

DoD News Briefing with Col. Philip Battaglia, commander, 4th Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, October 09, 2008, from Iraq.

BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): I'm not sure which clock is right, but we're ready to go, so let's go ahead and get started. Let's make sure Colonel Battaglia can hear me first, though.

This is Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon. Can you hear me okay, Carl?

COL. BATTAGLIA: Yes, we can. How about me? You got me?

MR. WHITMAN: Yeah. We're hearing you good.

Well, thank you for joining us. Good morning to the press corps and good afternoon to our guest in Iraq. We're joined today from contingency base -- operating base Adder in southern Iraq by Colonel Philip Battaglia, commander of the 4th Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division. This is his first opportunity to join us in this briefing format. And so we welcome you and thank you for taking the time today.

And since assuming authority across three provinces, Muthanna, Dhi Qar and Maysan on July of this past year -- he's also joined by Mr. Foote, a member of the State Department and leader of the Maysan Provincial Reconstruction Team. Dan works closely with the Iraqi leaders in his province to build and maintain governance and economic capability. We appreciate, again, you taking the time this afternoon, both of you, for being with us and for sharing with us the activities that your organizations have been involved with and taking a few questions from us today.

So with that, let me turn it over to you for some opening comments, and then we'll -- and we'll get into some questions here.

COL. BATTAGLIA: Well, great. Thank you very much. Good morning.

And as mentioned, I am Colonel Phil Battaglia, the commander of the 4th Brigade Combat Team of the 1st Cavalry Division, based out of Fort Hood, Texas.

Our brigade was previously deployed in Baghdad in 2005, 2006, and our current deployment started back in June of this year and we assumed operations on 15 July.

I'm very pleased to have here with me Mr. Dan Foote, the leader of the Maysan Provincial Reconstruction Team, a member of the State Department. He brings some great experience to bear, and he'll provide with you some opening comments, and then we'll both take your questions.

Let me tell you a little bit about our current operating environment. As mentioned, 4th Brigade operates in three provinces in southern Iraq: Muthanna in the west; Dhi Qar, our central province; and finally, Maysan to the east, which is Dan's province and which

also borders with Iran. These three provinces are just north of Basra. All three provinces are under Iraqi -- provincial Iraqi control, which means that the governor and the Iraqi security forces are leading the efforts to protect the Iraqi people.

My mission is to partner with the Iraqi security forces to secure the population, defeat terrorists, interdict the flow of munitions into Iraq and enable the reconstruction efforts of the PRT.

We work very closely with the 10th Iraqi Army Division, the Iraqi border enforcement units and Iraqi police every single day on a wide variety of security tasks. We live where they live, amongst the population and at various outposts and smaller bases throughout our area of operation. We're having tremendous success because we've combined our technological advantages with Iraqi firsthand knowledge of the terrain, the culture and those intangibles that only come from being an Iraqi.

We've seen the security in this area improve significantly since our arrival in July. The provinces are overall very stable, with occasional attacks by special groups and other criminal elements. Our combined offensive operations represent only a small part of what we do. We are very focused on improving the effectiveness of the Iraqi security forces and enabling Dan and his PRT to conduct their reconstruction efforts.

This is a much different Iraq, and it is exciting to watch this nation grow.

I'd like to stop for now and allow Dan the opportunity to give some opening comments so we can both have plenty of time for questions. And Dan?

MR. FOOTE: Thank you, Phil, for your gracious introduction and for your sage wardrobe advice for this event here today.

I'm Dan Foote. I'm the leader of the Provincial Reconstruction Team, or PRT, to Maysan province. I assumed charge of the team in mid-June, after several months up at Embassy Baghdad working PRT issues. This is my second reconstruction team tour in Iraq, having served a tour in our PRT in Erbil, Kurdistan.

It's been a great pleasure working with Colonel Battaglia and the 1st Cav elements here. They have provided a tremendous level of support to the PRT mission thus far.

As Phil mentioned, there had been no American presence or coalition forces presence in Maysan province for well over a year before Iraqi military operations commenced in mid-June. This is a province that has historically faced a lot of empty promises from outsiders and has seen significant militia influence and illegal arms smuggling from Iran.

