

DoD News Briefing with Col. Charles Flynn Col. Flynn, Commander, 1st Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division, June 26, 2008

(Note: Colonel Flynn appears via teleconference from Iraq.)

COL. GARY KECK (director, Department of Defense Press Office): All right. Good morning, everyone. As most of you know, I'm Colonel Gary Keck. I'm the director of the Press Office, and I'm moderating today for Mr. Whitman.

And it's my pleasure to introduce to you today from Iraq Colonel Charlie Flynn, commander of the 1st Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division. And he's been in Iraq since July of last year. So he's been there a while.

Colonel Flynn and his brigade were initially responsible for theater security operations in southern, central and western Iraq. But in April they reorganized and shifted focus to partnering with Iraqi security forces and providing overwatch to three southern Iraqi provinces.

This is his second time with us in this forum, and he's coming to us from Contingency Operating Base Adder at Tallil Air Base. So with that, let me turn it over to Charlie for opening comments. Over to you, Charlie.

COL. FLYNN: Okay. Thank you very much. Good morning.

As stated, I'm Colonel Charlie Flynn, the commander of 1st Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, based out of Fort Bragg, North Carolina. And this is the brigade's fourth combat rotation, with two each to Iraq and Afghanistan.

I'm sure you've been following the events unfolding these past 10 days in southern Iraq and in Amarah with keen interest. First Brigade has played a supporting role in advising and assisting this Iraqi- planned and -led operation, and I'll be happy to discuss that with you today.

I would like to first start, however, by painting a picture of our operational environment from when I last spoke to you in January and compare that to what it looks like on the ground now.

The operation in Amarah, Basha'er as-Salaam, is a clear sign of the development and professionalism of the Iraqi forces and will only serve as a model of transformation occurring in the government of Iraq, the Iraqi security forces and our area here in southern Iraq.

Since I last spoke to you, several transitions have occurred throughout our task force. In April Task Force Devil reorganized forces. As a result of the reorganization, our

brigade focus shifted to partnering with the Iraqi security forces and cultivating a unity of effort with provincial government to create long-term Iraqi self-reliance.

The focus of our partnership has been on the army and police. We've done this through combined patrols, intelligence sharing and the use of joint security stations which have benefitted the area. Maximizing the use of combat outposts and joint security stations has allowed us to live amongst our neighbors, fostering those essential relationships provided by the security forces and the people of the local area. This unity of effort has increased the capability and capacities of the Iraqi forces and continued to -- and continued for downward attack trends.

In light of recent events in Maysan province, security in southern Iraq can be assessed overall as stable, dotted with occasional periods of tension. These periods of tension are due to intra-Shi'a clashes. These clashes have been the workings of JAM special groups and local criminals. All of these groups have casual attitudes towards violence. This attitude has backfired, and they've lost significant support from the population due to their careless actions.

A concern remains with special groups and the spikes of violence they perpetrate for their convenience. While they are disruptive, they will not disable the government of Iraq. Special groups and criminals seek to drive a wedge between political progress and the population. As such, they'll attack Iraqi forces, coalition forces and civilian aid organizations just to make their point.

In an effort to eliminate these malign groups and extremists, Iraqi forces and government officials have stepped up and assumed active roles against these threats. Specifically, in Amarah, we've seen tribal leaders and citizens actively engage the Iraqi forces to enforce the rule of law. They've provided valuable information on the location of weapons caches and criminals. During a four-day amnesty period before operations began, tips produced caches, two of which resulted in over 200 artillery rounds, 51 antitank mines and 44 mortars.

Thursday, June 19th officially started clearing operations within the city of Amarah. The local populace was hesitant to come out of their homes at first, but by mid-morning the people began greeting the Iraqi forces in the streets, displaying a positive attitude about the government of Iraq taking care of the city and creating a safer environment to call home.

