

DoD News Briefing from Iraq with Maj. Gen. Martin Post, commander, Multi-National Force – West, Nov. 10, 2008.

BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Well, good morning. It looks like we have good video. Let me just make sure that General Post can hear me.

General Post, this is Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon. Can you hear us okay?

GEN. POST: I sure can. Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you for joining us this afternoon.

And good morning to the press corps. It is my privilege to be able to introduce to you Major General Martin Post, who is the deputy commanding general for Multinational Force-West. General -- (inaudible) -- assumed his current duties in Iraq back in February of 2008 and this is our first opportunity for us to hear from him and for him to take a few questions from us. He is joining us today from Fallujah.

And General, again, welcome. Thank you very much for taking the time today. And let me just turn it over to you to kind of open it up.

GEN. POST: I sure will. Thank you. Well, it's good being able to talk to you this morning. A pretty important week here in Camp Fallujah. This is our last week as we get ready to shut down Fallujah. And our headquarters will be moving out west to al Asad Air Base.

I'd also like to pass a happy birthday to all the Marines and families around the world. We just had our cake-cutting ceremony here in Camp Fallujah just a couple hours ago. And the youngest Marine was born in 1990, so I feel a little bit older today.

But if I could just add, as a deputy commanding general out here in Anbar Province and MNF-West, I've spent a large portion of my time working in governance and economics with the Iraqi -- the governor here in Anbar and also the provincial council and working provincial issues both here in the province and also up in -- back and forth in Baghdad. So if there are any specific questions on -- along those lines, I'll look forward to those.

So to move on, I'll go ahead and turn it back over to you all and see what questions you may have for me.

MR. WHITMAN: Okay, General. We'll get started here. And let's get going with David.

Q All right, General. It's David Morgan with Reuters.

I'd like to know how much time your forces spend tracking the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq from Syria, and what volume of flows you've been seeing, whether there has been any change within the past few weeks.

GEN. POST: You know, obviously that has been one of our key missions and tasks since we arrived here in February. And really starting from very aggressively this summer, both in Anbar province and just a little bit north of the Euphrates River, between Anbar province and Ninawa province, we've had a lot of combined work with the Iraqi army, Iraqi police and the Marine forces out here, to bolster up the borders, both physically and also with intelligence- driven and just putting presence out there.

So we've been pretty aggressive really for a better part of six months out there, you know, working those, working those lanes to ensure we stem the flow.

But quite frankly we are -- I can't give you a number. I don't have a number. But we know it's very, very low from what we're picking up or what we really have not picked up, as far as folks trying to get across the border.

So quite frankly we're pretty happy, if you will. We're still diligent out there and we still have Marine forces arrayed basically in a supporting role with the Iraqi forces, out there on the Syrian border.

Q This is Jim Mannion from Agence France-Presse.

Have you seen any reaction, any fallout from the raid that was conducted into Syria last month?

GEN. POST: Actually from the Anbar standpoint, on our side of the border with Syria, really the answer is no. We thought we may have seen just a little bit of activity, maybe just an increase. But it's really been very, very subtle quite frankly. And quite frankly the Iraqi forces have been in the lead.

They did take the precaution to move some Iraqi police out there to help bolster the immediate border in one of the locations right across from where the port of entry is out near Al Qaim. But all in all, it has been, from what we would say, it's actually a pretty steady state for us, no major issues.

Q If I could follow up, have you seen any impact in terms of a dropoff in the flow of foreign fighters and smuggling activities across that border as a result of the raid?

GEN. POST: Well, again, you know, I would probably tell you no dropoff because we really weren't seeing a foreign fighter back and forth. We knew that there were foreign fighters and insurgents on the Syrian side. I know General Kelly in the last briefing had talked you through that.

You know, normal traffic -- interesting enough, at the Syrian -- at the port of entries, two port of entries in Anbar province from Syria, we've seen normal steady traffic coming through there, what I call the economic traffic, steady state, if you will. So we have not seen a dropoff there, which would be may be an indication that there was, you know, kind of business as normal.

So we're -- again, it's been really no real major issues here for us on the Iraqi side here in Anbar province.