Together we face the challenge of quickly developing credibility for coalition forces, in the U.S. government, and more importantly for the Iraqi army, Iraqi police and the provincial and national governments.

As most of you already know, the PRT is a U.S. interagency entity, overseen by the Department of State and Embassy Baghdad, whose major focus is on building provincial Iraqi capacity. As part of the embassy, we also engage regularly with provincial leaders, report on political and economic developments and promote U.S. interests in the province.

Let me touch briefly on what we're talking about when we mention capacity-building. The chief role of the PRT is to teach, mentor and partner with provincial and local governments, civil society organizations and other provincial actors, increase their abilities, efficiencies, technical expertise and transparency.

Our chief focus areas are in economic development, political development and reconciliation, rule of law and governance, including the delivery of essential services. We're working closely with Colonel Battaglia and his soldiers to help Iraqi authorities deliver evidence of a better life and optimism for the future to the citizens of Maysan.

Virtually all Maysanis in the province report that life is much better in the wake of military operations because of increased stability. We expect this perception will create an inhospitable environment for the criminals and insurgents in the neighborhoods and rural areas they once controlled.

PRT staff are working on a number of infrastructure projects, training and assistance programs and outreach opportunities. While our focus is shifting away from U.S.-funded brick-and-mortar construction projects, the ability of the PRT and the coalition forces to influence the local populace, in this traditionally underserved province, depends to some extent on delivering some tangible, positive progress.

To date, the embassy has funded over 60 infrastructure projects in the province with upwards of \$20 million, all of which were requested by and approved by the provincial government. We've also implemented a number of training initiatives and outreach programs geared toward positively affecting the population and increasing provincial expertise and capabilities.

We know there's a lot of question in the United States about Iraqi money. We've seen significant progress in spending Iraqi money in Maysan. In addition to the normal Iraqi provincial budget and supplemental budget for Maysan, about \$200 million for 2008, the government of Iraq earmarked over \$100 million toward reconstruction in the wake of military operations.

Additionally, approximately \$10 million of Iraqi money has been allocated to U.S.-military-managed projects under way in the province. At this point, if Phil's in agreement, I think, we're ready to take your questions.

COL. BATTAGLIA: Sure.

MR. WHITMAN: Very good.

Well, thank you for that overview, both of you. And I think we'll make it easy today. We'll just kind of go around the room starting with David to our right. And then we'll go back and just like that. If you don't have a question, that's fine. Just pass it to the next person. All right.

Q Thank you.

Colonel, this is David Morgan from Reuters.

Can you tell us about your border security operations and what you've been able to interdict, what you've been seeing in terms of weapons flowing in from Iran?

COL. BATTAGLIA: Yeah. Thank you very much for that question, David.

As -- in terms of our border interdiction efforts, the improved security throughout Iraq has allowed us -- has allowed coalition forces to focus more in Dan's province, in Maysan. And since my arrival here, I have moved two battalions in the Maysan province, approximately about 1,800 soldiers. And we are partnered with the 38th Brigade of the 10th Army in that province, along with the Department of Border Enforcement forces right along the border and of course the Iraqi police.

In the past three months, our operations, in coordination with Iraqi security forces, have seized well over 8,000 -- I believe you have a sheet here that kind of talks about what we have interdicted -- a lot of the improvised explosive devices, IEDs, the EFPs, the explosively formed penetrators, about 600 of those deadly devices that we have taken off the streets, along with rockets -- 107, 122- millimeter.

What we have found is -- in the rockets in particular, we find that the manufacturer and lot numbers are Iranian-made.

So I hope that answers your question.

Q Give us some idea of whether the volume of weapons has been increasing or decreasing, and who the intended recipients are.

COL. BATTAGLIA: Yeah. Our intelligence indicates that -- we know that we have had an effect and we have disrupted the flow of weapons. After the first two months, primarily in July, August time frame, we have found that our discovery of caches of these weapons systems has decreased. So we believe that and we know that we have interrupted the flow of these explosives. What the normal -- our intelligence indicates that Amarah, in the province of Maysan, was an area -- since there was no previous coalition forces there, for a while, it was an area where these devices were assembled and then from there shipped to other parts of the country, into Baghdad and other places.

