

DoD News Briefing with Col. Terry Ferrell, commander, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division and Embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team Leader John Smith, June 19, 2008

Col. Ferrell and Mr. Smith speak to the Pentagon Press Corps via videoconference from Iraq.

STAFF: Well, good morning everyone. Welcome to the Pentagon Briefing Room. And we have with us today Colonel Terry Ferrell, who's the commander of the 2nd Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division; and Mr. John Smith, his Embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team leader.

Now, Colonel Ferrell's brigade was the fifth surge brigade and has been operating in southeast Baghdad as part of Multinational Division Center since May of 2007. This is Colonel Ferrell's second time briefing us, I believe, in this format, and Mr. Smith's first opportunity to be with us today. And we're glad that they could both make it.

They are coming to us, as I said, from Operating Base Kalsu in southeast Baghdad. And I believe Colonel Ferrell has some opening comments for sure, so let's turn it over to them for whatever they may have to give us before we start the Q&A.

COL. FERRELL: And good morning. As you said, I am Colonel Terry Ferrell, the commander of 2nd Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division. And with me today I do have Mr. Smith, John Smith, the chief of our EPRT that's supporting our brigade combat team. As you well know, we are the last of the five surge brigades, in our 13th month of this deployment. All in all, it's been a very successful operation for us.

Before I describe the progress we've made, I'd just like to give you a little bit of background. The Spartan Brigade Combat Team was part of MND-Center in the 3rd Infantry Division Task Force Marne initially, and now 10th Mountain Division, Task Force Mountain. We're assigned an area southeast of Baghdad, an area called Arab Jabour, including population centers in Abu Waitha, Hawr Rajab, Adwaniyah, Madhariyah and Sayafiyah, an area about the size of Baltimore, Maryland, and nearly all agrarian.

Our mission, we're assigned to block accelerants entering into Baghdad, protect the local population, and defeat sectarian violence, and to continue to increase the capacity of the Iraqi security forces, foster local governance and economic systems, and to set the conditions for long-term self-reliance by the Iraqis.

The primary enemies that we were dealing with in our area of operations was al Qaeda and Sunni extremists who had been left alone for long enough to create a sanctuary in Arab Jabour.

Al Qaeda had used this sanctuary to control the population through fear and intimidation. They used homes, farms and places of business as bases of operation and

bomb-making factories, devastating the region's economy. People lacked consistent access to basic necessities, like clean water and electricity, let alone a functioning health care or education system.

They had -- the area had no sustained security presence provided by either coalition or Iraqi security forces. We began operations on June 15th, when elements of the Spartan Brigade Combat Team attacked to seize a foothold in Arab Jabour against a well-entrenched al Qaeda threat. Organized defensive belts existed throughout our area of operations, and deep-buried IEDs were common as the enemy was confident they would be able to keep coalition forces out and the local population controlled. They were wrong.

Almost one year today, we now have 11 patrol bases in our area manned by coalition and Iraqi security forces. These patrol bases allow our soldiers to live and work among the Iraqi population. My soldiers work side by side with two Iraqi battalions and almost 5,000 Sons of Iraq, all of whom are working together to ensure al Qaeda and Sunni extremists do not return to the region. When we first arrived, we were experiencing on average of 30-plus attacks a week. Now we're seeing less than one per week.

Internally displaced persons that had left the area over the past six months have steadily been returning based on the word spreading about the security and the ability for them to return. Just in the last six months, we've had over 3,000 return to our area of operations.

Working with the Iraqi security forces and the Sons of Iraq, we achieved these gains through three division-focused operations: Marne Torch I, Marne Torch II and Marne Thunderbolt. The combined efforts of these operations resulted in over 800 suspects detained, over 600 weapons caches found and over 500 improvised explosive devices safely destroyed, and nearly 6,000-plus houses cleared so that we could continue to move through the area of operations, providing for a safe, secure environment.

The security environment that was created by these operations and increased the Iraqi army role in the area set the conditions for the local citizens to step up and begin to take control of their future. Over this past year, we've helped create city councils in each of our population areas. Neighborhood councils now give our communities a direct voice to the government.