MR. WHITMAN: Jeff, go ahead.

Q This is Jeff Schogol with Stars and Stripes. Were you seeing an increase in foreign fighter influx prior to this raid?

GEN. POST: Well, obviously, I can't speak about the raid or can't confirm the raid, but -- I mean the answer is no. I mean, we knew that we had been watching over time, as you are well aware, that there was a cross-border incident back in May or there was some loss of life there on the Iraqi police side. We know, very candidly, that they have been trying to get back and forth. So again, as I mentioned previously, it's pretty much a -- we thought it was a steady state.

Again, I wish I could give you a number. I really don't have a number. But I would tell you it's very, very challenging for them now. Where they may have been able to get across or attempt to get across the border not through the border entries but trying to come across the desert proper, we've pretty much closed that off because of the surveillance and the activity we have out there in support of the Iraqi forces.

So again, there's nothing quantitative that I could give you that would say there was an increase or decrease, but we feel confident that it is very small. We know that they're probably going to continue to try to get across, and we're working both in our sector and also with the MND-North up in Ninawa province that borders north of Anbar province. And that's kind of the area that goes back and forth to Mosul. And we're partnered and we share a lot of information with our -- the Army division up in that sector.

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead, Jim.

Q Sir, it's Jim Garamone with American Forces Press Service. Since you returned the province to Iraqi control, first, how are the Iraqi security forces doing? And second, have you learned things that changed the way that you train the Iraqi security forces?

GEN. POST: Yeah, that's a great question. You know, we've been really pleased with the -- across the board. I'd probably give it -- our best -- we're most happy with the Iraqi army. You know, many years ago, probably 3-1/2 years ago, the MNF-West, the

leaders previously here in Anbar had made a decision to really bolster the training teams that went along in training the Iraqi army.

So the 1st and 7th Division, the two divisions here in Anbar, are really, quite frankly, probably the two best divisions in Iraq, we believe. And really what that goes to show is they've been used extensively outside Anbar -- (audio break) -- in Basra, Diyala, Baghdad, and now up in Mosul. So we have about 60 percent of the Iraqi divisions who are from Anbar are actually outside Anbar right now, and they're doing -- acquitting themselves very well.

The Iraqi police are really maturing day by day, week by week. The way I'd best like to describe it is they've -- probably about two years ago, they were anywhere between -- about an 11,000-man police force. They're now a 28,000-man police force and that probably rivals the major cities -- many of the major cities in the U.S. So it's a very daunting task for them.

And really our biggest challenge as we continue to train and work with the Iraqi police is to move them from an insurgent force, where they originally were out patrolling and doing operations partnered with the Marines, now will protect and serve in the cities and turning them truly into a force that's taking care of the citizens on a day- to-day basis.

And they are making great strides. (Audio break.) Since we've turned over the security portfolio, if you will, in September, we've seen them continue to prosper. And in some cases here just recently, they've asked us to continue to take a step back.

For example, in the entry-control points around Ramadi and Fallujah, where we were partnered, basically joint-partnered those points with the Iraqis, they've asked us to take a -- basically a(n) oversight role with the Iraqis in the lead.

And basically, General Kelly and myself, we were waiting for the Iraqis to step forward and say, "Hey, we have this and we've got it." So, along those lines, we're very -- we're very happy with the continued trends we see with the Iraqi police.

And we continue to work with them, and we still have training -- transition teams embedded with the -- the police, and we plan on continuing that, obviously, through next year.

The third is the border patrol, the DBE -- Department of Border Enforcement -- (audio break) -- continuing to really -- probably, I would say, increase our engagement with them. We have been engaged, but really, as we see it, that's really the last piece of the ISF that needs the increased strength, if you will, here in Anbar province.

So we've got a dedicated effort out on the border, working with the border -- the border folks to try to both -- from a training standpoint and also from a logistics/sustainability standpoint -- to increase their -- their capacity, because they're

really the first line of defense here, when you're talking about whether it either be smuggling or foreign fighters or insurgents trying to get back and forth across the border.