Q Sir, JJ Sutherland from National Public Radio. In Amarah especially, in other areas in your area of control, there's a been a history of Shi'ite and Shi'ite violence between the police and, you know, local Shi'ite forces. I'm wondering: What have you seen over the past few months since you guys have been there?

COL. BATTAGLIA: You know, let me take a first shot at that. You know, not a lot. There have been some reports of threats in -- against key government -- GOI -- leaders, the chief of police, the commanding general of the 10th Iraqi Army. And that's because they're being effective in prosecuting and going after these special groups and criminal elements.

There have been some attempts -- isolated, a few, but not a lot, not a lot.

Dan, can you add on to that?

MR. FOOTE: I would agree. In Maysan, which is controlled -- the only province controlled by a Sadrist provincial government, we've seen the militias stand down since June and really haven't seen -- we've seen that the Iraqi security forces have been strong, have been capable and have not seen a lot of reports other than some anecdotal threats and intimidation stuff. We really haven't seen evidence of a lot of violence.

Q Hi, Colonel. This is Courtney Kube from NBC news. You mentioned in your opening statement that one of the main priorities in focus for you right now is building up the Iraqi security forces. Can you just give us some basic facts about the ISF in your area -- how many you have, how many Iraqi police -- and then an idea of how many of your soldiers specifically are focused on training, part of MiTT teams, versus offensive operations?

COL. BATTAGLIA: Thank you, Courtney. That's a very good question. And, you know, we could sit here for quite a while as I gave you all those details. Well, let me just try to be concise.

First of all, training and enabling and improving the effectiveness of the Iraqi security forces is the focus of my mission here. Absolutely, that's what I do. What's nice in our area is that the three provinces that my brigade operates in is also the same three provinces in which we have the 10th Iraqi army. And the 10th Iraqi army division headquarters is right next to Camp Adder, which is where we're located right here.

So we have a really good nexus of our ability to work with the 10th Iraqi Army Division and the brigades that are co-located in Maysan. I'll give you an example: My 2/7 Cav battalion is partnered with and -- is partnered with and conducts operations with the 38th Brigade in Maysan. My older battalion that's in the Maysan Province, 1/9 Cav, is partnered very specifically with the border enforcement brigade that is right along the Iranian border. And my other units, they're all partnered with their counterparts both in the Iraqi army and also Iraqi police.

I'm very focused and working with the senior leaders at the provincial level and also at the district level of the police. I have some police forces and also some great what we call law enforcement professionals that are -- that have deployed with the brigade. These are, for the most part, retired civilian law enforcement officers that provide me with that expertise so that we can work with the Iraqi police and better enable their operations.

I hope that answered your questions.

Q Colonel, this is Brianna Keilar from CNN. And actually this is a question for you but especially for Dan, as well. Just wondering, Iraqis on the ground there, what they're telling you is their biggest concern or maybe some of their biggest concerns; how maybe that's changed in the last few months, Dan, since you've been there in June; and sort of how it's affecting how you respond to the situation.

MR. FOOTE: Well, that's a great question. Thanks. Colonel?

COL. BATTAGLIA: Start off on that, Dan.

MR. FOOTE: In Maysan -- the two biggest issues for Maysanis are electricity and employment, both of which are critical problems. And while it's difficult for us to assess what went on prior to June in Maysan, but in talking and getting out, walking around marketplaces and things, there was a certain sense prior that there wasn't a lot of freedom of expression, wasn't a lot of freedom of movement. We were unable to interact with individuals without the government's approval.

We can do that now. So electricity and unemployment are the two major issues that we see out there in the province.

COL. BATTAGLIA: And if I can just add real quick to that and absolutely echo what Dan says. You know, my soldiers are out there with the Iraqi police and other Iraqi security forces in the towns with the people. Probably some water -- water issues in terms of water purification. That's along with electricity. You know, those are some of the two biggest concerns that the Iraqi has.

