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**Presenter: Commander, Multinational Corps Iraq, Lt. Gen.
Raymond T. Odierno**

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DoD News Briefing with Lt. Gen. Odierno from Iraq

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BRYAN WHITMAN (Pentagon spokesman): Well, good afternoon. And good evening to General Odierno. Let me start first by thanking the general for being flexible with our hectic schedule this morning; and press corps, you've obviously been keeping very busy today.

But it is special for us when we have the opportunity to talk to General Ray Odierno, who is the commanding general of Multinational Corps Iraq. This is, by my count, the eighth time that he's done this, and we always look forward to your updates and for you giving us time to answer some of our questions back here. And particularly for joining us so late this evening to be able to do this and still be able to get it done today.

So thank you very much, General. And with that, let me just get right into it and turn it over to you to give us an overview, and then we'll get into some questions.

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, thank you very much. And good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Always it's a pleasure to be with you here. I look forward to taking your questions after my comments here.

Having been here for close to 14 months now, I thought I would briefly summarize 2007 for you and also update you on our current operations as we continue to aggressively pursue extremists across Iraq.

While Iraq's environment remains extremely complex and dynamic, our focus has not changed.

The soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines of Multinational Corps-Iraq remain committed to the protection of the population in concert with our Iraqi security force partners. The task has been the foundation of our mission and it's critical to achieving the momentum needed for sustainable security and ultimately Iraqi self-reliance. The trends which we use to assess security have been headed in the right direction for the past seven months, and more importantly, the Iraqi people are beginning to feel the effects.

With the improved security situation opening a window of opportunity, it is important that it be followed with political and economic progress, creation of jobs and delivery of essential services. While the progress of the past six months has been encouraging, I recognize that challenges and hard work remain ahead of us. We will not give up any of the hard-fought gains while continuing to hunt down al Qaeda in Iraq and extremists. Additionally, we will assist efforts to improve civil and governmental capacity that enables accountable local governance, rule of law and economic development.

Finally, as local conditions permit, we will deliberately transfer security responsibility to increasingly capable Iraqi security forces, with the ultimate goal of police primacy for internal security. In 2007, the Iraqi people were given hope, and it's vitally important that this momentum be built upon in 2008 with strong and decisive leadership from the government of Iraq assisted by the coalition.

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Shown on this chart is our assessment of al Qaeda in Iraq when we assumed the mission in early December of 2006, with dark red showing where they operated and light red showing their transit routes. At that time, Iraq was caught in a cycle of bloodshed under the dark cloud of al Qaeda. Entrenched in numerous urban safe havens across Iraq to include the entire western Euphrates River Valley, from Baghdad to the Syrian border, al Qaeda's venomous influence was spiraling sectarian violence out of control. They claim Ramadi as the AQI capital and even had a parade down its main street.

In a December 2006 raid, we captured the map shown in the lower right portion of the slide. It clearly depicted al Qaeda's strategy for the total and unyielding dominance of Baghdad, assuming that control of Iraq's capital and its millions of citizens would give them free rein to export their twisted ideology and terror. Indeed al Qaeda did operate with impunity in several areas surrounding the capital that we call the Baghdad belts, and using these sanctuaries to introduce accelerants of violence. This strategy was similar to the way in which Saddam Hussein employed Republican Guard forces to control the city.

With large segments of the population under the vicious grip of al Qaeda and with escalating violence threatening to tear apart Iraq, a shift in strategy was necessary.

Next slide, please.

Last year at this time the first brigade of the surge had begun operations in Baghdad. The surge would ultimately include four additional brigades, a Marine Expeditionary Unit, a division headquarters, a combat aviation brigade and two Marine infantry battalions all in place by mid-June of 2007. These additional forces would allow us to go into areas we had not been for a long time, eliminate safe havens, and retain the gains of our clearing operations.

Not waiting for the surge to be completed, we established the Baghdad Operational Command, under Iraqi General Abboud, and initiated Operation Fard al-Qanun, a joint Iraqi/coalition effort to secure Baghdad that also included a surge of Iraqi forces into the capital. Harnessing the synergy of the Iraqi army, national police and local police with coalition combat forces and joint security stations and combat outposts, we maintained 24-hour presence in the same neighborhoods where Iraqis live, work and sleep.

By reversing and reducing the cycle of terror through tough fighting and immeasurable sacrifice, coalition and Iraqi security force were able to earn the trust and cooperation of Baghdad citizens. While acknowledging the risks, coalition force in Anbar seized upon Iraqi discontent with al Qaeda's brutality, and planted the seeds for what is now a burgeoning bottom-up reconciliation effort that is rejecting extremism. In June, with the full surge in place, we initiated Operation Phantom Thunder, a corps-level offensive operation focused on the Baghdad Belts to defeat al Qaeda and extremists, deny enemy sanctuary, and interdict their command and control and logistics capabilities. With Phantom Thunder's success at disrupting the enemy, we launched Operation Phantom Strike in August to intensify pursuit of al Qaeda and extremists.

These precision-quick strike raids on extremist leadership of enemy safe havens further diminished al Qaeda's capabilities and put intense pressure on their networks. Although still capable, al Qaeda was significantly impacted by the cumulative effect of these operations, all done in full partnership with the Iraqi security forces and an unprecedented cooperation with special operational forces. The surge has allowed us to simultaneously target Shi'a rogue criminal elements, who had clear ties back to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, or the Qods Force.

