

DoD News Briefing: Col. Dominic Caraccilo, Army Commander of the 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, Brig. Gen. Ali Jassim, Commander of the Iraqi Army's 4th Brigade, 6th Army Division, and Lou Lantner, Embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team Leader, speak with the Pentagon Press Corps via teleconference from Baghdad, March 24, 2008

JAMES TURNER (deputy director, Pentagon Press Office): Okay. Good morning, everybody.

This is Jim Turner in the Pentagon briefing room. Gentlemen, can you hear me in Baghdad?

COL. CARACCILO: Yes, we can.

MR. TURNER: Oh, great. All right. Let's get going.

This morning we're privileged to have three briefers today:

Colonel Dominic Caraccilo. He's the commander of the 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division.

Mr. Lou Lantner. He's the Embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team leader.

And Brigadier General Ali Jassim, commander of the 4th Brigade, 6th Iraqi Army Division.

This is their first time briefing with us in this format, and they will provide an update for the area, then take your questions. And with that, I'll turn it over to you, gentlemen.

(Pause.) Can you hear me, gentlemen?

COL. CARACCILO: Yes, we can.

MR. LANTNER: I can't hear him that loud.

MR. TURNER: Okay. Can you go ahead make your opening statement, please?

COL. CARACCILO: Okay. I'm sorry. Good morning. We appreciate an introduction and opportunity to come to speak to you today about our operations in south Baghdad. And we hope by the end of this press conference that you'll realize that it is indeed possible to bring prosperity to this war-torn country, but it takes a concerted effort and constant engagement between the coalition forces, the Iraqi security forces, the Department of State reconstruction teams and the Iraqis, in the forms of Sons of Iraq, government officials and average Iraqi citizens.

South Baghdad was arguably the poorest and most dangerous area in all of Iraq. That is not the case today. Today's press brief includes the three leaders associated with the changing of what was once termed the Triangle of Death into a stable and progressively secure environment.

As stated, my name is Colonel Dominic Caraccilo. I'm the commander of 3rd Brigade, the 101 Airborne Division, known as the Rakkasans. For this deployment, we are attached to the 3rd Infantry Division, Task Force Marne, commanded by Major General Rick Lynch of Multinational Division-Center. Our brigade operates in concert with the 4th Brigade of the 6th Iraqi Army Division and our Embedded PRT in an area called AO Rakkasan.

This area runs from the south part -- southern parts of Baghdad to the Euphrates River and encompasses the city of Mahmudiyah, Yusufiya, and the areas of southern Abu Ghraib. Basically, they operate in an area known as the southern belt of Baghdad. It's about a thousand square kilometers. And in this part of the country, it's 75 percent Sunni, 25 percent Shi'a. So quite frankly, at the tribal level, everyone really considers themselves Iraqi.

And during this tour, this brigade has been in Iraq since the end of September 2007, when we took over for the 2nd Brigade of the 10th Mountain Division, commanded by Colonel Mike Kershaw. And it is important to note that our predecessors suffered nearly 60 killed in action and 300 wounded in action during their 15-month tour. But they did an incredible job setting?? the conditions for what is now a stable environment.

For most of the Rakkasans, this is our fourth deployment in the war on terrorism, and this time we expected to be deployed for a full 15 months.

Unlike most press briefings of this kind, today is quite unique and somewhat telling of the progress achieved in Iraq since the surge began last spring. We are at a collective point today where operations in our zone are now clearly a joint effort between coalition forces, Iraqi army, Iraq police, the EPRT and the population itself, in forms of Sons of Iraq at Iraqi checkpoints and tribal sheikh councils.

As you know, brigade combat teams make up the backbone of the command elements here in Iraq. Each BCT in Iraq is chartered to work along multiple lines of operation. And that charter's challenged and measured against many factors. What can make a unit successful here in Iraq is its measured partnership with its Iraqi unit and the synergy provided by the EPRT. I'd like to think we have been successful in our AO mainly due to the talents and sacrifices of local BCTs who operated in our area and the talents associated with Iraqi army command, as well as the leadership and makeup of our EPRT.