There's still a lot of -- there's still a lot of room for reconstruction efforts to continue on here for a while, wouldn't you say, Dan?

MR. FOOTE: Absolutely.

COL. BATTAGLIA: Yeah.

MR. WHITMAN: Sir?

Q Colonel, this is Joe Tabet with Al Hurra. Do you think there is any Iranian influence through political -- Shi'a political parties in your area?

COL. BATTAGLIA: Dan, you want to take a shot at this first?

MR. FOOTE: (Laughs.) I'll be happy to, Colonel.

COL. BATTAGLIA: And then I'll do my piece. Okay.

MR. FOOTE: There's no question that there is a certain level of Iranian influence. The four main parties in Maysan province are a Sadrist umbrella party, ISCI, Da'wa and Fadhila. ISCI and Da'wa have ties to Iran, long and fairly strong. Ironically, the Sadrists are probably the most nationalistic of those parties.

Have we seen a ton of malign political Iranian influence to date? Not that I'm aware of. With provincial elections on the horizon, I think we're going to be looking at an interesting time. Iranian influence in Maysan province is to be expected. It's a neighboring country. The tribes along the border have people on both sides. There's going to be some of that that happens, and we expect and accept some of that to happen.

It's the smuggling, the malign influence, the Iranian accelerants that Colonel Battaglia and his folks are very focused on taking care of.

COL. BATTAGLIA: Yeah, exactly, and Dan's absolutely right on that.

We are -- what we experience and what we hear, what I hear from the, from the Iraqi security forces, some of the leaders of the 10th Iraqi Army Division, the police and so forth, same thing.

There is some Iranian influence, you know, not very overt at this time. And, but everyone is kind of bracing a little bit to see what happens during the upcoming provincial elections, I think.

MR. FOOTE: You guys still there?

COL. BATTAGLIA: Yeah. Any other questions, or?

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead.

Q Dawn Casey with Talk Radio News Service.

What is the reception of the civilians like, when you're walking around the marketplace, just to the presence there? Is it like a warm welcome, they're happy to see us? Or what's the sense of how they feel about us over there?

COL. BATTAGLIA: You know, I tell you, the people throughout the provinces are very appreciative of the Iraqi security forces which are out there, providing security, conducting checkpoints, patrolling the streets. And, and they're also very appreciative to

see our soldiers there working with the, with the police, working with the army. And you know, across the board, they tell us that there is a greater sense of security in the area.

Dan, you've been out there. What's your thoughts?

MR. FOOTE: Well, Phil, you and I have both walked around market areas and populated places in Maysan, both in the capital of Amarah and in other villages and cities.

In Amarah, I've got to tell you, the reception is surprisingly embracing of coalition forces. And I'm the only civilian, when we walk around. So they're looking at the green-suiters. They greet us. They smile. They stop to chat.

They tell us what their problems are, what their concerns are. And frankly I was surprised going into this province, that we thought was the Wild West that wanted nothing but coalition forces to depart when we got in there.

Now, in some of the smaller towns in the south of the province, where there hasn't been a big coalition presence, where there wasn't a big British presence in the past, they're a little more reserved. They don't approach us and they look at us a little more curiously. But as soon as we say hello to them, they smile with typical Arab cordiality and greet, are very warm to us.

COL. BATTAGLIA: Right.

Q Gentlemen, Bill McMichael, Military Times papers. General Petraeus has repeatedly warned that this might be -- the positive trends in Iraq and the gains that have been made, that the situation is very fragile and things could easily reverse. I wonder if you would discuss what you see in the province you're working in.

COL. BATTAGLIA: I can, you know, lead off on that a little bit and talk about, you know, the Iraqi army and the Iraqi security forces. I have -- I have mentioned here to you about how capable they are. They're able to plan and to execute operations. But of course, we're there and we supply a lot of those enablers -- some, you know, additional intelligence -- intelligence air assets, intelligence platforms to kind of narrow their focus of their operations. All those types of enablers, the Iraqi army has yet to build.