Slide, please. Shown on this chart is our assessment of al Qaeda in Iraq as of December 2007. Although the group remains a dangerous threat, its capabilities have been diminished. Al Qaeda has been pushed out of urban centers like Baghdad, Ramadi, Fallujah and Baqubah, and forced into isolated rural areas. Many of their top leaders have been eliminated, and finding qualified replacements is increasingly difficult for them.

Al Qaeda's external funding and logistics are also suffering, and their foreign leadership has done nothing to endear themselves with the proud Iraqi people.

The population's growing rejection of extremism denies them the passive support they need to maintain safe havens. Concerned local citizens under the control of Iraq and coalition forces are assisting efforts to maintain security in their neighborhoods, while simultaneously pointing out IEDs, caches and other nefarious behavior.

In AQI's former self-proclaimed capital of Ramadi, one of our coalition commanders there reported that the biggest problem today is vehicle traffic. Because coalition and Iraqi forces are able to maintain the hard-fought gains, al Qaeda is faced with ever-increasing -- ever-decreasing areas in which to operate. They are now trying to re-establish their command-and-control networks in support zones in northern Iraq, as well as trying to internally generate funding.

In the short term, al Qaeda will continue its murder and intimidation campaign targeting Iraqi security forces and concerned local citizens, but their long-term sights are still set on Baghdad. It is with this assessment that we shaped our first major operation of 2008.

Next slide, please.

Ten days ago, Multinational Corps-Iraq initiated Operation Phantom Phoenix to continue our relentless pursuit of extremists and to exploit the progress achieved over the past seven months. Phantom Phoenix is an open-ended offensive operation employing coalition and Iraqi conventional forces as well as our Special Operation Forces. As shown on the chart, it is focused at the division and brigade level to further degrade al Qaeda in Iraq and other extremists in those areas where they are trying to re-establish support zones and command nodes. Over the coming weeks, you will hear my commanders talk to you about operations like Iron Harvest, Marne Thunderbolt and what they are doing in their operating environments in support of Phantom Phoenix.

Without going into details of timing and locations, I will tell you that we have repositioned over two brigades-worth of combat power to hunt down al Qaeda, and that it has already made a significant impact. We were able to do this without giving up any previously gained ground because of the improved capacity of Iraqi security forces and concerned local citizens.

I would also like to highlight what I consider a major success of the Iraqi army early in this operation, something that would not have been possible a year ago.

With less than a week's notice the 3rd Brigade of the 1st Iraqi Army Division was alerted to deploy from Anbar province to Diyala province to support combat operations in the Diyala River Valley. This was a good Iraqi decision and was executed solely by the Iraqis. Within 36 hours upon arrival, the 3rd Brigade uncovered two sizeable caches, gathered significant intelligence and aggressively hunted down al Qaeda in tough terrain and demanding climatic conditions.

It is also important to note that Phantom Phoenix has a significant non-lethal component. Increased security will not in and of itself turn an area. It also requires the delivery of essential services, economic development and improved governance. It is what the Iraqi people want and what they deserve.

In this regard, we are vigorously pursuing several programs to sustain our momentum, like establishment of a civil service corps, awarding microgrants and developing vocational technical courses. Although we are still in the early stages of Phantom Phoenix, we are already achieving good results and expect to continue for the next few months.

Next slide, please.

Shown on this chart are operational results from the first 17 days of Operation Phantom Phoenix, including the first week of shaping operations that began on New Year's Day prior to our first major ground assault. Many of these results were facilitated by tips from local nationals. As soon as they have confidence that friendly forces are there to stay, the locals are quick to cooperate. This is done by the establishment of joint security stations, which is an important part of Phantom Phoenix, and it sends a clear message to local population and any remaining enemy fighters.

I would also like to highlight some items discovered by our troops not depicted on the chart but indicative of al Qaeda's brutality. These include numerous torture chambers, an underground medical clinic, several closed schools and a large foreign fighter camp with intricate tunnel complexes. In the town of Himbus, in the Diyala River Valley, coalition forces reopened a pharmacy last week that had been closed by al Qaeda months ago for their own use. This type of action, accompanied by countless other acts of compassion and our non-kinetic efforts, obtains the active support of the population and solidifies our gains. While we may see a short-term increase in violence in response to our operations in the weeks ahead, I expect Phantom Phoenix to contribute significantly to the population security.

With that, I'd like to briefly summarize security trends from 2007.

Next slide.

This first chart shows the monthly attack tolls for 2007. It consists of coalition force, Iraqi security force, civilians and infrastructure attacks and also includes found and cleared IEDs.

June 2007, with over 6,000 attacks, represents the highest monthly total of the war. That is the same month that the surge was fully operational, when we started Operation Phantom Thunder. Since then, attacks have been reduced by 60 percent. The attack levels we are experiencing now are about the same as early 2005 and in some points of 2004.

Next slide.

This chart represents IED explosions across all of Iraq. IEDs continue to be the extremist weapon of choice and come in various forms -- vehicle-borne, roadside, house-borne and deep buried, to name a few. In June, there were almost 1,700 IED explosions, but that was reduced to well under 700 by December.

There were several reasons for this reduction, among them: getting to the left of the boom and attacking the entire IED network; better integration of sensor-to-shooter techniques by our manned and unmanned assets; improved quality of tips and intelligence from local citizens; easier detection of IEDs due to hasty emplacement resulting from pressure put on the enemy; and overwatch of key areas by concerned local citizens.

Next slide, please.

We will never forget those that gave their lives fighting for the ideals of freedom, not the loved ones they left behind. Their sacrifices are not in vain, and it's because of them that we enjoy justice and liberty. Although we closed the year with increasing casualty trends, we are determined to drive it to zero. The months of April through June saw some of our toughest and heaviest fighting of the war as we went into strongholds to rout out -- to root out the enemy.