So if you look at the IA -- the Iraqi Army -- the Iraqi police, the border -- the border folks, the army has done very well. The Iraqi police is continuing to mature, and we're -- we're quite happy with their -- with their glide slope. And we're -- still have some work to do with the border folks, and we're going to stay -- (audio break) -- here until we depart in February. And I know the Marines coming in behind us will continue to do the same.

MR. WHITMAN: Mike.

Q Sir, it's Mike Mount with CNN. The new president-elect has a kind of rapid timetable to start moving troops out of Iraq. You've just kind of given us a pretty positive look at the Iraqi security forces there. Do you have any concerns, if the U.S. troops are pulled out early, what effect that might have on advances that the Iraqi security forces have made?

GEN. POST: Well, obviously, I can't or won't comment necessarily on decisions being made in Washington or in Baghdad.

I know those discussions are going -- are being had and will be had here in the future. And obviously Multinational Force-West is providing recommendations to our higher headquarters, as far as how we believe our stance is.

I think, as you all know, since we arrived here last February, we've reduced over 50 percent of our ground forces, our actual maneuver battalions, if you would, with the coming down from the surge and then from the Army BCT that left, the two Marine battalions that left. And then just recently here as a matter of fact, this week, another Marine battalion is headed back home, without a replacement.

So we feel real comfortable right now here, at the end of 2008, with our force structure, our force posture here on the ground. We would fully expect to have continued dialogue here with the MNF-I and MNC-I in Baghdad here, as we look into 2009 obviously. And one of our tasks here, as we've looked at 2008, is we've tried to look at our stance, as far as our laydown is.

One of our big efforts has been to start to close some of the bases down, i.e., closing Camp Fallujah, as we -- General Kelly talked to you about here a couple weeks ago. And we've also -- there's been a big effort to move all the Marine forces out of the cities. And so as you go throughout, from Fallujah all the way up the Euphrates River Valley, up to Al Qaim, where we used to have Marines actually living in the cities, we've pulled them all out.

And so where we have our tactical locations, where the Marines are living, they're all in expeditionary facilities right now, outside the urban centers, if you will. And of

course, that's one piece of the discussion here, as we wait to see what will happen with SOFA, if SOFA is in fact signed, and what the final agreement will be.

So that is really the next step that we're looking for, would be the final SOFA agreement, what those impacts may or may not be. And then of course, the next thing for us would be the elections. We're obviously hoping they have the elections before we leave. We'd like to see that happen here in January.

I know there's been some discussion that those dates are still tentative. We're still hopeful that we can pull that off before we actually depart here early next year.

Q Hi, General. This is Courtney Kube from NBC News. Just a couple of quick questions.

Can you talk a little bit more about the move, the headquarters move to Al Asad next week? How many Marines does that involve?

And then you mentioned that you've reduced, since last February, more than 50 percent of your ground forces, your maneuver forces.

Once the battalion, the Marine battalion you mentioned, leaves -- this next one that's leaving that's not going to be replaced -- can you give us just a very basic breakdown of what you have there as far as Marines that there specifically as maneuver forces, as ground forces, versus ones that are there for training -- MiTT team, PTT team?

GEN. POST: Yeah, I can. I'll first answer the comment here about the Camp Fallujah, I mean the basing. You know, we had -- when Camp Fallujah was full up with all the units, we had probably over 8,000 Marines and sailors and soldiers and contractors here on Camp Fallujah. A portion of that will be headquarters element and some of our intelligence elements and so forth will proceed up to al Asad Air Base. Some of the other -- some of the other units will stay physically in the Fallujah-Ramadi area, will just be transferred to some of our tactical locations in and around -- outside the city, but in and around the eastern part of Anbar Province.

So it's a -- really, numbers-wise, I mean, you can go from where we're going -- from 8,000 in here earlier this summer to zero. So we're just reposturing those forces. In some cases, some of those forces -- (audio break) -- you know, would be transitioned home.

The second -- your second question, again, was -- I'm sorry -- was about -- could you repeat that for me?