A perfect example of the progress is the Arab Jabour Community Center, which officially opened in December of 2007 with a very large ceremony on the grounds and more than 250 people attending in an area that once, no one would even think about coming to. The center functions similar to a city hall for the citizens of Arab Jabour. It also is the headquarters for the Arab Jabour city council and the Sons of Iraq. Now we have weekly security meetings chaired by the Iraqi army battalion commander, who now holds these meetings in the city hall. This is a clear indicator of the Iraqi army taking charge of security and working with the cooperation of the town leaders and the Sons of Iraq to secure a once-sanctuary for al Qaeda.

Our efforts, along with the EPRT, to bring back the community's essential services demonstrated to the citizens of the region that we were here to help. Throughout Arab Jabour and surrounding areas, we prioritized each of the essential services and began working with the local officials and the GOI ministries to repair, replace or refurbish each one they identified. From electricity to water for crops and water for drinking to schools and health care facilities, we assisted each community in realizing their goals to reestablish a sense of normalcy in their day-to-day lives.

Through monies provided by both the U.S. and Iraqi governments, the citizens now enjoy more electricity, more water, and 25 new or refurbished schools. Once forced to go all the way to Baghdad for health care, they now have Ministry of Health-supported clinics in the town of Abu Waitha, Adwaniyah and Hawr Rajab.

Local Iraqis have opened private clinics in Adwaniyah, Busayefi, Bayjia and Zambraniya and private rural clinics have been opened in very small towns in Madhariyah and Saifiyah, a very large step in the GOI reaching out to the local communities.

Economically, the area's residents are beginning to reap the benefits of self-sustainment. In such a short period of time, they've accomplished many business initiatives, including the formation of three business associations, with two of those associations being trained in small-business development and formally recognized by the government of Iraq. We've had the opportunity to see growth across the economy with 148 small-business ventures opening from Arab Jabour and across the region of our battlespace.

In regards to revitalizing agriculture, many initiatives have helped the citizens improve this once-dominant industry to our area. Through hard work and determination, six agricultural unions have been formed and linked to the Ministry of Agriculture. Furthermore, specific industries such as row crops, poultry, fish and beef farming businesses have been reinvigorated by the development of the ag unions and their ability to reach out and work with the local ministries.

As we prepare to redeploy as one of the -- as the last of the five surge brigades, it's clear that the government of Iraq has begun to shoulder a larger responsibility for the citizens in the area that we have operated. With increased security, GOI representatives are now travelling to rural communities to meet with local councils and community leaders to reach out and solve problems. Furthermore, the capacity and capabilities of the Iraqi army has improved tremendously throughout our time here and the operations we have conducted jointly throughout the operation.

All these vehicles of change combined to generate momentum towards prosperity, security and self-reliance. Increasing efforts by the Iraqis to effectively administer governance, the diligence of the Iraqi security force to prevent violence and -- intimidation in check, our partnerships to further professionalize the Iraqi security forces

and the compounding growth of the economy will continue to foster the stability that allows the region to move forward.

Thank you for this morning and we look forward to your questions.

STAFF: Okay. We appreciate that, Colonel Ferrell. Let's go ahead and begin.

Kristin.

Q Sir, it's Kristin Roberts with Reuters.

In terms of the security situation, are there any events on the horizon that might threaten the security gains or raise specific security challenges? And can you talk a bit about the sustainability of the security gains you've seen, as the country moves toward provincial elections?

COL. FERRELL: I think, in our specific area of operations, that the security gains are sustainable. We have forces that will be staying there, coalition forces that will be staying in the battlespace.

The progress of the Iraqi army battalions, that are working with us, has made great strides. The people of the communities are making tremendous strides. They are working hand-in-hand to prevent the threats from coming back.

There's always a threat. We know that. But the communities work. We work. The Iraqi security forces work. They do not want it. They've experienced now fighting for so many years. They see the changes that they've worked so hard over the last year-plus to gain; that they will move this forward. That's the key.

I believe that all of the events that's led, over the last few months, in and around our area, has been on the periphery. We continue to see progress, even with all the activities that was out there.

The know about the elections. They're looking forward to the elections. They want to see that occur. And I believe that is just another step in progress, as they move toward that direction.

Q On the elections though are there any other specific events that are going to -- that could affect security? I realize that you believe that the security situation is sustainable. But are there other specific events?