With al Qaeda and other extremists significantly degraded and with criminals apprehended, our casualty rates dropped. December 2007 was the second-lowest combat death toll of the war, going back to May of 2003.

Our wounded-in-action rates follow a similar trend, but are not shown on this chart.

Inevitably, there will be some tough days and challenges ahead, but we remain totally committed to lowering our casualty trends. Nothing is more important than our soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines, and our prayers remain with those that have made the ultimate sacrifice.

Slide, please.

This chart tracks all Iraqi civilian deaths nationwide attributed to violence and incorporates both coalition and host nation reporting. While the significant drop in monthly deaths is encouraging, our aim is to continue driving it down further. Nevertheless, it is indicative of the improving security situation and our focus on predicting -- on protecting the population. It also speaks to reduced levels of ethnosectarian violence that gripped Iraq at the beginning of 2007.

Next slide.

This chart depicts the density of deaths in the 10 Baghdad security districts attributed to ethnosectarian violence, to include car bombs.

From January to December of 2007, ethnosectarian attacks and deaths decreased over 90 percent in the Baghdad security districts.

As I travel Baghdad and meet with local citizens, it's apparent to me at the grass-roots level that sectarianism is in fact waning. Their concerns nowadays stem from a lack of essential services, slow economic growth and uneven local governance. Although these are important issues that must be addressed, it is a heartening trend to see a population that increasingly identifies itself as "Iraqi" ahead of ethnic and sectarian stratification.

Next slide.

This is my final chart and shows another positive trend of the overall security situation. It represents arms, ammunition, explosives removed from the battlefield before terrorists and extremists could use it against innocent women and children, or against coalition and Iraqi security forces. The box at the bottom of the chart shows the comparison between 2006 and 2007.

I attribute the significant increase over the previous year to several factors: gaining the trust of the local population, who then provided accurate and timely information; going into enemy safe havens with our surge forces; an improved Iraqi security force that are out doing their job on a daily basis. This all tracks itself back to us being among the population 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

With that, let's go to the next slide and open it up for your questions.

Q General, it's Lolita Baldor with the Associated Press. Secretary Gates said this morning again that he continues to hope that the level -- that the rate of the troop drawdown could continue through the end of this year, similar to the first six months as the first five brigades are moving out. Do you see anything in the trends that you have just outlined for us and that you are seeing now with the latest operations that would suggest to you that that is not possible? And I'm including what looks like a couple upticks in violence in December, both in attacks and IEDs.

GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah. I would just say that, first off, the upticks for attacks and IED -- for attacks in December mostly due to the fact that we found more IEDs. But I would say to that question we are still going down from 20 to 15 brigades, which we announced in September. And we won't be there until July of this summer. So I need to wait and see how that goes as we begin to turn more responsibility over to the Iraqi security forces. So it makes it very difficult for me to make a prediction now whether I should reduce further. I got -- I would like to see the effects of us going from 20 -- we're now at 19 brigades -- going to 18, 17, 16, 15. I feel comfortable that we'll be able to

maintain the security, but I would like to make sure that that works.

After that, then what we would do is, based on the conditions, and if we continue to see accelerants denied, if we continue to see attacks either at the same level or lower levels, if we continue to see Iraqi security force capacity, then we will decide whether we can reduce further. But to ask me that question now, it's very, very difficult for us to determine, and I think it's unfair frankly. So what I want to do is continue to assess.

We are making progress. Everything I see now is we will continue to make progress going down to 15 brigades. If in fact, that's true, then I believe we can do a reassessment and then decide from there whether we can go lower. But to predict now whether we can go lower or not is difficult, and I would not want to make that prediction right now.

Q A related question.

MR. WHITMAN: We'll get back to you. (Off mike.)

Q General, this is Nancy Youssef with McClatchy Newspapers.

The Iraqi minister of defense was in Washington last week and he called the CLCs an interesting experiment. Shi'a members of the government have expressed similar reservations about the CLCs and they're reluctant to incorporate them into Iraqi security forces.

My question to you is, how long do you see the U.S. paying salaries for the CLCs? And are you concerned about the Iraqi government's reluctance to bring them into the formal Iraqi security forces?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, first, we are working very closely with the government of Iraq on concerned local citizens. And I do want to say, we have made some progress. First, in the beginning of this, we've already incorporated about 10,000 CLCs out in Anbar, but let's set that aside.

In Baghdad, we now have 9,000 concerned local citizens approved to go into the Iraqi security forces. We have 2,000 that have been through the training and are now actually police. We have 8,000 more getting ready to go into training that have been approved by the government of Iraq and will become part of the Iraqi police force. So we have made some significant progress in this area. We're working very closely with them, and I believe that this program is very important.

Going into this, we realize that probably about 25 percent of those who are currently concerned local citizens will be brought into the police force. The reason that is, is first, about only 50 percent want to go into the Iraqi security forces, and about 50 percent of those will only qualify, for both physical -- passing the physical test -- as well the written and comprehension tests that are required. So that reduces the population.

So what we will do then is put other programs in place, working with the Iraqi government, to put them to work doing other things, such as civil service corps operations, such as other job programs, through vo-tech institutes and other institutes.

And so that's what we're really focusing on, is about 25 percent getting into the Iraqi security forces and then getting other jobs for the other 75 percent. And we're working closely with the Iraqi government to do that.

Q And how long, then, do you think the CLCs will be on essentially the U.S. payroll, then, given all that?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, I mean, we do 90-day assessments. And the commanders -- what we do is every 90 days we assess are they still contributing to security, are they still waiting to be integrated in the Iraqi security forces. And as long as they meet those two criteria, we'll continue to extend those contracts on 90-day increments.