Q Sure. If you could give us just a very basic breakdown -- you mentioned there's a Marine battalion that's leaving that's not going to be replaced -- just an idea of percentage-wise or numbers-wise how many of your Marines there are functioning

specifically as ground maneuver elements versus ones that are there specifically for training.

GEN. POST: Yeah, we -- well, the -- you know, again, it's hard percentage-wise, because obviously the Marine Corps is over here as a three-pronged attack. We have a ground combat element, which is our battalions. We have our logistics combat element, which is the bulk of taking care of the -- moving the pieces, parts across the battlespace. And of course our last piece would be the aviation piece with our helicopters and command and control that we -- how we do business.

Percentage-wise, obviously, you could probably look at -- you know, we were -- when we arrived here in Anbar Province, MNF-West was about 34,000 strong. That's between Marine forces, Army forces and our support from the -- from the Navy. We're probably going to be at the end of this month here, early December, down about 26,000. So you can see it's almost 8,000, approaching 9,000 service member -- men and women -- reduction.

So it's a -- we feel comfortable with that. We've also, with respect to our -- the question on -- your question on the training teams, transition teams, we have -- I would probably say we reduced those by greater than 50 percent. And what we mean by that is where we used to be -- have training teams with the Iraqi army at the battalion level, the brigade level and the division level, at this point we're pretty much taking the team -- (audio break) -- just at the brigade and division.

And really the reason was because they no longer needed us, and they were -- they were self-sufficient and didn't need that type of level of training.

The police -- the police training teams, kind of, sort of the same thing. We were up over 80-plus training teams earlier -- when we first arrived, that were embedded across Anbar province at the local police stations, the district police stations and at the provincial police stations. Now we're down in the -- about the 30 range. So we've slowly started coming out of the -- the local police stations are focused more at the district level and the provincial level. Sort of the same -- the same approach here. They no longer require our capability down there. They've become self-sufficient, and we're just continuing to provide mentorship and liaison, if you will, at the -- at their -- kind of their higher headquarters. And we would expect to see that to continue to probably wean off -- wean those transition teams off as we -- (audio break) --

And really what we're seeing in this environment -- in the post-PIC environment is the Iraqis are going to come tell us. They're going to say, hey, listen, "we don't need your help here anymore." And like I said previously, we're starting to see that now. So it -- again, it's kind of a positive trend line here that what we've seen here as far as how -- where we've been embedded and where we're -- where we've off-ramped and where we are right now.

Q General, as you've had this 8,000 or nearly 9,000 reduction and you see the Iraqis coming to you to reduce the U.S. involvement further, I mean, how low can you go and when can you get there? What's your expectation, you know, for the coming six months or 12 months?

GEN. POST: You know, I will tell you, I think the -- the -- really, the next two big items for us are going to be the SOFA. Depending upon what happens out of that, if -- whether that gets signed or not and see what the -- what the impact will be. And then the last piece of that will be the elections, getting a new provincial government seated, and then you're kind of going forward here.

You know, candidly, we thought the elections originally were supposed to be in October, and we were hoping to have the elections in October and then have the new provincial council and the new governor seated and then have several months to actually work with that new team, if you would, as they came in. So that'll be something that will be delayed. I think as you know, the Sunnis really didn't participate in 2005 in the vote, and quite frankly, a lot of the Anbaris out here believe that the current provincial government is not representative because such a small part of the population voted.

In the run-up here to the registration, here earlier this fall, we -- outstand -- unbelievably high numbers of Anbaris registered to vote, and just -- we had over 375,000 folks register, and the only requirement to register here -- if you were previously registered, you didn't need to register. If you just needed to go in and revalidate an address where you lived or if you were a new -- somebody who hadn't been registered previously.

Some of the polls we've taken out here with the -- across Anbar province, we fully expect to have, about between 70 and 80 percent turnout for the elections. So we're thinking between 600,000 and 650,000 Anbaris are going to vote here when they have it. And they are really, truly, ready for it, and they want to -- they want to get that -- they would believe, the true democratic approach here and seat this new government out here in Anbar. So we're -- that is one thing.