My military colleague, Brigadier General Ali Jassim Mohammed Hassen Al-Frejee, is the commander of the 4th Brigade of the 6th Iraqi Army. General Ali, who commands both Shi'a and Sunni soldiers, is the model of reconciliation working for the

benefit of all Iraqis as a true ambassador and patriot for his freely elected government. His brigade consisted of nine Iraqi battalions, and his headquarters are stationed in the city of Mahmudiyah at the center of the Mahmudiyah qadha, which is one of the many qadhas that make up the Baghdad province. This month begins the beginning of his third year in command.

Mr. Lou Lantner from the Department of State is our Embedded PRT team leader, who has a full array of subject matter experts who assist in reconstruction of the government -- governance, essential services and general economy in our area.

To give you some background of how are forces our arrayed, my coalition brigade occupies 12 patrol bases throughout our zone, as well as seven combined battle positions. My Iraqi counterpart has soldiers at all our -- all our patrol bases and occupies 84 battle positions and checkpoints through his battlespace. And we have under our purview 780 Sons of Iraq checkpoints, which help thicken our lines to ensure the population is protected from the insurgency. And the EPRT is also task-organized, so that its experts are positioned throughout the battlefield to optimize their talents.

To further strengthen the security situation, we have nearly 2,000 Iraqi police operating mostly in the eastern and southern part of our area of operations, as well as patrol police operating on the MSRs and the ASRs. So you can see from the footprint described, we have a mix of coalition, Iraqi security forces and Iraqis themselves securing our zone, which allows for Lou Lantner and his EPRT experts to do their job.

I'd be remiss if I didn't provide our tactical mission statement up front. The brigade's mission is to conduct full-spectrum operations, to assist the government of Iraq and Iraqi security forces by interdicting accelerants into Baghdad, defeating sectarian violence and securing the population or to continue to increase the capacity of the Iraqi security forces and to foster local government and economic systems to set the conditions for long-term self-reliance by the Iraqis.

The question obviously now is, how well are we doing our mission? Well, there are many factors that can measure success. One telling measure of performance is that a year ago, this area was suffering from, on average, 106 attacks a week. Today, we average less than 12. That is a decrease of nearly 88 percent. This is not to give the impression that the area is without threat. We know the enemy's still there, but has been fragmented and disorganized, to a large degree due to our combined efforts. We attribute this success to the focus on the surge, the confidence of the Iraqi army and the desire of the population to choose peace over violence.

Because of this level of stability, the emergence of governance at a grassroots level and the inception of essential services long- needed in this area have begun. In the past five months, a combined team effort has renovated 10 schools, 11 health clinics, four government buildings and eight water treatment plants. It also put in motion numerous projects that will instill vigor in the agricultural and poultry industry that this area has been -- has enjoyed in the past.

Through the efforts of forward deployed company, battery and troop commanders, we have developed democratically elected local government councils and agricultural co-ops that convey the concerns of the people from geographical locations on the ground to the nahiya seats, which are the district seats, up through the qadha and the province. Working closely with the government of Iraq and the numerous Ministries of Defense, Interior, Health and Education -- just to name a few -- as well as the coalition's senior leadership, my partners General Ali and Lou Lantner and I have great hopes but realistic expectations for the next few months.

There's no doubt that the stability in our region is on a positive, upward trend. We see the army -- the Iraqi army taking exponentially more responsibility and gaining the ability to sustain itself.

We see the forward progress of economic opportunity in concert with the establishment of (nested ?) governments geographically represented by the people. And we look to the opportunity to provide proof to the world that the insurgency is indeed dying on the vine, while the Iraqi people realize that the choice of freedom over violence is the right choice.

Starting next week, General Ali, Mr. Lantner and I will set in motion a number of events in what is being termed Operation Marne Piledriver. It's a 3rd ID-focused operation to rid our zone of the remaining insurgent leaders, their cells and their support structure. This will be a 100 percent Iraqi-led operation.