Obviously, this is not an open-ended commitment. But they understand that; we understand that. But I'm not sure. I would say we'll have some in the program probably at least till the end of 2008, but beyond that it's hard to predict. But I think the numbers will be lower as we go through the year because more and more will be picked up by the Iraqi security forces.

Q General, it's Al Pessin from Voice of America. To follow up on Lita's question, as we go through the year and you get more into the hold phase and rely more on the Iraqis to do the holding with U.S. forces in support, is it possible that whatever drawdowns we see of combat forces may not be matched by drawdowns of the support forces, and that in fact you may need more support forces to support the Iraqis than you've needed to support the American combat units?

GEN. ODIERNO: No, I don't see that we'll need more support forces. I do believe that what we'll be able to do is, as we deliberately reduce our forces across the entire battlespace, we will be able to continue to support the Iraqis with the support forces we have in place. And we will continue to assess that as we go forward. But I do not see a necessity for an increase in support forces.

What I believe we can do is continue to support them with the level of forces we have on the ground, and in fact I believe over time we'll be able to reduce those forces as well.

Q Just to follow up, do you then have an assessment looking long term, well beyond your own tenure there, as to some ballpark figure of how many and what type of U.S. forces would be needed in Iraq over the long term of several additional years?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, I mean, I think that's really a -- first, it's an agreement

between our government and their government. We have to remember that Iraq is in fact a sovereign country and that they have a say in all this. So it's going to be something that has to be determined by a long-term security arrangement.

What I hope to see as I look ahead here is we just do this in a very deliberate fashion. What we don't want to do is suddenly pull out a whole bunch of U.S. forces and suddenly turn things over to the Iraqi security forces. I would like to see it done very slowly over time. And I think if we do that, we'll find ourselves being more successful and we'll be able to have a consistent reduction of our forces over time. And that's what I see now and that's what I would like to see in the future as I see the threat today.

Q Sorry, but --

MR. WHITMAN: No, let's go over here, Joe. Thank you.

Q Thank you. This is Joe Tabet with Al Hurra. General, do you have any information that the CLCs might be infiltrated by al Qaeda in Iraq?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, we know that both al Qaeda, actually, and some Iranian surrogates are trying to infiltrate the CLCs. We know that for a fact. In fact, we have found some. We have detained some of them. That's part of the strategy we know they're trying to execute. And we work very closely with the Iraqi security forces to vet them. And if somebody -- we find out that they have been infiltrated, we very quickly go after them. They are very closely watched and it is very difficult for them to do anything outside of what we've asked them to do. But we are constantly watching for that. But we have found some so far. They have been detained. And we'll continue to do that.

Q Is there more specific detail? I mean, where was that?

GEN. ODIERNO: We found a couple in Baqubah that were part of the 1920s Revolutionary Brigade, that continued to conduct sectarian killings in Baqubah. They've detained and arrested. We found one that was from al Qaeda that was part of a suicide bombing cell. They were detained and arrested. So I mean, there's been a few, but there's just been a few phases, there's not been very many.

MR. WHITMAN: We'll do Mike and then over to Julian.

Q General, it's Mike Mount with CNN. Reports over the last several weeks, I guess, from December and going through this month, we've also -- we've obviously seen a trend of attacks on the CLCs. Have you seen any negative impact on other citizens not -- you know, too willing to join or breaking their relationships with the U.S. because of that or the coalition?

GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah, no, they're extremely resilient. They have faith in the coalition forces and the Iraqi security forces they're working with. In fact, I would tell you it should be a sign of how effective they are. In fact, Osama bin Laden mentioned them

in his latest statement, and so I think that should be a sign of how effective they are over here and how much they have helped us to go after al Qaeda and other extremist elements. I think that's been very clear, and they know that. And in fact, I think the Iraqi government has seen that and understands that as well, and that's why, I think, we're starting to move forward a bit quicker in integrating some of these groups into the Iraqi security forces.

We watch it very closely. We work with them very closely to try to make sure we're able to protect them the best we can, because we -- I believe they will continue to attempt to try to target them over the next several months because that's the one of the biggest fears that these concerned local citizens are successful, they get integrated into the government of Iraq and it starts a -- it's a confidence- building measure for overall reconciliation for all of Iraq.

Q General, Julian Barnes here with the LA Times. Your two maps of areas where al Qaeda was operating, the second map showed that Mosul was still an area of relatively intense al Qaeda operations. Mosul, of course, is one area where the United States has drawn down its forces quite sharply.

I wonder, A, do you worry that the al Qaeda influence could grow in other areas as the U.S. draws down? And B, you know, if you could talk about the sort of strategy of pushing al Qaeda out of Mosul once again.

GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah. Well, first off, it is probably about the same level that it was at last year. It did not increase. But it stands out now because in other places throughout the country, they've been eliminated -- or not eliminated, but diminished, you know, so since we've had a diminish of al Qaeda effort in Baghdad, Anbar. So that's where the majority of them -- we have pushed them north. They are trying to reestablish themselves up there. There are not more than there were.

And what we've relied upon is the Iraqi army and the Iraqi police in Mosul to do that, and they have done a pretty good job. But we will assist them and probably assist them with a little bit more combat power to help them root out al Qaeda up in Mosul.

