

DoD News Briefing from Iraq with Maj. Gen. John Kelly, commander, Multi-National Force –West, October 23, 2008

(Note: The general appears via teleconference from Iraq.)

BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Well, good; we have a picture. Let me see if General Kelly can hear us.

General Kelly, this is Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon. Can you hear me okay?

GEN. KELLY: I can hear very well. Thank you. (Inaudible.)

MR. WHITMAN: Very good. Well, General, thank you again for joining us for a third time, I believe, in this format. For those of you who may not have been with us for the other two sessions, this is Major General John Kelly, who is the commanding general, Multinational Forces-West; took command of Multinational Forces-West in February. And he joins us today from Fallujah. And as he's done in the past, he's going to provide you with some overview of what his forces have been doing out there in the west and then take some of your questions.

So again, General, thank you for taking the time and joining us this afternoon, and let me turn it over to you.

GEN. KELLY: Okay. Just obviously happy to be here, and maybe make just a few initial comments and very few, and then just open it for questions.

As you indicated, we -- or I took command out here in the province on the 9th of February this year. Almost right away, in March, we rolled off 40 percent of U.S. forces out of the province. That was not a surge move. That was just a Army brigade that had worked here alongside of the Marines for -- since we had taken the zone back in '03. But they left anyways.

And then unexpectedly we lost 60 percent of the two Iraqi army divisions that we had raised and trained here in Anbar. They went down to do operations, as you probably know, in -- initially in Basra. Then they moved to Sadr City. They've been in Baghdad. They're in Diyala now -- (audio break) -- divisions. And as I say, over half of those two divisions, divisions I used to rely on, moved off. And the good news is that they've done very, very well in the operations, along with their Marine transition team members.

The bad news is, they were good friends, and we of course watched how they do with pride and always keep them in our prayers in terms of the combat operations they're involved in.

In April, as we started coming up on the period where we would be turning the province over, so-called PIC, or provincial Iraqi control, we started to actually move

down the road to set the conditions so that when PIC took place, which initially was supposed to be in May- June and then we moved it to July and then, of course, all the way to September -- but we really changed the relationship between the Marines or the coalition forces and the Iraqi security forces and the Iraqi government.

I can't overstate the fact that we're particularly close friends and real colleagues with all of the Iraqis' official as well as the tribal leadership.

So we set those conditions so that the day we PIC'ed, whenever that was -- and it turned out to be to be 1 September -- there was not -- wouldn't be a huge shock to anybody that we were already operating in kind of post-PIC methods. That included some of the things we started to do at the time, was to return -- as much as we could within the security considerations, return the province to normalcy as best we could.

We started a share-the-road program where no longer would Iraqi traffic have to do anything particularly different when they came upon military convoys. That was a big change. Moved most of our convoys -- I think something on the order of 95 percent of all military movements, administrative, logistics movements, and that includes the contract convoys -- they all move late at night, certainly after 21:00 or 9:00 at night and they're off the roads by 5:00 a.m. The average Iraqi, of course, is home in bed in at that particular point in time, so they don't even see much traffic, much military activity in the province anymore.

We started to tear down literally hundreds of checkpoints, particularly the ones that had -- certainly were once very necessary as defensive positions all over the province but no longer serve the purpose. And it was kind of an operation Rudy Giuliani that we did to clean up the cities and to, as I say, take down these unsightly defensive positions, roll up the barbed wire in this attempt to convince the average Iraqi that the good news of reduced -- significantly reduced security over the last couple years -- correction, violence -- was real and even the Marines, even the coalition forces felt confident enough to allow them to travel on their own roads around us without having to stop, pull over, be under the threat of any type of gunfire and, at the same time, to break down these defensive positions.

We did PIC on the first of September. That has gone very well. We're still very much engaged but in overwatch with the Iraqi security forces. We are outside the cities, for all intents and purposes -- not to say that we don't go in frequently, to meet with them, to bring training to them.

We still have Marines and some U.S. Army soldiers as police advisers that still live inside police stations, but down to a very small number in comparison. We were up over 115; now we're down below 30. And that's -- the good news is, we are backing out. They're on their own and all we're doing is providing them training.

Even in the area of funding, we have probably in April started to shift away from the U.S. -- the use of U.S. money; as much as we could, started to rely on

government of Iraq funding. It's a little harder or more frustrating because the U.S. CERP money, as I think you all know, is -- you know, we can use that in a relative sense, in a lightning quick way, but that doesn't teach the Iraqis how to budget and how to execute a budget, so we really started backing off on the use of money that I have, U.S. money, and forcing -- not forcing them, but teaching them, working with them, to use their own money. And that's turned out very well.