What this operation enables is the simultaneous injection of resources by the coalition and the government of Iraq to build capacity along both economic and government lines of operations, and as designed, Marne Piledriver will not only display ISF-led operations, but also the establishment of Joint Security Station at Yusufiyah, the development of Iraqi-run radio stations, the injection of funding by the GOI to refurbish two major water treatment plants, the infusion of funds and expertise into the poultry and agricultural industries, and the training of qadha- and nahiya-level governments by representatives of USAID.

These are just a few examples of the many opportunities that will improve the quality of life for individuals, so much so that we believe it will have an irreversible impact on the stability in this region and pave the way for elections at the provincial level next fall.

I want to thank you again for this opportunity to speak to you today. And now we offer this time to field your questions.

MR. TURNER: Okay, thank you for your introductory remarks. And with that we'll get on to the questions. Kristin.

Q Sir, it's Kristin Roberts with Reuters. This is a question for the colonel. We've seen a number -- or an increasing number of high-profile attacks throughout Iraq in the past few weeks, maybe for more than two months now. Can you please bring us up to date on the trend lines you're seeing in your area; specifically, the number of attacks and the number of casualties you've seen since the beginning of the year?

You can't hear me, can you?

COL. CARACCILO: No, you're going to have to relay that question.

Q Can you bring us up to date on the number of attacks and the number of coalition and civilian deaths you've seen in your AO since the beginning of the year?

(Pause.)

MR. TURNER: The question's about bringing us up to date on the number of attacks and casualties in your region.

COL. CARACCILO: Yeah. As I understand the question, you want to know how many number of attacks we've had and the number of casualties.

As I said, a year ago at this time, we had 106 attacks a week. And we're averaging now about 12 a week. So again that's nearly a 90 percent decrease. And then comparing ourselves with the forces that were here before us, and we've had one killed in action and 19 wounded since 2 November.

Any time you have a loss of life, obviously, that's a terrible thing. But comparatively our predecessors, that were here, who set the conditions for this stability, had nearly 60 killed in action and 300 wounded. And General Leahy's forces have also lost a number of his soldiers over the past year.

But there's a striking decrease in attacks. We go for days at time without attacks. We'll have zero attacks for a number of days at time periodically through the week. But on average, it's about 12 attacks a week.

I hope that answered your question.

Q Can you ask him to compare it to December '07?

MR. TURNER: Can you also compare that to December of '07?

COL. CARACCILO: You asked me to compare that to December of '07.

MR. TURNER: Yes, please.

COL. CARACCILO: Yeah.

Well, the numbers I've give you is the numbers we've had since November of '07. So what we average, on average, per week, 12 attacks since November of '07.

MR. TURNER: Tom.

Q This is for Mr. Lantner. If you could, ask him what's being done to find jobs for the Sons of Iraq. I was there last fall, and about 10 percent of one group of Sons of Iraq I was with were being absorbed into the ISF. I understand they're going to be retraining Sons of Iraq folks to get other jobs. If you could, just talk about that issue.

COL. CARACCILO: Yeah. It's difficult to hear. I think you're asking me the training level for the Sons of Iraq and as they work for the ISF. As General Ali will convey, the ISF fall under the purview -- the Sons of Iraq are -- we have 780 checkpoints, the Sons of Iraq, in my area, 15,700 or so Sons of Iraq working in AO Rakkasan. And they work for the Iraqi army and they have been trained to stand guard at their positions. General Ali, do you want to cover any more on that?

GEN. JASSIM: Actually, the issue of Sons of Iraq -- there is a system and a procedure done by the American forces so that -- and most of them are from the former Iraqi army, from the former officers, and now they take control of those checkpoints and man those checkpoints. And the brigade supervisors check their missions with support from the American forces. And we have also made a medical check for those Sons of Iraq and those soldiers, and we're planning to make joint operations in the future with them.

Q So what is being done for the Sons of Iraq in terms of reemployment?

Q (?) Do you train for other jobs?

MR. TURNER: And the number that'll be absorbed by the ISF and other jobs?

COL. CARACCILO: Oh, how are we transitioning Sons of Iraq. Okay. I'm sorry. It's very difficult to hear. We are in a full- court press to ensure that first of all, we have accountability and understand all of our Sons of Iraq -- Iraqis, where they're working and who they work for along what contracts. And as we sign them up, we do BATs and HIIDEs to make sure we have all the biographical understanding of who each one of these individuals are.