And that's how I see our role, frankly, in the future here, is that we'll have forces available that are able to, when necessary, reinforce Iraqi security forces. So in reality, I see what we're doing in Mosul as a model for the future. If we reduce our forces and when -- not if -- when we reduce our forces over time and the Iraqis take primacy for security, we will be here to assist them when they need it. And so we have to determine over time what that right number is and how we would assist them. So in a lot of ways, I would argue, this is how we see the future and how we would assist them in fighting this threat.

Q Can I follow up very quickly on that? Some of the proposals by some of the candidates for president have talked about removing all of combat brigades from Iraq by the end of next year. Would you say that, given the strategy of the need to reinforce

Iraqi units in the future, that you would be opposed to removing all combat forces in two years time?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well again, it depends first on what the environment is like, and so it's hard to make a prediction of what the environment is like. And so what I would say is for us to continue to make progress and for the Iraqis to make sure that they -- the government is successful, that they become regional partners, that they become partners in transnational terrorism, we want to make sure they're successful. And so as the environment goes forward and we believe the conditions are set, then we can reduce our forces.

The timeline of that depends on many factors. The timeline depends on the threat, the capacity of the Iraqi security forces, the capacity -- the governance capacity that's established. And based on that, we'll make recommendations.

Obviously, it's a policy decision about how long we stay here. What I would do is make my best military recommendation.

It's hard for me, again, to look two years from now. I see us making progress. I see us being able to get down to 15 brigades by the summer. I'm very confident of that. If conditions continue along the way they are and the same they are, then I think we'll set the conditions for further reductions, but that will be based on all the factors I just laid out for you.

MR. WHITMAN: We'll go to Guy and then to Jim.

Q General Odierno, this is Guy Raz from NPR. Again, looking ahead beyond 2008 into 2009, do you see multinational forces as -- will they still have to continue to go after al Qaeda and insurgents for many years to come?

GEN. ODIERNO: What I think is over time I believe the Iraqi security forces, the police and the army will be able to handle the majority of their internal security. What I would see our role is to reinforce that and, if necessary, help them against some terrorist threats, specifically al Qaeda and some Iranian-supported surrogates. But we would do that, again, at the behest of the Iraqi government. Again, as we move forward here, this becomes -- this is a sovereign nation, and they want to exercise more and more of their sovereignty. So what we'll do is we'll continue to do operations, but it'll be much -- it'll be in partnership with the Iraqi government. And so we will work -- that's part of the long-term security arrangement that has to be developed.

But I would see a role for us as, really, to continue to help them by advising, by helping them to continue to train their forces and, when necessary, assist them in going after some of these extremist targets if they think they need the assistance.

MR. WHITMAN: Jim.

Q Sir, this is Jim Garamone with American Forces Press Service. In some of your earlier briefings to us you talked about the importance of the Iraqi security forces building momentum. Have they reached that point where it's a self-sustaining momentum yet?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, what's clear -- they continue to generate additional forces, that we continue to generate more battalions, we continue to generate division headquarters and brigades. We are seeing them really develop capability to conduct operations. What has not yet caught up with that is the equipping. They are getting more equipment every day, but they are not yet quite equipped the way they need to be with -- whether it be infantry fighting vehicles or humvees or, you know, things that are similar to that. We are still fielding those to them, and that will take a bit more time.

We still are working with them in terms of their logistic support, and they still need some assistance. They are getting better, and they are taking more and more of that on. They are much further ahead than they were a year ago, but they are not yet ready to do some of these things on their own. They are not yet capable of providing enough aerial support that we -- like we can provide. They still have to work on providing indirect fire support for themselves. So there's still things like that that have to be fielded that'll take a little bit more time.

But in terms of them being able to fight, they've clearly increased their capacity to do that, but it's still -- they still have some ways to go, but they are making steady, steady progress.

MR. WHITMAN: We're going to go right over here. Gordon?

Q General, Gordon Lubold from the Christian Science Monitor. General Stone, who, as you know, oversees detainee operations in Iraq, has expressed concern recently about the number of detainees being held. And I think -- as I understand it, there was a turning point sometime last fall where you began to release more than you were taking in.

I wonder if you could speak as the corps commander, do you see a point where many more of these folks who potentially are reconcilables and moderates, as General Stone terms them, could be released?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, we'll work very closely with them and we realize that there are some that have probably been detained two years ago that are probably reconcilable, or a year ago that are reconcilable. So we want to work with that in order to decide how that's done. So we have developed in a joint way, working with the corps units and Task Force 134, General Stone's organization, on how and who we release.

And what we try to do is, we work it with the local population. We work it based on what we think they had done in the past and how well they've done in detention and how well they've been rehabilitated. And then we make decisions on releasing them and

we are really ramping that program up.

And so we believe that we'll continue to release more than we're taking in and plus, we're taking in less people now because of the improved security. So all of that put together, we believe will begin to reduce the population. And we do think it's very important to reduce the detainee population. There will be some hardcore elements in there that we'll never want to release, and we'll have to, we'll try to get them through the Iraqi court system, and that will continue to go forward.

So we're working that hard and yes, I do believe we need to release some of these individuals that have been in there. We're working very closely with them, and I expect this program to continue throughout the year. Again we'll do it in a very measured way to make sure that we're able to maintain security throughout the country as we do this.

Q Real quickly, I mean, do you see a real substantial, let's say, of the 25,000 being detained now, do you see, say, by the end of '08, based on what you've said, a very substantial number of that, of those detainees, being let go?

GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah, I mean, I think, I would say, I mean, our goal is to reduce that by a fairly substantial number. I don't want to predict what that number will be, but I think our goal is to reduce that by a fairly substantial number, and I think we're working towards that.

Q General, it's Ken Fireman from Bloomberg News.