And of course we're -- there are some -- been some discussions as to whether there will be pre-election -- in the run-up to the elections -- (audio break) -- run-up to the elections or violence after the elections, and, you know, we're obviously talking very closely with the Iraqi security forces on that. Quite frankly, we had zero incidents in the one month that the -- for registrations, not a single incident, which was obviously good news. And so we're watching that very close to see if we don't have a slight uptick in attacks or incidents in the lead-up to the election. So we're -- we're working that pretty hard and we're hoping to keep a steady state, if you would, so we don't see any type of backslide.

Q General, if you don't want to give figures for the coming six to 12 months, can you give us some idea -- we hear this word "fragile," that there's good progress, but it's fragile. How fragile -- or is it fragile in Anbar Province?

GEN. POST: No, I don't believe it's fragile at all. You know -- (audio break) -- for Anbar Province. The -- you know, as we say it, the AQI is marginalized here. The people of Anbar don't want that back. Surely we have -- we have incidents out here where we believe AQ is still trying to inject themselves when they and where they can and where we stay very heavily engaged on that, as you would expect.

We see a subset of some nationalists, who are -- quite frankly, they're not happy we're here and they won't be happy until we're gone. And so that's a subset that -- yeah -- but candidly, in the nationalist side here, for the most of the part, what we believe is they've bought into the political movement and are kind of waiting to see how the elections go and how that's going to work out.

So, you know, as I -- as I would probably say, they're kind of -- kind of holding neutral right now. But we continue to see some small -- (audio break) -- try to take actions against us just because they look at us as -- they don't want to us here in Anbar.

So -- but really, probably what I've seen in the last -- just in the last six weeks, you know, we've been -- been since 1 September, so we're coming up on two and a half months in the PIC environment. And consistently, the Iraqis are going, "We have this. You don't have to get involved." For example, previously, if there was an IED event in Fallujah or Ramadi or -- they would call us first and we would respond to it. And quite frankly, in this case, when we -- when we do have the incidents out here, they respond to it. They're normally the first ones on site. And in most cases, by the time the -- they call the Marines in, they've already, if you will, cleaned the site up, transported the -- if there are any casualties, they've transported them to the Iraqi hospitals.

So kind of a -- it's really -- we've seen a -- (audio break) -- shift here in a very short period of time. So we don't see a -- we don't think it's fragile out here.

Candidly, it depends upon who you talk to. In some cases, if you talk to the local man on the street, they'll look at us and say, "Hey, I think we're ready for you to go."

If you talk to the -- the leadership -- you know, the IP leadership or the Iraqi army leadership or the provincial leadership, they would probably tell you, "Hey, we need you here for some period of time longer." Not really ever saying, "We need you here for one year or two years," but I think we're still, if you would, that security blanket for them, in the -- standing behind them.

But what we're seeing is that -- they're comfortable in their role, and I would probably see -- as decisions would come out at CENTCOM and MNFI here, and later this year or early -- early 2009, there would probably be potential continued reductions out here. I think we would be able to probably handle that quite nicely.

MR. WHITMAN: We're just about at the end, so we've got time for maybe one more, somebody who hasn't had a chance. Gordon?

Q Sir, Gordon Lubold from the Christian Science Monitor. Really just a question out of curiosity, on reconstruction. Can you give us a sense of how many of the - - how much of the population there is getting electricity and getting it all the time?

GEN. POST: Yeah, that's a good -- great question. Obviously, that's probably where we'd give ourselves probably a D, if I had to grade what we've been able to accomplish in the -- in that sector, the electricity sector. It's widely varied; you know, I -- it's tough.

If I probably told you, if you went into Ramadi you'd probably get anywhere between maybe six to 10 hours, depending upon what district of Ramadi you hit, grid power -- national grid power. Fallujah might be just a little bit different. If you go up -- further up the river, for example, Haditha, where they're co-located with the -- the hydroelectric power plant there at the dam, they might have 18 to 20 hours.