And then what General Ali does is he takes a listing of those available for transition to either Iraqi army and Iraqi police, and he brings them to the reconciliation cell for screening.

And so while we know that all nearly 16,000 Sons of Iraq will not be transitioned to Iraqi security forces, a great number will. And those that aren't we are working hard to define other economic opportunities for, along the lines of civil service corps opportunities and opportunities for micro-grants to stand up their own businesses and to

transition them into agricultural businesses and poultry businesses, which have been very, very successful in this area in the past.

And so there is a coalition quickly transitioning to a government of Iraq plan to transition these Sons of Iraq into other means of economic opportunity.

We've already seen, I think -- what is it? -- 3,000 screened for the Iraqi security forces. And so General Ali actually handles that. He pulls the sheikhs in and (says you all have 80 ?) contract holders, and he takes the names available through the reconciliation department to ministry for screening for future employment by either the government or the security forces or some other means of employment.

Q Can you say 3,000 out of how many?

COL. CARACCILO: Right now we have a -- it's a glide path to achieve the level of police we need for our area. So we know we've screened up to 3,000 out of the 16,000 for potential hiring by the Iraqi police. And we also had a number that we screened for the Iraqi army.

MR. TURNER: Okay.

Q Wait. He's talking.

GEN. JASSIM: (Audio break from the source) -- over 3,000 people received approval by Prime Minister Maliki and the -- so that they will be integrated into the police forces.

They have been vetted and they are -- they have been given training so that they could join the police forces.

In our headquarter, me -- us and the American forces, we headed to the prime minister's office and all the ministries, like the Ministry of Defense and Interior and even the prime minister office saw that -- and the government welcomed us and welcomed our plans. And the proof is, 3,000 of them have been integrated, and we have 2,500 names submitted to the reconciliation and follow-up committee. And this committee will also integrate them very soon. And we have also 3,000 names, and they will be integrated to work for the services and civilian projects and economic --

COL. CARACCILO: Let me add that it's very easy to be critical of this whole process, because it's really in its infant stages. And already we have seen, out of the 3,000, I think it's just short of 800 that have already been transitioned to police in my -- in the area that we operate in. So they're already on the streets as shurka (sic; shurta), police, for the Iraqi qadha. And they're going through the probationary phase. And so there is a full court press to transition the Sons of Iraq into some employment other than what they're currently standing as Sons of Iraq now.

And then also, the PRT is employed in some great detail trying to develop an economic vigor in this area through other means that will naturally process some of these Sons of Iraqs (sic) over to other economic opportunities, and Lou can explain that.

MR. LANTNER: Thank you.

One area that we're working on right now is setting up a vocational-technical school. We call them vo-techs. And we intend to have courses offered that will train people to work at some of the factories that now exist in our area of operations.

We have some state-owned factories. We have state-owned enterprises. We have some privately owned enterprises and we have some mixed ownership.

So what are these huge campuses, with numerous buildings, that at one time employed over 1,000 or even 2,000 people, are now barely operating with a force of 50-to-100. By offering courses at a vo-tech and training people up, we can see where these companies would be able to employ many more people in the near term, assuming they have orders for their products. So we're working on marketing with the companies and we're looking at other areas as well to ensure that the companies will be up and running.

And I'd like to emphasize one aspect here of our work. When I talk about what we are doing, it's not just the EPRT. We're totally integrated with the brigade so we're working with the civil affairs company in the brigade. We're working with the plans office. We're working with the brigade engineer on many projects, whether it's water or electricity.

We're really a well-integrated unit and we have many people we can call on. So while my team has nine people, we have several thousand people from the brigade that we can involve on various projects.

COL. CARACCILO: And to give you some specifics to bite on, so you make sure you have specificities behind transitioning these Iraqis from Sons of Iraq to other things, just today, we sent, I think, it's 23, to a vo-tech in Baghdad. And by April 1st, right now we're planning on sending, I think, the number is 189 to a vo-tech in Iskandariya.