The Achilles' heel of the Iraqi security forces, in my opinion and what I see here in these provinces is their logistical system. And you know, that's well-acknowledged, in terms of maintenance and availability of repair parts. So although the Iraqi security forces are capable and willing to go out there -- that's my experience -- at the same time there are other facets of these security forces that must continue to grow -- you know, logistics, like we talked about, their intelligence assets and other type enablers -- to make them a more capable force.

So that's what I could talk to you about the Iraqi security forces there. In terms of the government and some of those entities --

MR. FOOTE: I think the population of Maysan is a very fickle one. Through history -- World War II and the British, earlier Iraqi regimes, Saddam Hussein, the British -- they've heard a lot of empty promises over the years.

We have an opportunity as coalition, American and with the new power of the Iraqi security forces in there, to take advantage of the opportunity to give them optimism and show them reason for a better life. It's not going to last forever. And we're certainly working hard and have had some quick wins with the population, some good press events and humanitarian assistance, some infrastructure things.

Are we at the tipping point, as General Petraeus likes to say, where Maysan has tipped and will be stable? Not yet. I think over the next six to 12 months what Phil and I do and our teams do and what the Iraqi security forces and the result of the provincial elections is going to be key to what happens there.

But to date, again, this is what we thought was a militia- controlled province, and the militias aren't there right now. So we're very optimistic thus far.

COL. BATTAGLIA: Yeah, exactly. Exactly.

Q Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: (Off mike.)

Q Gentlemen, it's Luis Martinez of ABC News. My question kind of follows on Bill's. With the discussions under way for the status of forces agreement, there's been some talk that by next summer U.S. forces would pull out of some of the bigger cities. Do you think that right now in Maysan that you -- that this would be feasible for you and it might be more feasible in the near term, based on what you're seeing right now?

COL. BATTAGLIA: I'll start off on that question. And first of all I will tell you, you know, I'm a simple soldier, I'm a tactical commander, and I'll do what -- you know, what my bosses tell me -- my division commander, my corps commander.

So we know that the -- both the Iraqi government and of course the U.S. government officials are very involved in the negotiations. But you know, we are so far out of that, and it's certainly not my place to comment on that. I'm not involved in any of those negotiations.

You know, Dan, anything that you can add to that --

MR. FOOTE: Well, that's a great question and a tough question for anybody to answer at this point in time.

That being said, I think that regardless of what happens with the coalition forces out there, there will be some elements -- the PRT and the Department of State were going through planning exercises to be able to adapt and adjust and continue our mission over the near term. Are we going to be there in five years? Nobody can say that. But the PRT expects to be there at least through the end of next year, and then certainly planning and looking at a longer-term horizon.

I'd certainly refer you to the visit of Deputy Secretary of State Negroponte to Iraq this week. He had a lot of high-level discussions, and they're working closely with the Iraqi officials. Everybody knows the end date. Everybody knows the date by which we have to have an agreement. And they're working very seriously towards that.

MR. WHITMAN: (Off mike) -- CNN.

Q Larry Shaughnessy, CNN. The U.S. election is less than a month away. Colonel, can you tell me -- are your troops reporting any problems with getting the ballots they need and being able to cast their ballots in time for those votes to be counted back here in the U.S.? Is everything going as smoothly as you'd hoped?

COL. BATTAGLIA: Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. I'd tell you what. We had a -- you know, voting is one of the -- you know, the basic premise of our democracy, and in the past couple of months, we've had a very strong campaign within the brigade to allow our soldiers the -- give them the information first and provide them with the opportunity to contact their respective states so that they could register and be able to vote.

I will tell you that in the past week or so I have seen -- as I walk around some of my soldiers, I see those absentee ballots, that they have received them, and they're putting their vote in.

So I have not heard of any complaints or any issues with the absentee ballots in my brigade. So that's a good sign.

(Cross talk.)

MR. WHITMAN: Okay. How about all the way in the back? Are there any questions? Go ahead. Mm-hmm.

Q Colonel, earlier in your briefing, you referenced -- this is clarification -- special groups. Are you specifically referring to JAM SGs?