COL. FERRELL: There's always threats. Can I pick one specific event that would change the dynamics within our area of operations? I believe we've dealt with specifically al Qaeda trying to come back in. We worked through that.

As I stated, I believe right now, the area specifically that we operate in, I can't see a major event that we could not facilitate working through, with the communities and the Iraqi security forces, that not could sustain it.

There will be bad days. I acknowledge that. But given where they have been, in that specific area of operations, in those towns, and the growth they've made, I believe that they will see their way through and continue to work on the progress that they've achieved to date.

Q Colonel, it's Tom Bowman with National Public Radio.

I was just in Arab Jabour a few weeks ago. And clearly it's largely a Shi'ite area. But as far as the upcoming elections, I was hearing there that, you know, they're setting up polling stations in the Shi'ite areas. But in the Sunni areas, they seem to be not doing that as quickly as they should be doing. If you could, address that.

And for Mr. Smith, we also keep hearing that the Iraqi government isn't sending ministers down to, you know, look at essential services. in places like Arab Jabour and also Anbar, and also not sending sufficient monies to those areas. So if you could, address that.

MR. SMITH: Well, I'll do the --

COL. FERRELL: Within our specific area, we've nominated additional polling sites that could come in. And we're predominantly Sunni. We're about 98.5 percent Sunni. We do have some Shi'a pockets. Right now we all worked very well together. I mean, if you go and talk to them, it's Iraqi, it's not Shi'a, it's not Sunni. There's a lot of people that work hand in hand.

We have nominated back through the chain of command to try to pull in some polling sites to the location. The communities, the leaders of the communities and the neighborhood area council that is newly opened in Hawr Rajab, for example, that reaches into all of our region, is working to identify specifically where we can work with the Iraqi army to ensure safe passage, if necessary, to get our people in our communities out to the polling sites that have been identified. That is an ongoing process and one that will continue through the Iraqi security force, to ensure people can go do what they need to do to cast their vote and register.

MR. SMITH: And just to add a little bit to the election portion in that, it's my recent understanding that the IHEC in that is looking at putting together some mobile polling stations as to facilitate areas that were not previously slotted for having a stationary polling station. So that's yet to come down with further guidance and that from them.

In reference to your question about the ministries' participation in that, first of all, in our particular area, it's pretty unique. Because of its instability in that over the

years, it was isolated, and local governance, recognized GOI bodies of governance were basically to the north of our area in the Rashid district. In that they covered the southern portion of Baghdad that comes over into our area of operations.

And then we have the -- now the Mahmudiyah qadha in that, the Al Rashid nahiya, which governs two-thirds of our area of operation in that, was outside of our battlespace.

However, in reference to gaining cooperation from the ministries in that, through the building of relationships -- and once again, this is a team effort in that -- as we entered the battlespace with the 2/3, as a surge unit, I term us as a surge EPRT, because we are right there behind them and that all along the way identifying the needs and assessments. From there, one of the very first ones, of course, was connectivity to governance. And so we began building relationships in that with the officials in that, in the Rashid district, the Mahmudiyah qadha and the Al Rashid nahiya in that.

And through developing relationships, which -- this society is built upon relationships, and then they take it very seriously -- we were able to bring these officials into an area that they would not have dreamed of going into.

And that -- and as they came into the area and you saw the Shi'a meeting the newly formed town council of Arab Jabour for the first time, and that -- so you have a Shi'a district chairman sitting down with a Sunni town council and seeing them embrace. And the thing that I can't project here in words in that is the excitement in their eyes and the reunion and the reconciliation that took place at that moment. And that was the start. That was at the very beginning of that. That was the first part of October in that, when we engaged.

And from there, you know, we followed that protocol in that, and we have gotten assistance in that from the Ministry of Health. We've gotten assistance from the Ministry of Energy. We've gotten assistance from the Ministry of Irrigation and their representatives in those areas in that. So just speaking from our area, you know, they have been cooperative to the best of their ability, and funds are starting to break free in assistance.

STAFF: Joe?

Q Yeah, Colonel, it's Joe Tabet with Al Hurra.

I want to go back to your opening statement. You said that 800 suspects were detained. Can you just tell us more on that? Can you give us more details -- where they were captured, are they still in detention, are they from al Qaeda?