Your presentation about current trends in Iraq focused primarily on al Qaeda. I wonder if you can talk a bit about the Shi'ite side of the ledger, Jaish al Mahdi and some of the other Shi'ite groups, and what's going on with them.

GEN. ODIERNO: Sure.

First off, we are really working hard. One of the things that's happened over the last 90 to 100 days, I would say, is we are beginning to really start to work with many Shi'a groups, and they are reaching out to us. We're reaching back to them and we're really starting to see some reconciliation, so I'm encouraged by that.

But there has been a split in the Shi'a side. You have most of the Shi'a, who want to reconcile and who want to work with us. But we still have some, who mostly are supported by Iran, who still are trying to conduct attacks against coalition forces, are still trying to keep the government of Iraq in a weakened state by conducting attacks. And we are focused very much on them and we will continue to be focused on them in the future.

Q Have you seen -- if I could follow up. The Iranian- supported networks, there's been some talk about a diminishment of Iranian support, but commanders and

U.S. officials have said it's too early to judge whether that was a policy decision by the Iranians. Have you been able to now reach a conclusion about that?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, what I would say is we know fairly emphatically that they continue to train Iraqi extremists in Iran. We know that they continue to pay some of these extremists. We are not sure if they're still importing weapons into Iraq, but we certainly are still uncovering a lot of Iranian weapons here. What we don't know is if they're already here or they continue to send them in. We are still finding lots of EFPs. We are still discovering mortar systems and rounds that are manufactured clearly in Iran. We are finding explosive materials, C4-like material that we know has been developed in Iran. So the stuff is here.

And so, you know, we still believe that they are in fact providing some support. Whether they've reduced it or not, it's hard to tell. But in my mind there are still many surrogates that have been trained in Iran working here. They are still training some people. And we will continue to try to go after those networks.

Q (Name inaudible) -- with the Journal of Electronic Defense. Based on your time over there, what role has electronic warfare -- for example, signals intelligence, jammers -- what role have they performed, and what needs to be done to work effectively in the environment you have over there in Iraq?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, first off, one of the most important things that we've done is we've integrated electronic warfare specialists down to battalion level, down to maneuver battalion level. Because of the complex environment that we have here electronically, it was absolutely essential to make sure we understood how to manage the spectrum of electronic warfare, we knew how best to use the capabilities we have and we knew how to deconflict electronic capabilities. We were finding in the beginning that we were having problems deconflicting our own electronic capabilities. And we've also had some success in using it in terms of defeating IEDs and some other things.

So the big lesson here is electronic warfare is something that we have to be capable of and integrating into all of our operations.

And I believe that's a lesson we've learned here that we will carry forward with us, and that we must have that expertise into our maneuver units as we look at warfare not only here, but in the future.

Q General, Meredith MacKenzie with Talk Radio News Service. Yesterday, witnesses at the House Armed Services Committee talked a little bit about the legislative reconciliation that's ongoing. What would -- what is the next step in terms of legislation that you'd like to see after the de-Ba'athification law's been passed? What's the next step for you guys?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, I mean, I think there's a couple things. First, you know, they have to pass their budget for this year. I think they're about ready to do that. But

secondly, I would like to see provincial powers. The provincial power law is important to us. It leads to provincial elections. I think that's an important next step. I believe the hydrocarbon law is important because that has to do with private investment. It's not so much -- we used to -- it's not so much that we need the hydrocarbon law to distribute assets because actually the Iraqi government is doing that on their own. They are allocating assets to the provinces -- so they're already doing that. But we need the hydrocarbon law in order so we can continue to develop their economy, their capability to export oil and do some privatization out here. So I think it's important for that law to get passed in order for them to -- for economic reasons in the future.

But number one for me is provincial powers leading then to the laws they need in order to conduct provincial elections because many people -- although we had a great turnout in 2005, Sunnis didn't vote and some Shi'a groups didn't vote. It would be important for them to be locally represented, and so we think that's important. And we think that would bring stability on its own by just having those elections.

MR. WHITMAN: Luis.

Q General, it's Luis Martinez with ABC News. A couple of months back you mentioned that there was some initial contacts in Sadr City with elements of the JAM. Can you tell us how those contacts have improved? And given that -- you said there's a split within the Shi'as that they're split between, I guess, the JAM -- the majority JAM and the rogue elements. Given that the Sadr cease-fire is going to expire maybe in about a month or so, what are the prospects for that cease-fire being extended since it's been such an important player in lowering the violence?

GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah, we are -- we clearly are having conversations with people out of Sadr City. We meet with them just about every two weeks. We meet with local leaders; we meet with some of the sheikhs out of Sadr City.

So, I mean, those are important discussions that we're having. They're the ones also, obviously, who tell us that there is some intimidation that goes on in Sadr City by these special group rogue elements, and they frankly want to be rid of them themselves. And so we're working towards that.

In terms of the cease-fire, you know, my -- what I see is, Muqtada al-Sadr is really trying to -- he is -- in my mind, he is really trying to move to a more peaceful organization. He is -- a more humanitarian organization. I believe he is trying to move forward with more of a religious organization and get away from a militia type-supported organization. But we'll see. I mean, that's kind of what I see today. I don't know what we'll see tomorrow, but that's kind of what we see today. And I think those are important steps. But we'll see how it goes. That could change.

MR. WHITMAN: All the way back to Ann and then up to Courtney.