Over the next couple of days, the Iraqi security forces discovered caches and detained over a hundred special groups and related criminals. As you can see on the third slide in your packet, the Iraqi security forces found a significant amount of rockets, mortars, mines and launchers. Operation Basha'er as-Salaam is a positive indication that the Iraqi forces are continuing to grow and develop, leading to increased confidence by the Iraqi people in their security forces. The people understand that the special groups and outside influences are not in the best interests of their country.

As the Iraqi army and police continue to clear the city and move to the outer villages to relentlessly pursue threats, the gains, security and stability within the city of Amarah will lead to further development of essential services. To start with, the Iraqi army delivered over 10,000 halal meals into 12 different neighborhoods.

There was a huge turnout for the food, and it was gracefully received. The people of Amarah are showing their support to the Iraqi police and army because they know they will not be abandoned.

In the upcoming weeks, several programs are going to be initiated. First, the community transportation improvement team program, which is essentially a city public works or highway sanitation program.

We have used this program before in Dhi Qar, Muthanna and Maysan or, correction, in Basra successfully. And it's worked very well. It creates a number of jobs in addition to cleaning trash and debris from the city streets.

We will continue to work -- with the tribe leaders and the provincial council, the Army Corps of Engineers and the provincial reconstruction teams -- on identifying, prioritizing those essential services that are needed, throughout the city and also in the outerlying villages, so we can enhance the quality of life for all of the Maysanis.

In closing, I'd like to say that there is tremendous potential for the future of Iraq. Over the past 13 months, we've seen the Iraqi army, police and the highway police step forward as solid public servants for Iraq. They stand ready to defend their nation and they grow in confidence daily.

And as we've seen, when the government of Iraq calls upon them, these loyal servants bravely answer the call. Although there is a long road ahead, we realize that combined and coalition partnerships will enhance safety and security for all of Iraq.

We stand in full support of the Iraqi forces and the government of Iraq. And we also understand that secure and stable environments afford the economy of Iraq to grow, bringing with it jobs and opportunities for people to prosper.

Working together with the Iraqi forces, government officials and the leaders and people of Iraq, the 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment is thankful for the chance to help create conditions for further successful transitions in 2008.

And with that, I stand ready to take any questions that you might have. Thank you.

COL. KECK: Tom.

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

The area you're operating in of course is a stronghold of Sadr's Mahdi Army. And Sadr has recently created a new armed group to target Americans.

Have you seen any evidence of that new group yet?

COL. FLYNN: You came in a little bit broken. I think what you said was something about the Mahdi Army and the Sadr militia.

In the Amarah operation, they have come out, as I stated, in the amnesty. And there have been those that have offered up cache and criminals in their local neighborhoods.

But since that time, there's been no confrontation with the Mahdi Army in Amarah or, for that matter, elsewhere in the provinces that the 1st Brigade is operating in.

Q The Question was about the new group that Sadr has created, the new armed group to go after Americans. Have you seen any evidence of that?

COL. FLYNN: You're really -- I cannot follow that question. I'm really not getting -- I don't understand what you're saying, because you're coming in a little bit distorted.

COL. KECK: Charlie, this is Gary.

What he's asking is, there is a report of a new group of fighters that have been identified by Sadr and the Mahdi Army. And he's wondering if you have seen any indications of a new group that supposedly has threatened to kill or harm Americans or coalition forces.

COL. FLYNN: Right, I understand, question about the new group.

No, we have not seen any evidence of a new group evolving out of the Mahdi Army. We've heard about those reports. But they have not been identified nor have they come out and made any attacks or done anything to showcase themselves.

Q Hi, Colonel. This is Courtney Kube from NBC News.

You mentioned the problem of intra-Shi'a clashes in your area. Can you talk a little bit more about that; where specifically you're seeing the greatest instances of this, and in what way it's manifesting? Are they attacks against civilians, Iraqi security forces? Can you just elaborate a bit on it?

COL. FLYNN: Right.