COL. FERRELL: As we've done operations over the past 13-plus months, 12-plus months here, we have detained over 800-plus suspects. And several have been released. As we've gone through the operations, some have been released and are back

amongst the locals, as we've done those operations. Many are still in detention and work through that, based on the fact that they were involved in operations directly against our forces, Iraqi security forces or against the locals.

We still are engaged in operations today. Just today we're involved in operations. Predominately, as we entered into our area, as previously stated, it was dominated by al Qaeda. There was some Sunni extremist organizations that had been there, but they had basically been consumed by that al Qaeda umbrella, and as we worked through that, we were able to sort through and determine who and what and where. But that is the element that's criminal or threat that we dealt with, and now we continue to see the same as we work through the area of operations.

STAFF: (Off mike.)

Q Colonel, it's Al Pessin from Voice of America. I wanted to follow up on Kristin's first question.

As you know, the surge was accompanied by a change in doctrine, a change of approach. That change of approach, I'm told, couldn't have been done without sufficient security forces.

Now, with the surge brigades leaving, what makes you confident that this approach will continue to succeed without all these extra U.S. troops there?

COL. FERRELL: I will tell you that I think that we were at the right place at the right time. And I understand the surge and the mission set that we got as we came in, and we were able to get after it. And I think it was very classic in the counterinsurgency aspects. It's the clear, hold, build as we moved through and a very slow, very methodical approach as we came in. But now we've been able to build the Iraqi security forces to come in.

As we move elements of the brigade combat team out of the battlespace -- and our brigade is very unique as the last surge brigade -- all of 2nd Brigade, 3rd ID, the brigade that works for me, is not working specifically here in this battlespace. So I have task-organized units that belong to other organizations that will be staying. So there will be a reduction, given, but there will be a coalition presence.

But what has changed is a significant increase in our area of operation of Iraqi security forces. When we first started, there was one Iraqi battalion -- no Iraqi police and one Iraqi battalion that was on the periphery of the brigade's area of operations. Nowhere did they really want to venture into our specific area of operations. And it took several weeks to get that to change. And it's taken time now to get them to the point that they do independent operations, the one battalion.

We have since, just in the last two months, received a second battalion. And we will see that it will continue to expand Iraqi security force presence over the coming

weeks and months with plans that are designed for our specific piece of terrain with a larger presence of Iraqi army.

And additionally, we have just recently opened an Iraqi police station. We will have a permanent police station in Arab Jabour about the first of September, but there's a temporary station that now is open. We have over 400 candidates that is going through the process to become policemen. And we will see that bring more security to the area.

So you have Iraqi police officers. You have Iraqi army, the increased volume of Iraqi army. And then you still have that coalition presence that will facilitate the sustainment.

And don't forget the population. Don't forget the Sons of Iraq that are still there. But more importantly, don't forget the population and what they've been through and the changes and the transformation that they've been through and what they see now, what they have as they move forward. They wanted normalcy in their life. They're starting to see that and they're moving forward. I think that is one of the biggest keys that we have a tendency to overlook, here.

Q If I could just follow up, I realize you may not want to give us specific numbers, but can you give us an idea what the coalition presence will be in the next phases compared to what you have now?

COL. FERRELL: You're going to see a reduction across the battlespace. As I move a couple battalions across the footprint -- you really won't see a reduction from the coalition, in the coalition presence -- you will see a reduction, but the Iraqi security forces is filling the void that we created.

And they've already stepped in. We're working with them. They're integrated. They're down on the ground, they're in the patrol bases, they're out on checkpoints and they're working with the community.

Q Sir, it's Meredith MacKenzie from Talk Radio News. After you and the brigades leave, they're going to start that 45-day period of evaluation that General Petraeus talked about. Project for us, based on your experience, how you think your area of operation is going to fare under that evaluation.

COL. FERRELL: I think that it's all situation-dependent. And, you know, as we go through, decisions will be made, but I will tell you what -- and I think that it goes back to comments previously made, to be quite honest with you. The forces that we have there, coalition presence, our battlespace, that as we transition out, the expansion of that battlespace to coalition command and control, the expansion of Iraqi security forces in there, I think you'll see that it will stay under the footprint there.