Q General Odierno, Ann Scott Tyson with The Washington Post. As General

Austin comes in, could you just reflect a little bit about what you would tell him about the biggest challenges that you see ahead and any advice you'd give him on lessons that you've learned from your time here in Iraq?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, I mean, I would just say -- is that the bottom line is that the number-one piece of advice that I've given him and he understands very fully -- he's a great officer who has great understanding of Iraq -- is -- it's about really protecting -- you know, the lesson we learned is, it's really about providing security for the people of Iraq, protecting the population. And what we have to do -- and the Iraqis understand that. And so his mission is to continue to do that as he turns more responsibility over to the Iraqis. And my advice to him would be to do that in a slow, deliberate manner, making sure that we don't make some of the mistakes we've made in the past -- turning it over too quickly, where we lose ground and give some of these extremist elements a chance. We don't want to give them another chance. We don't want to give them anything back. So I would say that's probably the biggest challenge.

It also is about developing jobs. We've got to help, work with the -- it's the government of Iraq's responsibility, ultimately, but here, in the next six to eight months, job development is going to become more critical, because security now is at a level where jobs become more important, economic development become(s) more important. So it's time for us to really focus on those areas, working with the government of Iraq to try to create as many -- and not -- I'm not talking about just jobs for jobs; I'm talking about sustainable jobs.

And we've been able to do that through micro grant programs, through establishing some vocational technical institutions. We are just beginning a program called the civil service corps. We've kind of modeled after the 1930s, when we were trying to put people to work in the United States after the Depression. And so we're trying to put some of those programs -- and we're working those with the government of Iraq, with their reconciliation cell.

So I would say those are the areas that are going to be hard to get started, and those will be -- those are the things that will be the most difficult for them to move forward with. But I believe they understand that, and they are ready to do that.

Q Hi, General. This is Courtney Kube from NBC News. Speaking of turning security over too quickly, what is your current assessment of when all 18 provinces will be turned over to the Iraqis?

And then also, back to on Luis's question, what's your personal assessment for why Muqtada al-Sadr has turned face and taken more of a humanitarian tack for the future of Iraq?

GEN. ODIERNO: I think -- I know -- I think there's a couple reasons. I'll answer the first question first -- I mean the last question first. I think -- first off, I think -- I can't speak for him, but I think he understands the purpose -- he is for the -- he represents

the lower-class -- the people without jobs, the people -- the poorer people of Iraq. And he -- what he realizes is violence is not going to help them. And I think he's come to the realization "what I need to do is build them jobs, build them some other future besides violence." So I think he's working towards that, and I think he's become that realization.

I think he's -- you know, some people say he's in Iran now, and he's getting religious training, he wants to increase his religious credentials. I think he's looking back on what his father represented, which was, you know, again, support to the poorest people in Iraq, to try to help them and to have them be represented, give them hope. And I think he's moving a little bit back towards that and not using violence as one of the tools. I think that's part of it.

So I think that's probably what we're seeing, but we'll -- again, we'll have to wait and see. I could be misinterpreting it, but that's kind of how I see it right now.

Q And the Iraqis taking security of the provinces?

GEN. ODIERNO: Say that again, please?

Q The -- your assessment for when Iraq will take over control for all 18 provinces?

GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah. We'll see. I don't know. To me, it's more about sustainable security and their ability to sustain security levels. And so that's what'll determine when they go to provincial Iraqi control.

I think that's more important, because what -- you know, when we first started the PIC process, you know, that was before, in my mind, they had -- they didn't have as much capacity for Iraqi -- for their own security forces. As that increases, the most important piece now is them gaining sustainable security. And it's across the whole country.

So I think the relevance of PIC is not as great as it once was, but we still believe that to the government, obviously it is -- to take control of all its provinces, to have the final say in what goes on security-wise. So we'll continue to work towards that goal.

But I don't know -- I mean, I think we're pointing towards the end of 2008 to do that. Hopefully we'll be able to do it by then. I think, you know, we look at it every month. We make recommendations. And I think if we continue along the path we are now, we'll be able to do that by the end of 2008.

MR. WHITMAN: Did I miss anybody who wanted to ask a question?

All right. We'll try round two here -- Lita?

Q General, it's Lolita Baldor with AP again. Just on your comments about making sure that progress turning security over to the Iraqis is steady, this morning General Dubik was talking about what the Iraqi Defense minister has said their projections are for when they will be able to take over security of their countries, saying that it wouldn't be until about 2012 where they'd be able to handle internal security and as late as 2018 for border security. Is that in line with your assessment as to how slowly it needs to be done, or is that too slow and do they need to really pick up the pace?

GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah, I would just say it is -- at the levels we're supporting them now, I do not see that going that far at all. I mean, I see it happening much quicker. But I do see us having some sort of long-term security relationship at a lower level for a long -- for some period of time that will be determined between, you know, the government of Iraq and the government of the United States and our coalition partners.

So, I mean, I think it -- you can't mix our levels. I mean, I think there'll be -- we'll have some people here, if the government of Iraq wants it, for some period of time. That could be five to 10 years. But it will not be at the levels we're at now. I don't believe that that will be necessary.

It could be, you know, we provide some capability. You know, maybe we provide air capability for, you know, five to 10 years, where we have close air support that can support them, or we have some helicopters that support them, and we have an appropriate number of ground forces that go along with that. And that will be dictated by the situation on the ground. But it won't be anywhere near the level we're at now. It'll be at some level that we believe is sustainable and is agreeable between us and the government of Iraq, because their security force will be far enough along where they can do that.

But I think what they're concerned about is complete independent capability to protect themselves against others as well as to protect themselves against some extremist threats that still might try to come into the country. So, I mean, I think that's something we're going to have to look at as we go down the road, and we'll determine what that right size is.