And so that's -- those are things that are tangible. And they're happening near-term here. They're transitioning Sons of Iraq from guarding checkpoints, to the ability to learn some skill sets, to be infused back into the economy.

MR. TURNER: Right here.

Q This is Nancy Youssef from McClatchy newspapers. I had a question for the Iraqi commander. One, have you had any problems getting salaries from the central government for the CLCs, for the army or for the police? And also, what is the security situation for your tribal sheikhs? Have any tribal sheikhs been threatened? Have there been any assassinations of tribal sheikhs in your area?

INTERPRETER: Sir, if you could -- if you heard the question, could you please restate it, so that I can translate it again? Because I couldn't hear it? It's not even that clear.

MR. TURNER: All right. Have you had any problems getting salaries for the CLC, army and police from the central government? And also, what is the security situation with the local sheikhs --

Q Any threatening --

MR. TURNER: -- and threats to them?

COL. CARACCILO: Is that for General Ali?

MR. TURNER: Yes.

COL. CARACCILO: Yeah.

INTERPRETER: Colonel, if you heard the question -- this is a simultaneous translation. Would you please restate the question again? Because -- (off mike) -- I can translate it the general.

COL. CARACCILO: Yeah, again, it's very difficult to hear, and I apologize for that. But the question, I think -- and the second part was, what is the security situation for the tribal sheikhs? Is that correct? The second part. The second part. (Extended pause.)

MR. TURNER: All right. Let me try the question again, the first question.

Are there any salary problems, getting salaries from the central government to the army and police?

COL. CARACCILO: You want to know if there's problems getting salaries paid to the Iraqi police, whether that's the case, is the question. Is that right? Is that correct?

Q (Off mike.)

MR. TURNER (?): Sons of Iraq.

COL. CARACCILO: To the Sons of Iraq. Right now, we're -- the coalition government -- the coalition is paying the salaries for the Sons of Iraq. And General Ali, they're asking is there a problem for the government of Iraq to pick up the salaries for the sons of Iraq. That's the question.

GEN. JASSIM: The Iraqi government is working on integrating the Sons of Iraq into the Iraqi army and police. And we all know that the Sons of Iraq need some

precision. We have been working for the past four and five months with the Americans and, as mentioned, with the Prime Minister Maliki on this. I would like to add that 3,000 people have been integrated into the security forces, and once they have been integrated, they sign contracts with the Ministry of Interior, and this contract includes paying them salaries.

As for the others, I think that there are some conditions when you're an employee in the government so that the government could pay you, and that's -- and this is why, once they get hired, the government -- the government will pay for them and, of course, find jobs for them. I think that the first -- we had 3,000 soldiers, and the Iraqi government is paying for those 3,000, and we're working hard -- and the government of Iraq is working hard to pay those soldiers and Sons of Iraq their salaries.

MR. TURNER: Al Pessin.

Q Al Pessin. Colonel, this is Al Pessin from Voice of America. I hope you can hear me.

The big Iraq story here in the states today is reaching the 4,000-casualty mark last night.

Can you tell us, are your troops aware of that? What, if any, impact does it have on them? And what does this milestone mean to you as a senior commander with multiple deployments?

COL. CARACCILO: Yeah. I think the question is relating to the -- we hit the 4,000 mark, casualties, today. And I can infer from what I tried to understand, the question is, what does that mean to a commander with multiple deployments over here? And I think there's probably an added question to that, but let me try to give you my impressions on the number of casualties.

There have been 4,000. We hit that mark. I guess what we're not seeing is, how many soldiers, Marines, sailors, Coast Guard men, Iraqi soldiers, civilians that are working here have not lost life and limb based upon the equipment we have the training we have, the integration we have and the perseverance that we have to complete this mission?

Any time you lose a soldier, of course, that's a horrible thing and it hits hard. I was a battalion commander here, a G3, and a brigade commander here now. And so I've seen the full spectrum of loss, from the North all the way down through where I am now in Baghdad, and it's difficult.