I turned back a fairly significant amount of money of CERP money this year, U.S. CERP money, and I recommended about a 64 percent reduction next year, to only \$50 million. But the thrust, the theme will still be to use Iraqi money, not U.S. money, just as in the security LOO, it's to use Iraqi police, Iraqi army, with Marines and soldiers, U.S. personnel, in overwatch.

And I think I'll just let it go there and take your questions, if that's all right.

MR. WHITMAN: That'll be great, General. Thanks for the overview. And we'll get started right here with Andrew, to start us off.

Q General, it's Andrew Gray from Reuters here. Could you just give us some statistics? Can you tell us how many U.S. military personnel you have in the west now and how many Iraqi soldiers and police? And then could you give us a sense of the security environment now? How many incidents per day or per week are there?

GEN. KELLY: There are 28,000, almost to a man, Iraqi police, and we've had a lot -- actually, that number grew significantly just prior to my arrival, and we've added to that by about 6,000. But it's 28,000 of them and, you know, they vary in terms of their training level, but we are -- we work with them all the time. And I would tell you, when we first started working with the police, three, four years ago, the relationship was very different. The relationship was we lived in their police stations with them, and took them out on patrol, a very dangerous time, where police were killed in very, very large numbers. So that was the relationship then.

Now the relationship is -- actually when I arrived here it was much more they went on patrol -- that is, the police -- and the Marines went with them but they were in the lead. And at that point, we started to reduce even the numbers that were in the cities with them, because clearly -- the numbers of U.S. personnel, because they were clearly doing well, and it's that whole image of, you know, we took the training wheels off, they were more than ready to leave the driveway and get out on the street. And they've done quite well, actually.

What they really lack now, and we work more than anything in our training programs with them now, is to give them the protect-and-serve kind of training; the, you know, preservation of a crime scene, investigative techniques, interrogation techniques, ethics and morals.

That's the kind of thing we focus on. And this is not the kind of training that's resident, necessarily, in the infantry -- (audio break) -- former police officers, retired guys from the states, from places like Boston and Indianapolis and St. Louis, and they do the training.

Incidents you asked about. When I got here -- when I left here, let me put it that way, in '04, we had several hundred incidents a month on a pretty routine basis. When I got here, the incidents were down to the level of about 35 a week. And an incident -- you have to understand in today's world an incident might be an IED we find, doesn't go off. Another incident would be an IED that goes off but doesn't hurt anyone. It could be a single shot of gunfire. If there's five people shooting at you, that's five incidents. So, frankly, the way we account for it's almost meaningless now.

And I don't pay much attention anymore to the odd incident, although in today's Anbar province, we have eight to 10 -- (audio break) -- because the real indicators of how things are going here is the number of people that are working; we just finished our voter registration. In a country that had 3 percent of the electorate -- of a province that only had 3 percent in the '05 election, we just registered about a hundred percent of the eligible voters, pretty close to it, largest number per capita in all of Iraq. The Iraqi security forces planned it, a little help from us, but they executed entirely on their own. Not a single accusation of fraud and not a single security incident.

That's two of the three things you asked. What was the third thing you asked about?

Q I was asking how many Marines, how many U.S. military personnel and how many Iraqi soldiers are there in Anbar at the moment.

GEN. KELLY: Okay. As I mentioned, we have 28,000 policemen of all varieties, and there's several types of police, but 28,000 of them. Right now I've got a little more than 25,000 Marines, but that's only because we're switching out some units, so the best number to use is 25,000. We have, of course, soldiers, sailors and airmen here on the team. They're very much part of the MNF-W team, as much as the Marines are, and they all contribute mightily.

We have normally two divisions of Iraqi army here, the 1st and the 7th. As I mentioned, they're so good that they're literally used as fire brigades in other parts of the -- in other parts of the country. But if they were all here, I'd have close to 20,000. Since 60 percent of them are gone, that tells you I've got maybe something in the neighborhood of about -- let's see, three brigades -- I've probably got 8,000, 9,000 who are still here with me. And they're sprinkled in various bases -- their own bases around the country, on the border, where we're doing much more work along the Syrian border than we've done in the past.

And a lot of them are out that way, but a lot of them are down in other places, some of them right here in the vicinity of Fallujah.

But remember, in this -- in this step-by-step process, as security improved, the police now are in the cities. The Iraqi army are outside the cities, but around the cities, but out beyond the suburbs, if you will. And then the Marines are in various places doing various things for the most part outside that -- those areas that even the Iraqi army are responsible for.

Hope that answers it.

MR. WHITMAN: Let's go to Barbara.