COL. BATTAGLIA: You know, when we talk about special groups, criminal elements, you know, I tell you -- and what I tell my folks is, we target, in coordination with the Iraqi security forces, any destabilizing element of the Iraqi government, okay? So, you know, there are elements out there that are strictly criminals, all right? I mean, I'll

tell you, just strictly criminals that are out there smuggling, trying to make money smuggling accelerants.

There are some groups that do have some type of political affiliation, whether that's JAM or Sadrists or other groups.

So -- but you know, in terms of what we see and the groups that we target, there's really a -- you know, I make no difference -- you know, we just target anybody that either attacks coalition forces or is trying to destabilize the current Iraqi government.

Q (Off mike) -- can you speak at all -- can they hear me?

COL. BATTAGLIA: Yes.

Q With the ISF, can you speak at all to levels of corruption within those forces, whether or not it's impacting your operations? Specifically, I'm thinking of JAM.

COL. BATTAGLIA: Let me kind of divide that a little bit. First of all, talking about the army -- and this is what my observation on -- the army is dedicated and working hard to secure Iraq. And what I see in our area is they're going after any group that is committing criminal acts or committing violent acts.

The Iraqi police still have some work to do.

I think, you know, as a culture -- and maybe Dan can talk a little bit about this, but the Iraqi police is not the same and they don't have the same level of acceptance or the same level of power that does, let's say, police down in New York City or somewhere else in the United States. They just don't have the same level of acceptance by the people.

So the police, there's still some work that we feel that we have to do, especially down at the lower level, those street cops out in the beat out there that -- you know, everything from -- you know, from better basic training for the police to more education and all those factors. But I'm very pleased and I'm very impressed with the work of the Iraqi army, and we're working hard with the police to also improve their effectiveness throughout the three provinces.

Dan, anything you can add to that?

MR. FOOTE: I don't have anything particularly incisive, other than to make mention of the major cultural differences. "Corruption," to us is a bad word. In the Arab culture, a certain amount of bribery, bakshish, is a little more part of the culture, so "corruption" has a little different definition here. But I think the police and Phil's guys are working closely with the police to improve their capacity.

GEN. BATTAGLIA: (Off mike) -- question.

MR. WHITMAN: General, we have reached the end of the time that we've allocated for this, and we want to be respectful of your time. So. But before we bring it to close, let me just turn it back to you one last time in case there's something that we've missed or that you've thought of during the course of this that you'd like to talk about before we bring it to a close.

GEN. BATTAGLIA: Yeah. Thank you for that opportunity. I'll let Dan go ahead and lead off with that.

MR. FOOTE: Well, thanks. You have home court advantage, so you get to bat here last.

Our combined mission here aims to secure a stable, secure, self-reliant Iraq, not just as an ally in the global war on terrorism, but also as a positive economic, political and stabilizing force in the region. Such an Iraq is going to be a major asset to the Middle East, to the international community and the United States. And I think I can speak for Phil in saying we hope our efforts are contributing in some way toward those goals.

Thanks a lot for the opportunity to talk about what we're doing here. We appreciate the great support we get from back home. I'd like to thank Phil and his guys once more for their outstanding collaboration and allow him to offer his closing comments.

GEN. BATTAGLIA: All right. Thank you.

And first of all, thank you for taking the time this morning to discuss our mission down here in southern Iraq. I appreciate to talk to you -- for the opportunity to talk to you about the Long Knife Brigade and my great soldiers. I believe our combined efforts with the PRT and the State Department are making a significant reconstruction progress and reducing violence in our area.

Your soldiers and your government officials are as dedicated and committed as ever to our mission and to each other.

I would be remiss if I didn't recognize the sacrifices of all our family and friends back at Fort Hood, Texas, known as a great place. The support that we continue to receive is as strong as ever. Our families as well as our troopers make sacrifices every day in the service of our great nation.

Thank you again for your time. Have a great day. And I look forward to talking to you again in the future. Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you, gentlemen. And we will take you up on that offer in a couple of months.

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