What I mean by that is, there have been some attacks, against police forces, against government officials. For example down in Southern Dhi Qar province recently, there have been a couple of attacks against police officers in police buildings.

We've also seen evidence and there have been attacks against reconstruction efforts that have been going on when they attack a private security company that's moving officials around to go bring reconstruction efforts to some of the people. Those are what I mean by the inter-Shi'a clashes against government officials. And then also attacks against those reconstruction efforts that are going on by the civilian aid organizations.

Q Is there any sign that they're increasingly targeting -- these inter-Shi'a clashes are turning their attention towards the U.S. or the coalition, like Tom was asking?

COL. FLYNN: Well, I haven't seen any increases in attacking against coalition forces. If anything, the attacks that have been conducted have been against the Iraqi security forces -- the police and the army -- although fortunately, we have not seen any of those in Amarah to date.

COL. KECK: Go ahead.

Q Colonel, Jeff Schogol with Stars and Stripe. Have you experienced any delay getting your CERP funding? And if so, what challenges has that posed?

COL. FLYNN: The only word I picked up in there is about challenges. The rest of it came in a little broken.

Q Let me repeat. Sorry, I have a tendency to mumble. Have you experienced any delays in getting your CERP funding? And if so, what challenges has that posed?

COL. FLYNN: I have not personally experienced in this brigade any challenges getting CERP fundings. I think as units come in, you know, sometimes just getting your arms around what projects you want to do, the formalities of getting the funding approved for those projects, and then, quite frankly, finding those individuals in the population that you trust and you want to begin a relationship with and you're willing to begin those contracts with.

A recent development in the last couple of months has been an initiative called ICERP. It's Iraqi funding. And I find this to be the same process. It's very helpful. But it is Iraqi money being used. And we take a number of those things to the provincial councils and they can determine where they want to put those funds or what projects they want to put those funds against.

Q If I could follow up, are you saying the Iraqi government is providing you with money to do what CERP does?

COL. FLYNN: The Iraq government has provided each of the provinces with funding. And what we do is, we work with the Provincial Reconstruction Team, the chamber of commerce and the provincial councils to just advise and assist in some of their places where, as we get out and about in the province, to give them ideas about some things that they may be able to better spend their money on -- infrastructure-type items.

COL. KECK: Joe?

Q Yeah, Colonel, this is Joe Tabet with Al Hurra. Can you give us more details about the weapons caches that you talked about in your opening statement? Do you know if those weapons are coming from Iran?

COL. FLYNN: I think you asked me about weapons caches in Amarah. Is that what you just asked me about?

COL. KECK: Yeah, Charlie, this is Gary. (Audio break) -- if he could get some further clarification on the types of weapons caches you've found. And specifically, have you found weapons that seem to be of Iranian origin?

COL. FLYNN: Well, I just came back from Amarah early this morning. The first load of weapons that will be looked at by the experts is on the way to Baghdad today. So I can't really speak of whether any of the weapons that we found today are from Iran.

Certainly the smuggling routes indicate that they would come from that direction, and there are individuals that were in the city that are no longer there. We have evidence that some have gone back into Iran.

But the size of the caches are pretty significant. We've gotten over -- in excess of 3,000 mortar rounds, nearly 300 rockets, and artillery rounds are approaching 800, and there's about 27 EFPs that we're aware of right now, but an additional nearly 300 IEDs of various types -- so pretty significant amounts of ammunition. There's other things in there that I haven't touched on, but a lot of caches and, quite frankly, a lot of people coming forward with more information about those.

And if I might just add, that is basically three days or four days of operations in the city limits of Amarah. We're now beginning to go -- or I should say the Iraqi security forces are going -- outside of the city limits now to about nine objectives over the next four or five days, looking for additional caches and criminals.

Over.

Q To follow up, Colonel, if we look at the graphic that we have, we can see that the number of mortars is above 3,000.

Is there any significance in discovering this much of mortars, this size of mortars?