Q General Kelly, Barbara Starr from CNN. What's your perception right now for the further draw-down of Marine forces and other U.S. military forces from your area?

GEN. KELLY: Well, you know, right now, of course, we've just had some reductions. We all -- we all made some recommendations in the past as to what we thought we could do without. I sent home one of my fighter squadrons. In fact, the remaining aircraft just made it back to the states today. I'll be ramping off an infantry battalion. I have six infantry battalions. That's the core of my combat force that's here. One of those battalions won't be coming out.

There's some other what I would term cat-and-dog-type units, firepower-type units that -- and these have all been already announced. And we're all kind of sitting here -- I think in some places they're holding their breath about what could be the next recommendations.

We have taken on some additional missions recently, so the forces that I have here now, I'm certainly going to need to do some of these additional missions -- you know, nothing -- you know, nothing big, nothing very newsworthy -- but as we redouble our efforts to secure the Syrian border, as an example, and to redouble our efforts on the police training. And I can pretty much use everyone I've got here now, particularly the infantry, not for kinetic purposes, really, anymore; more for intelligence purposes and to, you know, provide presence and assistance in various places that, you know, frankly we haven't been to in the hinterlands of Anbar Province.

Q And you've mentioned the Syrian border a couple of times now. What exactly are you doing out there that you weren't doing before and what's the security situation out there?

GEN. KELLY: Yeah, the Anbar Province, which we all call home, has three national borders. One with the Saudi Arabians -- that border is actually quite tight. There is no regularly scheduled or regularly opened port of entry except for one place during the hajj period that's coming up. But that's -- that's a good solid border.

The Saudis are great soldiers and they take care of this side very well. We don't have to worry too much about that.

Same comments for the Jordanian border; we have a very, very active port of entry there. A tremendous amount of commerce goes in and out of that port of entry. And the Jordanian side for sure; have that, their side locked up. I would say that we have absolutely no issues of corruption or security really on the Jordanian border at all. There are very, very good soldiers and police services in Jordan.

Syria, different story; it's a long border. It's the longest border really. There hasn't been much, in the way of a physical barrier, along that border for years. We're in the process of rebuilding. And that's really at this point just building a large berm of sand and some ditching to keep certainly vehicles from crossing the border and from the Jordanian border all the way up north. And we're working our way north, past the Euphrates River.

So that's 7 or 800 kilometers of berming that we've done. The Syrian side is, I guess, uncontrolled by their side. We still have a certain level of foreign fighter movement, not much, through Anbar because of our activities out there, with the police and with the Iraqi army and with the Iraqi border forces, so less and less of that kind of thing coming through.

But we do know that there are operatives that live, we believe, certainly -- let me say, the Iraqi security forces and the Iraqi intelligence forces feel that al Qaeda operatives and others operate, live pretty openly on the Syrian side. And periodically we know that they try to come across.

The 2nd of May, there was a raid that killed 11 Iraqi soldiers, very close to where the river enters, the Euphrates River enters Iraq from Syria. But that is increasingly a more secure border. We're working a lot with the security forces, with the ministry of the interior for funding, training, that kind of thing for the border forces.

They've got a big job. They've been underfunded. We're working hard with them, much like we do with the police, reinforced with individual border team trainers, not combat units but border team trainers, to live with the border post 24/7.

We've been doing that for four years. But we're really redoubling our efforts in that regard.

But Syria is problematic for me but, more importantly, for the Iraqis because it doesn't seem that there's much being done on the other side of the border to assist this country in terms of maintaining the border and the integrity of, you know, Iraqi sovereignty.

MR. WHITMAN: Before we leave, Jerry, I'd better go to Joe, or we'll go back to -- (inaudible).

Q General, this is Joe Tabet with Al Hurra. I would like to know what's your assessment of the current status of the Sons of Iraq. How do you see the process to make them join the Iraqi forces?

GEN. KELLY: Yeah, the Sons of Iraq -- we're -- you know this -- depending on where you are in Iraq and where -- what province you're in, the Sons of Iraq are a different issue in each place.

In our case, we have right at about 4,000 of them. They work directly -- don't operate with, but they work directly for the American -- and in today's world, the post-PIC environment, for the local Iraqi army commander. They're given tasks. They're organized in small units.

We in Anbar are kind of consistent a lot of times with the way Marine Corps, I think, does business. We probably pay them less than anyone else in the country. I hope they don't find that out. But they're out there every night. I travel around by vehicle more than I do by helicopter and do a lot of just random driving about, and from my own observations, and certainly from what the Marine small unit commanders there -- the Sons of Iraq are out there doing that they're supposed to do.