So it's kind of varied across the -- across the province. So the way we figure is the -- right now, Anbar's probably getting about 30 percent of the grid power they require. So -- and it's going to be, the way we see it, quite frankly, probably years before they would -- what you and I would expect to see, 24-hour power, as the whole backbone, if you will, electrical backbone here in Iraq matures. And so, quite frankly, the -- a lot of power they get is backyard power, on generators; co-ops that they've -- neighborhood power generation. I think for those of you who've been over here, you've probably seen that.

Probably one of the bright spots that would be connected to that would be the increase in fuel we've received. You know, we've basically -- have watched about a 500 percent increase in fuel deliveries since we arrived in February to where we are now, here at -- in November. So with respect to gasoline, or benzene as they would call it, kerosene, and diesel fuel, a -- much increase in fuel in the province.

And they would -- the man on the street and also the provincial leadership will tell you, hey, the fuel is no longer a -- probably a top three or four issue for them. The number one issue is still electricity. Number two is probably still water and sewage that they -- they have concerns with on a day-to-day basis. And really, from a security standpoint, they would probably tell you, security probably falls under number four or five.

So power is an issue. It's going to be an issue here for us for a number of years. It's really being -- the big issue is the total Iraqi grid power. And the province gets its allocation from the national grid, and that's kind of where we sit. So we're at about 30 percent, and unfortunately, it's going to be a lot slower than we'd like to increase here in the near term.

Q Just real quick, how much of the frustration among the population is projected on the American force there about the electricity issue?

GEN. POST: That's a tough one. I think that the -- we have worked very aggressively. There are a couple of major projects out here in Anbar that we have worked very aggressively with the local provincial government back to Baghdad, with the minister of Electricity, deputy prime minister and so forth to try to move projects along. So I think that they -- they understand that we have been kind of shoulder-to-shoulder with them. I think that they're probably, quite frankly, more frustrated with the central government in Baghdad than they are with us because they believe that things aren't moving fast enough at the ministry level. So not really too much resentment.

I mean -- but obviously if you're living out there and you're only getting five to six to 10 hours a day, that -- that frustration level, as you would expect to be -- you would be frustrated. So it's a tough problem, and everybody's trying to push real hard, but we kind of are where we are.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, General, we have reached the end of our timeframe that we've allocated for this. And we appreciate you taking the time this afternoon to spend some time answering our questions and giving us the perspective of what it looks like out in MNF-West.

Before I bring it to a close, though, let me just throw it back to you to see if you have any final thoughts for us.

GEN. POST: No. I thank you -- I thank you for the time here this morning. Again, for those Marines that are out there on our 233rd birthday, we'd like to send our best wishes here from Iraq to our -- to our families and to the families and the Marines across the world, especially those ones that are back home waiting for us to return. So again, thank you very much. And you all have a great day.

MR. WHITMAN: Thank you. And on behalf of everybody here, happy birthday to you.

GEN. POST: Thank you.

(C) COPYRIGHT 2008, FEDERAL NEWS SERVICE, INC., 1000 VERMONT AVE. NW; 5TH FLOOR; WASHINGTON, DC - 20005, USA. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. ANY REPRODUCTION, REDISTRIBUTION OR RETRANSMISSION IS EXPRESSLY PROHIBITED.

UNAUTHORIZED REPRODUCTION, REDISTRIBUTION OR RETRANSMISSION CONSTITUTES A MISAPPROPRIATION UNDER APPLICABLE UNFAIR COMPETITION LAW, AND FEDERAL NEWS SERVICE, INC. RESERVES THE RIGHT TO PURSUE ALL REMEDIES AVAILABLE TO IT IN RESPECT TO SUCH MISAPPROPRIATION.

FEDERAL NEWS SERVICE, INC. IS A PRIVATE FIRM AND IS NOT AFFILIATED WITH THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT. NO COPYRIGHT IS

CLAIMED AS TO ANY PART OF THE ORIGINAL WORK PREPARED BY A
UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT OFFICER OR EMPLOYEE AS PART OF THAT
PERSON'S OFFICIAL DUTIES.

FOR INFORMATION ON SUBSCRIBING TO FNS, PLEASE CALL CARINA
NYBERG AT 202-347-1400.