COL. FLYNN: I'm sorry. I'm still having trouble understanding what you're asking me.

COL. KECK: Okay. Charlie, he says that we've got some slides that you provided to us that have a chart that shows number of mortar rounds discovered and caches which seems to be higher than 3,000. I don't know if that was because it was -- you're referencing the three- day time frame, but he was wondering, would the significance of the number of mortar rounds -- how would you characterize that?

COL. FLYNN: Of course, the mortars are used against our forces as we're in these, you know, combat outposts and forward operating bases. And I mean, to find just that many mortar rounds in the city of Amarah -- we're happy to get those out of their hands. And of course, those same munitions can be used to conduct IED attacks against us. So we're happy the people came forward and turned those over to us. And we're going to do what we can to make sure that we reward the people that are providing information related to cache finds.

COL. KECK: Luis.

Q Colonel, it's Luis Martinez with ABC News. Question about your shift in operations, back in April. Did that occur in tandem with the Iraqi operation in Basra? Or did it happen afterwards? And did you fall in behind other units that had left, or were you the first American units to partner up with Iraqi forces down there and set up joint security stations and COPs?

COL. FLYNN: Yeah, it's a unique set of circumstances there. We are partnering with the 38th Brigade from the 10th Iraqi Army Division. The Marines have a transition team that is partnered with the 1st Iraqi Army Division. We have Special Forces in the area that are partnered with Iraqi special forces and then there's even a national police brigade under the Ministry of Interior with the 6th National Police Brigade. And they have their police transition team.

So it's really a unique set of circumstances there, where we have MOI and MOD forces from Iraq coordinating their efforts.

They planned it well in advance, and every day they're getting better and better at synchronizing their operations, sharing intelligence and coordination points to be able to conduct these operations successfully. So it's quite an event to see, and it's a really positive trend.

COL. KECK: Go ahead.

Q If I could follow up, sir -- so back in April, did the shift occur because of the Operation White Knight that had just taken place in Basra, and that's why you were shifted to this new mission?

COL. FLYNN: I'm not sure completely of the question. I think you asked about something in Basra in April. I'm not sure if the shipments of the weapons have gone into Amarah since those operations began in Basra. No one has been in Amarah to conduct clearing operations, so it's really the first time that the Iraqi forces have been able to go back in there with the level of support that's required to pull some of the caches out of there.

COL. KECK: Go ahead.

Q Colonel, Jim Michaels with USA Today. You described the relationship with -- in the Amarah operation with U.S. forces as kind of a supporting and overwatch. I'm wondering: From what you've been able to see, when do you think that the Iraqi security forces will be capable of conducting these types of operations with little or no U.S. support?

COL. FLYNN: I think to a degree -- I'm not sure if they can conduct any unilateral operations by themselves other than the standard patrolling that can go on day to day, which is relatively significant. You know, what -- I think what we are able to provide them, as a partner, is a degree of technical assistance, advice and some unique enabling capabilities that we have because of the maturity of our force.

For example, their EOD teams are performing great up there, their explosive ordnance teams against IEDs. However, their engineer clearing teams don't have quite the equipment that we have. So if we match them up together, they can do their own counter-IED work, but over time, they'll get there. And right now, they're just doing great work with the capabilities that they do have, and I think our enabling and our assistance and our partnering with them really, when they're -- when we are shoulder to shoulder with them, gives them a degree of confidence in doing their operations, and I think that's what's most helpful here.

Q Colonel, it's Al Pessin from Voice of America. Two sort of related questions.

One is, how would you put this Amarah operation in the broader context, of trying to bring stability to that part of the country and especially to combating the Iranian influence?

And secondly you said in your opening statement that people know they won't be abandoned when they see the Iraqi troops come in. How do they know that? And is that accurate? Do you have enough sources down there to have that sort of persistent presence, that we've heard about, that we've heard is necessary to bring stability?

