. And I think it's another reason that—if you asked most of my Iraqi friends—that it would be another indication of why they reject al-Qaeda. Shukran. Yes, sir.

REP9:

Asks question in Arabic.

INT:

I have two questions. The Turkish bombardment is it still ongoing and what is the stance of the Multi-National Forces from this bombardment? The second question, do you think that the Awakening groups will have a positive point if they were included into the security forces? And how would you explain the fear of the Iraqi Government of joining those...incorporating those groups into the security forces?

MAJ GEN BERGNER:

Well, on your first point, let me go back to the comment I made earlier which is the Government of Iraq, the Government of Turkey, and the United States all recognize and identify the P.K.K. as a terrorist organization. It is one that represents a significant national security threat to Turkey. The Government of Turkey has conducted operations specifically targeting the P.K.K. terrorists and that is their focus—specifically targeting the P.K.K. terrorists. Those are Turkish decisions and those are Turkish actions. The

second part of your question in terms of how the Awakening movement is being integrated into the Iraqi security forces, I would point out that there are thousands of members of local citizens groups who are in the process of being screened, vetted and, in some cases, accepted into the training programs necessary to become qualified as Iraqi police or Iraqi soldiers. And that process is continuing to move forward. It's a commitment that the Government of Iraq has made publicly and one that we certainly welcome. And it's one that is an important sign to the local citizens that the Government of Iraq welcomes their courage and wants to help them either find a place in the legitimate security forces of Iraq or find employment as civilians with a job in the Iraqi economy. And both of those avenues are being pursued now which I think is a very strong and encouraging sign of the Government of Iraq's commitment to help work with its citizens at the local level. Shukran. Okay. One last question; Solomon.

REP6:

Regarding the violence over the past week, do we know if anything different is happening there, I mean apart from the actual numbers? I mean why there seems to have been such a surge in violence in the last week or so. Was it the recent audio recording by bin Laden? Was it the new year? What do you think is happening?

MAJ GEN BERGNER:

Yeah. Well, that's tough to...it's really tough to nail it down at this point other than to say that we have known that there will be tough days and tough weeks ahead. And this is a fight that's going to continue to require continuous and persistent pressure on the networks that are perpetrating this violence. And so we know this is still a tough fight and we know that they will continue to seek the opportunity to conduct those kinds of spectacular attacks. So I think this is in that context, certainly, of the kind of fight that we will have to continue to press against. It's another sign of why the Iraqi security forces and the increasing courage of the Iraqi people at the local level is so important because they are making this more and more difficult. But it is still something that can be conducted and it's still something that we're going to have to fight against and further reduce the capability of al-Qaeda and these other extremists. Okay. With that, I'll say thank you very much. Shukran jaziilan and ma'salaam.