

Excerpts from Pentagon Press Secretary Geoff Morrell, May 06, 2008

DoD News Briefing with Geoff Morrell from the Pentagon, Arlington, Va.

MR. MORRELL: Hi. Good afternoon. Pleasure to see all of you today.

Before taking your questions, I'd like to briefly address the global war on terror budget situation. Late Monday Secretary Gates sent letters to congressional leaders letting them know that he was encouraged to hear they intend to pass the rest of the president's FY '08 war funding request by Memorial Day. The remaining \$108 billion is urgently needed for this department, as well as State and the intelligence agencies, to continue operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

As it now stands, and has for months, actually, we here at the Pentagon are financing those wars by borrowing from our payroll accounts. But those accounts are about to run dry, and if Congress does not act soon, the Army will not be able to pay its soldiers after June the 15th. While we certainly hope lawmakers get their work done well before then, prudent management requires that we plan for the possibility that they do not meet that goal. After all, we first requested these funds more than a year ago.

In the interest of being completely transparent, the secretary has ordered his staff to keep the Congress fully informed of our contingency planning. In fact, our budget team briefed key Hill staffers here at the Pentagon this morning.

I know we have raised concerns about this issue before, but we are once again getting down to crunch time. And unless Congress appropriates the \$108 billion in the next few weeks, most of our troops fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan could go without pay, and the critical progress they have achieved will be in jeopardy.

Now I'd be happy to take your questions. Lita?

Q Geoff, can you confirm that the two service members killed in an MRAP in April were killed by an EFP?

MR. MORRELL: I would never -- I would never confirm the mode of death, and it's just not appropriate for us to do from this podium. We speak of things in terms of IED attacks. That's how we describe them. Anything more specific than that would be, we believe, aiding and abetting the enemy. So I'm not prepared to do that.

Q Was there a third MRAP death caused by an IED in April?

MR. MORRELL: You know, I'm not -- there have been a number of questions about MRAP deaths, particularly, I understand, this past month. I saw a story today which talked about them at length. In fact, it sort of left the impression that there are people in this building or downrange, perhaps, questioning the survivability or the enhanced survivability of these vehicles. I can tell you nobody in this building, nobody

downrange is at all questioning the survivability -- the enhanced survivability that MRAPs provide.

In fact, without getting into specifics, Jeff, on the data, I can tell you that there have been over a hundred attacks on MRAP vehicles, and there have been a relatively small number of injuries associated with those attacks, and far fewer deaths associated. But I'm not going to get any more specific than that from here, for fear of assisting those who wish to harm our troops in the field.

Q Are you seeing any increase in the sophistication of EFPs that, you know, add risk to the MRAPs?

MR. MORRELL: Jim, we are facing an agile and deadly and dangerous enemy in Iraq who is constantly adjusting to meet our new and improved vehicles that we put in the field. We have never suggested -- I think we've always made the point of placing a real clear caveat on these MRAPs, or any vehicle, for that matter, by making it clear that there is no vehicle that we can produce which will completely protect our troops. There is no hull that we can build that is impenetrable.

That said, these vehicles, as a troop transporter, are as good as can be made today. They provide our troops with more and better protection than any other vehicle on the road today. And that is why commanders and troops in Iraq, and Afghanistan, for that matter, have been asking for more of them and have been raving about their increased protection.

Yeah?

Q Geoff, could you describe the secretary's level of confidence that the supplemental will be passed by Memorial Day? And could you also talk about the contingency plans the DOD has in place should it not be done?

MR. MORRELL: As for the secretary's confidence, I mean, he is taking members, leaders, actually, at their word that they will have this bit of business done by Memorial Day. That's all he can do at this point, is take them at their word. However, he also has to run this enormous department and provide for the well-being of the men and women who work here and provide for the continued progress on the missions that they are conducting.

With that in mind, he has asked the budget personnel in this building to begin contingency planning for the possibility that they do not meet -- the Congress does not meet its goal of passing a bill -- a budget bill the president can sign by Memorial Day. So we have begun that planning.

As for the specifics of the planning, I'm hesitant to get into it too much other than to say that, you know, the situation is as I described it. I mean, the Army will run out of money in terms of its payroll accounts, such that the last payroll it will be able to meet

will be June the 15th if Congress does not act. And operation and maintenance accounts are a little more robust, but not much more, and if there is inaction there, they will run dry shortly thereafter.

So, right now we are focused on urging the Congress to pass the supplemental as quickly as possible, but we are making contingencies and planning for the possibility of reprogramming requests in case they do not.

Q Would you describe the situation as more or less urgent than it was last November or December?

MR. MORRELL: Well, it's a little different than it was last November and December. I don't -- you know, last November and December, we were -- what was most in jeopardy then were operation and maintenance accounts, and those directly (that funded ?) our operations, obviously, in Iraq and Afghanistan.

And at that time, we were forced to borrow against those accounts to fund those operations.

This time it's military personnel accounts that are running dry, and that would obviously most directly impact uniformed personnel, the men and women fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. And that is obviously not a prospect that we at all relish. And that's why we are -- here, and through letters to leaders, and through meetings with Hill staffers -- urging them to act quickly so we don't face the prospect of not paying our soldiers.

Q Why did you decide to dig into the Army payroll accounts as opposed to Navy or Air Force? Why Army?

MR. MORRELL: Why did we decide to dig into them?

Q You're saying that you're emptying the Army's --

MR. MORRELL: No, Army payroll accounts are just running dry faster, I mean. And if it -- if -- if the Congress does not act before Memorial Day, we will have to come back to them and ask them for permission to reprogram money so that we could take money from some of the other services -- the Navy, the Air Force -- and use those payroll dollars to pay the Army. But all of these measures, the reprogramming request, if we get to that point, will not buy us much more time. We're talking weeks of additional funds, not much more than that.