MR. WHITMAN: I have time for two quick ones. Joe? And then we'll finish up with Julian here.

Q This is Joe Tabet again, General. Given what you said about Iran, that the Iranians are paying and supporting some Shi'a extremists in Iraq, do you know if Muqtada al-Sadr is still controlling his military branch, the Jaish al-Mahdi?

GEN. ODIERNO: I didn't understand your question. Could you ask it one more time, please?

Q Given what you've said about Iran, that Iran still paying and financing some

Shi'a extremists, do you think or do you know if Muqtada al-Sadr is still controlling his military branch, the Jaish al-Mahdi?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, I mean, I think that he has control over the mainstream elements of Jaish al-Mahdi. I think we've -- but we've had some break-away groups. The ones specifically that tend to be mostly supported by Iranian Qods Force and supplied weapons and money, that, in fact, have separated themselves and have broken off, and I think those are the elements that we'll be very focused on, on those elements that have broken off for a variety of reasons and that are continuing to be supported and the ones that in my mind are causing the majority of the violence from the Shi'a extremist side.

Q General, Julian Barnes, LA Times. In your slides, you showed a map that showed a decline of sectarian violence in Baghdad. That map also showed the sort of ethnic make-up of neighborhoods, and the parts that we could see here showed Sunni neighborhoods becoming more Sunni and Shi'ite neighborhoods becoming more Shi'ite. How much of the decline in sectarian violence is due to military operations and how much is it due to the sort of self-segregation that's taken place across Baghdad?

GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah, it -- now if you look at that slide closely, there is no pure Sunni or pure Shi'a areas, it's just a percentage; so some have 50 percent, greater than 50 percent, some have greater than 75 percent. There are very few pure Shi'a or pure Sunni neighborhoods in Baghdad.

That said, clearly there was some movement of Shi'a and Sunnis around Baghdad in 2006 and in the beginning of 2007. So what we've tried to do is hold that in place and not have it continue to get worse, and I think we've been able to do that through military operations.

And what I'm seeing, frankly, is at the local level Sunni and Shi'a are working together and they are coming together, and sometimes it tends to be, in some cases, more of a political issue that causes some of this discontent, based on some political parties generating some of the disagreement between Sunni and Shi'as, and we watch that very closely.

But again, sectarian violence is reduced, but there are still some sectarian tensions. There's long histories here from when Saddam Hussein was in power; there's long histories here from, you know -- from a long history.

I mean, you got the Persians in the East of Iraq. You have the Arabs to the West. You have Iraq in the middle.

There are some pressures there, and so there's always going to be a little bit of pressure. But I think ultimately we'll see that Iraqis will say, Iraq comes first, and I think they'll work together. But it is going to take some time, and we have to understand that it is going to take some time to get there.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, General, as always, the hour has passed very quickly. But we know it's getting late there, and we want to be respectful of your time. But before we do bring it to a close, let me just turn it back to you for any final thoughts that you might have.

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, thank you.

If you could just put up -- I think I have one more slide there, if I could. Although 2007 was a year of hard work, sacrifice and significant progress for Multinational Corps Iraq, our work however is far from complete. As we embark on 2008, we'll continue our pursuit of extremists, slowly and deliberately transitioning security responsibilities to Iraqi security forces, and assist Iraqi civil and governance capacity building.

While the security improvements of Iraq have garnered much attention, such a strategic shift wouldn't have been possible if not for the courageous efforts of our brave soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines. These are extraordinary people doing extraordinary things in extraordinary situations, and I want to share with you a story that illustrates just how remarkable these individuals truly are.

In 2007, Staff Sergeant Kenneth Thomas, Jr., of the 1st Squadron, 7th Cavalry Regiment, was participating in a boat patrol on the Tigris River near Falahat, Iraq. The four boats in the patrol began to take fire from more than 70 fighters massed on both sides of the river. Sergeant Thomas returned fire with the machine gun mounted on his boat, disabling an enemy machine gun nest and killing one insurgent. The hail of enemy bullets was relentless and eventually forced Thomas's boat ashore.

The position on the river bank left Sergeant Thomas and his team of five soldiers exposed to hostile fire, so he ran up the steep bank and used his wire cutters to make a hole in a fence that was separating him and his group from a safer position. However the fence carried 220-volt electric current, and each cut Sergeant Thomas made provided him with an excruciating shock. By the time Sergeant Thomas finished cutting the hole in the fence, his wire cutters were starting to melt and his gloves were burning.

Because of his uncommon valor, Sergeant Thomas's team was able to crawl through the hole in the fence and reach the cover of a nearby house. There, they established a fighting position on the roof and killed three insurgents before the enemy broke contact. For his actions Staff Sergeant Kenneth Thomas was awarded the Silver Star, our military's third-highest honor for heroism.

The courage of our fighting men and women in this conflict is nothing short of phenomenal. To serve in their ranks is an experience that both is humbling and inspirational.

Our warriors are absolutely selfless, and their hard work, courage and

determination has brought about improvements across Iraq that many thought impossible just a year ago.

But what defines our soldiers and Marines is not just valor, but their unwavering compassion for the Iraqi people. This picture of Sergeant Thomas says it all. These are the future leaders of our country and the heroes of their generation.

The next time you think about events in Iraq, I ask that you remember heroes like Staff Sergeant Kenneth Thomas, Jr., and the thousands of others who are on the ground every day contributing to this important endeavor.

Thank you so much again for allowing me to talk to you today. I enjoyed it very much.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you for sharing Sergeant Thomas's story. And General, again, thank you very much for all the time that you spend with us here and for helping us to better understand the situation in Iraq. Thank you.

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