COL. FLYNN: First of all, I'll say that having watched the operation and partnered with forces in Basra, in late March, and then watching and partnering again, providing assistance to the Iraqi forces here in Amarah, in June, they have learned some great lessons. And they've applied those in this operation.

In terms of having a persistent presence and having forces available to do what needs to be done, certainly at the period of time we're in right now in Amarah, the Iraqi ground forces commander, Lieutenant General Ali, identified a need for more forces, during the initial phase of the operations, in order to establish security, remove the caches and then arrest the criminals that they had warrants for.

In terms of their presence staying after, they are going to move forces elsewhere. And they're going to bolster the Iraqi army and the police in that area.

And they're going to afford them a window of opportunity to create that stable, secure environment, so that the threats don't reemerge, and the criminals don't come back into that area and try to reestablish their networks.

Q Colonel, I'd also asked about the bigger picture, as to how significant you think the Amarah operation is.

Is it of major significance or is it just another in what's going to be a long series of these?

COL. FLYNN: Well, there's nearly 10,000 Iraqi forces in the province conducting operations. We've got a little over 500 in various stages -- capabilities helping them. So I think that the forces that the Iraqi government has chosen to use in Amarah are significant. I think the combined efforts of the police and the army are significant. And seeing them work together and in unison is a positive trend.

COL. KECK: Okay, Jeff, let's make this the last one.

Q Colonel, Jeff Schogol with Stars and Stripes again. I read a media report that said that since Basra the Iraqi security force's strategy is to give the Mahdi army -- well, excuse me, to give the Shi'ite militias a heads-up that they're coming, allow them to escape, and then establish order. Is that what you've been noticing?

COL. FLYNN: Well, you know, that's a good question. I don't -- I'm not sort of going to buy into the idea that they're allowing these people to escape. I think what the Iraqi plan has done is afforded the opportunity of the local population to regain control of their towns, cities and villages. And they have told them, "Hey, listen, we have an amnesty period. You have a period of time to allow us to get the criminals turned over to the police or turn in the locations where the caches are."

If some of the higher-end individuals decide to leave during that period of time, then it actually makes it a lot easier for the citizens of that city, town or village -- for security forces to surge into there, take care of the situation without creating a lot of collateral damage and a lot of chaos. And I think that's an important aspect of what the Iraqi security forces are going -- have been doing.

And moreover, it's their plan. It's their idea. It's their concept. And they're applying their plan to the situation based on the environment that they know so well. And with us in support and as partners, providing those enabling capabilities to them to help, I just think that those efforts contributed together really lend themselves to success.

COL. KECK: Well, we have come to the end of our time. And as is traditional, we'd like to turn it back over to you for any final comments or messages you'd like to make sure to get through to the Pentagon press corps here. So with that, let's turn it back over to you, Charlie.

COL. FLYNN: First of all, thank you very much for taking time out of your schedules to do this today. I appreciate the opportunity to tell you about the achievements of the 1st Brigade Combat Team. The paratroopers over here in 1st Brigade have been doing a great job for 13 months. I really want to extend my appreciation to the spouses and families back at Fort Bragg and really across the country for their support that they've rendered to us while we've been away. We should be home fairly soon, and we all look forward to a peaceful and joyous reunion with our families.

Lastly, I'd be remiss if I didn't recognize the families and the loved ones of the paratroopers in this task force that have paid the ultimate sacrifice and for those that have been severely wounded. You're in our thoughts. You're in our prayers. My heart goes out to all of you, and I appreciate the sacrifices and the contributions that you make every day.

All the families back there, you're patriots as much if not more than the soldiers that are over there, walking point. I just really want to tell you thank you very much for your support. We look forward to getting home. And God bless you all. And we'll see you soon. Thanks.

COL. KECK: Well, thank you, Charlie, and we wish you and the rest of the Devil Brigade paratroopers all the success in the world and a safe trip home. And hopefully we'll see you back here someday. All the way.

COL. FLYNN: All right. Thank you very much.

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