But I also see, like yesterday, an MRAP was hit. I saw the storyboard describing how it was hit. And because the MRAP was -- has such great survivability capability, the soldiers basically just walked away. And if they didn't have that equipment, a month ago, they would have been in a humvee and they all would have died probably.

So while I'm not trying to twist into a positive any kind of loss of life, I do want to relate that because of our equipment, our relationship with our Iraqi partners, our integration with our civilian counterparts in our training and our perseverance -- it could be much worse. And I'm very impressed by the ability of our medical community to be able to save limb and turn soldiers that are severely wounded into the ability to return to the front in a short period of time.

So it is a tough thing to see soldiers' lives lost, but also I'm impressed and happy that our nation is spending the funds in properly training the soldiers and giving us the equipment we need to survive.

MR. TURNER: Okay, Courtney.

Q Hi Colonel, this is Courtney Kube from NBC news. Back to Kristin's original question from the beginning of the Q&A, can you talk a little bit about the trends you're seeing of the 12 that are killed -- the 12 casualties that you're taking per week -- oh, I'm sorry, the 12 attacks you're seeing per week? How many of those are sectarian, if any, in nature? And can you talk about what specifically you're seeing? Are these IED attacks, small arms? Just give us an idea of the trends.

COL. CARACCILO: Yeah, the majority of attacks we're seeing -- and well, we'll say 12 per week on average -- a lot of it's because we're being very aggressive and going back into places where we think there's still a presence of AQI or extremists.

And unfortunately, when you go into areas that have not been hit hard in the past, you'll have historic IEDs that have been there for months, perhaps years. And so those get rolled into the attacks. But we don't try to twist and to redefine what an attack is. If there's a drive-by shooting, if there's a IED on the road, or an historic IED, it's still an attack.

But we're seeing they're being very -- they're less effective there because the AQI and the extremists are disjointed and disorganized.

And so when they put an IED on an MSR, it's done hastily. And so quite frankly there's weeks when we'd go with 10 found IEDs and none detonated, for example.

So it's very -- it's not very often we get detonated IEDs, because our skill set now is such that we have the capability to find them, and also the infusion of the SOIs everywhere. It's hard for the enemy to put IEDs on the road. With 700 SOI checkpoints, with 84 Iraqi battle positions, with our 12 forward battle positions splitting amongst the population, it's very difficult for them to have effective attacks on us, because the population is supporting the Iraqis now and not the insurgency.

(Off mike) -- while I say 12, I mean, it's everything from a couple of pop shots at a battle position to a IED that hit one of the convoys on the road that blew a tire. And that's about the extent of it in our area right now.

Q 12 attacks: Do they count any sectarian violence that you're seeing in your area? Can you quantify that for us?

COL. CARACCILO: The sectarian violence in our area -- quite frankly it's more Shi'a extremist criminals against Shi'a extremist criminals, for the most part. In Mahmudiyah, in the Hilla Highway, it has a large population of criminal activity. So we really don't see a lot of Sunni-on-Shi'a and Shi'a-on-Sunni for the most part.

General Ali, can you add to that?

GEN. JASSIM: Actually the sectarian violence was present in the past.

But now, after reconciliation and after the Iraqi army is present and after the missions that are being done by the multinational forces, all the people reached a conviction that the best thing for them is the reconciliation.

Some of the groups, or armed groups -- there are some small armed groups that -- and we're working hard to eliminate those sort of small armed groups. And within the past few months, we've conducted missions in Mahmudiyah qadha, and we've captured large numbers of senior leaders from those organizations and armed groups.

And most of the thing that we see is a Shi'ite-Shi'ite; the less thing that we have now is the Shi'ite-Sunni. And in our commanding headquarter, three months ago, we didn't have only -- we only had one kidnapping incident in our headquarter. And I think in most countries in the world, this thing doesn't happen. So this is a good thing as well.

COL. CARACCILO: Let me give you an example of where we should expect sectarian violence where it didn't happen. As you know, Arba'in just ended. And we had upwards to 3 (million) to 9 million -- depends on how you count -- people (trek ?) through our qadha, from north to south -- through the whole qadha, traversed it, along the hill highway. There were zero attacks against the pilgrims, and then there were zero attacks afterwards.