Yeah.

Q Is the department satisfied with the pace and intensity of the Iraqi effort to get Iran to stop the flow of weapons, money, training, et cetera into Iraq?

MR. MORRELL: Is the department satisfied with the Iraqi effort?

Q Yes.

MR. MORRELL: Well, it's an Iraqi and U.S. effort. I mean, we are working hand in hand to try to minimize, ideally to try to stop, the Iranians from their deadly meddling in Iraq. And I am not aware of any -- how did you characterize it, are we satisfied?

Q With the pace and intensity. I understood that Iraq was taking the lead in that effort, and that was the delegation that they sent to Tehran.

MR. MORRELL: You're speaking about the briefing that was provided to the Iranian government on the fact that we have very clear evidence that they --

Q And a follow-up to the briefing.

MR. MORRELL: Well, we have very clear evidence of Iranian training and equipping of terrorists in Iraq. You know, I think the Iranians -- the Iraqis can best speak to how that brief went with the Iranian government. I can tell you this that we were very supportive of their desire, frankly, to go and share the information, the evidence that we have collected over the past several months, with the Iranian government. We certainly hope it helps the Iranian government make what we believe to be the fundamental choice before them, and that is whether or not to support their neighbor -- the Iraqi government -- or to continue to subvert them, as they have been, clearly. I mean, they have been trying to play both sides of this, at one time feigning -- or suggesting that they are friends of the Iraqi government, while at the same time providing weapons and equipment to those who are clearly undermining the stability of that government. So we certainly hope that this brief and the evidence we've collected helps focus their decision.

Q What's the impact of the suspension of the U.S.-Iran ambassadorial talks on that effort? And will that material be made public, and when, as Admiral Mullen suggested it would be soon?

MR. MORRELL: Well, you know, that's an MNF-I issue in terms of when they brief this material. I mean, clearly, frankly, much of it has been shared with you in one form or another in many of the stories that I've been reading over the past several months. We have made it clear from here and in reporting you've done elsewhere that the Iranians have been supplying, equipping, training terrorists in Iraq.

And there will hopefully one day not so far in the future be a brief which lays this all out to you, as it's now been laid out to the Iranian government. But I can't tell you how soon MNF-I plans on doing that.

Q And the impact of the ambassadorial talks?

MR. MORRELL: The ambassadorial talks have not -- my understanding is -- again, a State -- a question I would most put to the State Department -- my impression is

that the -- that there have not been talks for quite some time. There's been a desire to hold some follow-up talks. There have been some sub-ambassadorial talks months ago. But I'm not familiar, Al, with the current state of efforts to get talks back on.

Yeah, Gordon?

...Also, a secondary -- different thing altogether, the secretary expressed the hope of getting the confirmation of General Petraeus done by -- in a couple weeks. Do you know anything about when that's going to happen?

MR. MORRELL: I heard today that he may have a date for hearings at the -- near the end of this month -- maybe the third week of this month. But I'd double-check up on the Hill to confirm that. I just heard that in the building. So that would be certainly good news that they are moving expeditiously on setting up hearings and hopefully confirmation soon thereafter, because it's important that we get him into his new job at CENTCOM.

Q (Off mike) -- General Petraeus does get confirmed, after he's confirmed, could he still stay out in Iraq for a few --

MR. MORRELL: Well, I mean, the secretary has talked about -- he thinks it's important that General Petraeus stay in Iraq until the last surge brigade has come out in July and then for that initial 45-day assessment period, that pause or period of consolidation and evaluation. So it's the secretary's desire that he remain in there -- you know, I guess that would put you in September, October time -- July, August -- mid-September, probably, before he were to make the transition over to CENTCOM.

Q How long would you expect the general -- (off mike) -- to arrive for the overlap -- (off mike)?

MR. MORRELL: Well, I think -- in most cases, you'd want -- you'd probably need less of the left seat, right seat with this transition than most, but I have not heard in terms of how much planning they are trying -- they are -- they wish for that.

I mean, the truth of the matter is, with -- I mean, General Odierno has just got back, and I think there probably will be some attempt to let him have as much time as he can back here at home before he has to turn around and go back to Iraq. And given the fact they worked so closely together before, I think that probably the overlap is perhaps less than it would be for other transitions of this nature.

Yeah, Ken?

Q Quick clarification: You said after Memorial Day, if Congress does not pass the supplemental, the Defense Department will have to use other services' payroll accounts to pay the Army.

Is it after June 15th? That is when there will just not be any more money for the Army. That's the limit.

MR. MORRELL: June 15th is the last payroll the Army, at this point, can make without congressional action.

Q So you're saying, troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, that's the day, June 15th, where soldiers in Afghanistan --

MR. MORRELL: The last payday we know we can make without congressional action. So that action hopefully will be the passage of the global war on terror supplemental, the remainder of it. If not, as I said, we're looking at contingencies. But all those contingencies would really require congressional action because they would be reprogramming requests. We'd have to go to them and ask them for permission to move money from military -- from one military personnel account to another military personnel account.

Q But what's the real likelihood that troops -- that soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan aren't going to get paychecks if this isn't passed? I mean, wouldn't you plan on moving some other money around? I mean, it's not really a probability --

MR. MORRELL: This is up to the Congress. It's not an issue for us. We run out of money in order to pay soldiers after June 15th unless the Congress acts to pass a supplemental or provided us with the reprogramming authorities to move money within accounts. We do not have the authorities right now to pay soldiers beyond June the 15th.

Q All soldiers, not just soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan.

MR.MORRELL: All soldiers.

Q Thank you.

MR. MORRELL: The Army military personnel account runs dry.

Thanks so much.

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