I think over time as the security situation continues to do and the decisions are made that you will see the opportunity for more forces to be moved if necessary. But

right now the forces that we leave there, working with the Iraqi security forces and the local population, I think they're in the right place at the right time. And as the boss makes decisions in the coming weeks and months, of course that's all going to be based off of decisions based on the situation and at the time.

Q Just one quick follow-up for that. Speaking specifically about the Iraqi security forces that are going to backfill in your area, assess their strengths and their development to possibly one day to stand on their own in that area.

COL. FERRELL: Well, what I will tell you that's very unique -- when we first got here, and we see it now between the two battalions we're operating with. The first battalion, when we first started working with them, they were able to man checkpoints. They were able to get after doing stationary operations. We watched. As we moved through the zone and the one battalion that we were working with became independent, the leadership got confidence, and capabilities and their capacity to do independent operations grew. And specifically in the months of December, January, February, I watched that battalion work in the framework of our operations and it was significant to the successes that we achieved in completing the expansion of our area.

As we introduced the second battalion, we're back to building checkpoints and getting them into the community now in stationary positions so that we just have their presence, and then it has to develop and get the capabilities out to where they too can build independent capabilities to do those independent type operations.

What they bring -- both battalions bring is the ability to reach out to the community and talk with the leaders. Where we've been doing that, they have that just right off the bat, and they take over a role and fill a void that has been working now with the one battalion; I have two battalions that can do it throughout the width and depth of the battlespace.

And it's been a significant impact.

Over time, they will both improve. And as more forces come in and they get the strength and capabilities and build the capacity, we'll see independent operations across all of them. They have the desire. That's the one thing I want you to understand.

The soldiers I deal with, and I've got great, you know, great knowledge of working with them on the ground and being engaged with them in the fight firsthand. The company commanders, a couple of the battalion commanders, but the company commanders are the ones that I have personal knowledge of down there.

They are out leading soldiers. They want to take the fight. They want to rid their area just as much as any of our soldiers. They know what's right and they'll get after it.

Q This is Daphne Benoit with Agence France-Presse.

You mentioned the Sons of Iraq in your area. Has there been any progress in terms of integrating them in the Iraqi security forces in your area?

COL. FERRELL: I mentioned that we had 400-plus packets that have been submitted for Iraqi police candidates. Those 400-plus packets are from Sons of Iraq. We actually have about 800-plus candidates. And they're all out of the Sons of Iraq.

And as we neck it down to one station, we're down to about 400. And we look for those, you know, as they go through the hiring process and the vetting process, that will be integration too.

We're now going through a recruiting drive to get Sons of Iraq from our area of operations to join the Iraqi army. We have numerous individuals that are coming forward, wanting to join the Iraqi army.

So bringing the Iraqi security forces in has been successful in the fact that people now, the locals, want to go and be a part of it. That has been another piece that we did not have.

Initially they did not want to be in the Iraqi army because they didn't have any engagement with it. But now that the Iraqi security forces, specifically the Iraqi army, is working within our footprint, the Sons of Iraq are, sure, we want to join.

And just today actually I have one of my battalions that has a recruiting drive, in conjunction with the Iraqi army battalion they're partnered with, to take recruits to the recruiting station.

STAFF: Okay. Well, we are the end of our time and we appreciate you making yourselves available, gentlemen. So as is traditional, we'd like to turn it back to you for any closing comments you may have.

MR. SMITH: Thank you for the opportunity and that. This has been unbelievable, serving with Colonel Ferrell.

And I'll tell you, the fine young men and women and that, that are out there, the first boots on the ground and that, that were the first link in the chain and that, you know, everybody back there in the U.S. and that needs to stand up and be proud of these young men and women and that. Because it's an honor for me to have been able to participate, stand side-by-side with them.

God bless them all. Thank you.

COL. FERRELL: And I would like to close by just saying, one, thank you for taking time out of your day to give us the opportunity to talk to you. It's always our

privilege to share what's going on here in theater, specifically in our little area of operations.

And we do appreciate the American public and what they do for our soldiers. And our families -- our soldiers -- they truly benefit from every day what the American public does for us. And we cannot thank you enough.

Look forward to the next chance to talk to you all. Thank you.

STAFF: Thank you and have a safe redeployment.

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