So there was no attacks during Arba'in, which I -- quite frankly I find that very significant for the security environment that we have here. And it's based upon the combined efforts of General Ali's 4th Brigade and the battalion from my brigade that's partnered with them. So that gives you a feeling of sectarian issues down here in Mahmudiyah qadha.

Do I not think that there is some sectarian issues? Of course there are.

And there is a -- sectarian by itself, without violence, is fine, and that's how we're trying to keep it.

MR. TURNER: There's time for one more question.

Jim?

Q This is Jim Mannion from Agence France-Presse. I know that you've described the insurgents as being disjointed and disorganized, but are they making any effort to regroup? Are you seeing any effort on their part to reorganize themselves for actions further down the road?

COL. CARACCILO: In that, you're talking about al Qaeda. Is that correct?

Q That's right. Principally al Qaeda, yeah.

COL. CARACCILO: Yeah. The -- we've recognized that there was rat lines, as we call them, really, basically (accelerants?) moving from our south to Baghdad to cause trouble in the form of al Qaeda in support zones in our area.

Since we've been here, because of the infusions of the Sons of Iraq checkpoints and allowing the Iraqi army to take control of the majority of the area of operations, we think we've rid the majority of al Qaeda from our area. There are always going to be HUMINT reports and reporting of potential -- the al Qaeda coming back through our area, but it has been so limited that we've been able to actually shift some coalition forces out of this area of operations to the surge brigade area to my east because of our belief that we're able to maintain the stable environment that we have.

So, while we're always concerned and we're looking at the potentiality of al Qaeda resurgence in this area, I don't -- we don't believe that the population will accept it any longer.

The population has basically turned against it.

And so while some Sons of Iraq were disenfranchised and probably associated with them in the past, I think, they see now that there's a better choice. And that is running prevalent through all the sheikhs and tribes that we have in our area of operations.

Anything to add to that?

GEN. JASSIM: The tribe leaders in all Iraq reached a state or an idea that all the al Qaeda and the armed groups should be eliminated. And that's why they stood up against al Qaeda. And I think al Qaeda in Southern Baghdad has no future.

And there are some still few members of al Qaeda, and the operations are continuing with, of course, cooperation by the citizens and the security forces. And this cooperation helped in establishing a good situation in the region that we control.

MR. TURNER: Okay, gentlemen, thank you for your update. And with that, would you care to make any closing statements?

COL. CARACCILO: Yeah. I do apologize for our inability to pick up really quick on some of these questions. It's very difficult to hear. Thanks very much for having us and we appreciate the opportunity to answer the questions. And I hope we answered them to the best of our ability.

2008 is clearly the opportunity for Iraq. Continuing successes along every line of operation, to include the exponential increase of security, has made it possible to focus our energy and efforts on establishing governance at the local level and enabling those governments to gain the essential services so drastically needed by the Iraqi people.

I can speak for the people of the area of operations that General Ali, Mr. Lantner and I operate. On the aggregate, the people in this area want peace. They want a sense of normalcy. They want to be part of a process where they choose their livelihoods and their governments at the local, district and provincial levels. They want to do all they can do to support the sense of hope.

The sheer numbers, of tribes that continually provide the manning of checkpoints under the command and control of the Iraqi army, is proof positive that the populace in our area has chosen peace over violence. With attack trends down by nearly 90 percent in less than one year, I think, we can safely say that the time for economic prosperity has finally come to this part of the war-torn country.

The sacrifices of 4th Brigade, 6th IA, the coalition forces and the civilians in this area have been great. But we truly believe that there is hope in the near term.

Staying the course and persevering multiple tours is indeed a challenge by our soldiers and their families. But there's no doubt that the commitment to achieve victory is as strong as it is today as it was five years ago.

I'd like to personally thank those that continually show their support for those deployed. Of note, I'd like to recognize the personal sacrifices for all the families of all our soldiers. Your sacrifices have been enormous, but our gratitude is of equal measure.

Thanks again for listening. We look forward to doing this again in the near term. And have a pleasant day. Thanks.

MR. TURNER: Thank you very much.

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