We started thinking about assimilating them sometime ago. One of those things, I guess, probably around the April period, I started to talk about giving them reading and writing and arithmetic kind of classes to get them ready for follow-on employment. As it turned out, the good news was, they were all able to read and write.

The other thing we asked them about was what they might want to do for an occupation after, what would -- what life would be like after the Sons of Iraq. Interestingly enough, most of them would prefer to go back to being farmers. Anbar used to be a very productive rural province. A lot of things happened in the old days: food for oil -- you know, the impact of the sanctions did a lot to hurt the economy of Anbar, particularly putting its agricultural industry in collapse.

But these young guys would prefer to go back to being farmers. Those that didn't look towards farming very much would like to be police officers and even join the Iraqi army. So I'm hoping that we'll be able to expand a little bit on the police numbers. But they have pretty quality guys. They -- again, they read and write.

So we don't have the same kind of challenges, by any means, that some of the other provinces are having.

And the folks that we work with here are all "sons," as they would put it -- sons of Anbar, sons of the tribes, 4,000, but many, many small groups -- tribal affiliations, yes, but, you know, young guys that are looking for something more than sitting on a checkpoint for, you know, 120 bucks a month. And we hope to be able to assimilate them either into the security forces, which won't be much of a challenge, frankly, if -- because

of the 4,000 number, or even try to get them -- work something out -- a grant or something, get them back into farming.

MR. WHITMAN: Lita, go ahead.

Q General, it's Lolita Baldor with the Associated Press. Can we go back to Syria for just a quick follow-up? Can you give us a better sense of the number of incidents? You said that there has been -- there have been fewer cross-border traffic, but can you give us a better sense of what it was and what you're seeing now?

And then just as another quick follow-up, how many -- how many of your forces in Anbar are doing training, either border or Iraqi police or army?

GEN. KELLY: Well, the incidents on the border are -- you know, the biggest one we've had since we've been here -- and it was tragic -- was the one on the 2nd of May where there was a raid. We know it was al Qaeda. They came across and surprised some -- some policemen, beheaded them and then surprised some other policemen. There was a short gunfight. Total number of police that were killed -- murdered, really -- were 11.

But that did a lot to shake up the border and to shake up the police and to shake up the border guard. And at that point, they got very serious. Obviously, that kind of thing would make you more serious. They got very serious about protecting themselves and protecting the border. And once we got the -- once we started repairing the berm -- and there is a longer-term plan that the government of Iraq has to really put a barrier there -- but once we started fixing the berm, through our various intelligence sources knew that the bad guys on the other side were getting frustrated because they had begun to notice the improvement in the -- in the border security, the berming. So that's about all I can go into there.

As far as how much we're training them, I -- in a very real sense, I think that the 25,000 Marines, soldiers, sailors, airmen that are here with me -- we're training all of these people all the time.

So I guess I'd say we're a hundred percent involved in training. And that even includes my civil-military people who are training them how to develop a provincial budget, or training them in the medical engagements we do in the hospital.

So I think 100 percent of all of us are here in training, but to put it in the terms they're probably talking about, with the police and all the rest of the training we do, I'd say our combat forces are either entirely -- and that's six-battalion base now -- are either entirely wrapped up in training them or standing with them when they operate, which is kind of the same thing because they're learning by association.

So we're very much of a training mission. It's still a dangerous place; still the occasional IED; we still have to watch ourselves. But at the same time, it's really in the hands of the Anbaris. And they very seldom ask us for much help on the ground

anymore, and tell us, of course, everything they find out about the enemy through their various means.

Q Hi, General. This is Courtney Kube from NBC News. Do you still anticipate turning over Camp Fallujah to the Iraqis in mid- November? And can you talk a little bit about what that will mean for the Marines that are still stationed there? Are they going to move to Ramadi? How many will stay behind? And if any stay behind, in what capacity they'll be operating?

GEN. KELLY: Yeah. We've closed, actually, a fair number of bases since I've been here. Al Qaim is an example, which is in the far west. Nothing nearly as big as Fallujah. But we just -- we closed another base right on the Husaybah border, near Syria, and gave that back to the Iraqis. We closed what some of you may know as Blue Diamond, in downtown Ramadi. We've actually turned over the base at Habbaniya to the Iraqis. And actually we're tenants on that base. So they own the base and we're tenants. But they run the base. Going to do the same thing at Camp Ramadi early next year.

Fallujah is 5(,000) or 6,000 acres, something like that, pretty big place. Many of you have been here. The Marines that were here -- and we have not only combat Marines here, but we have logistics Marines and then a lot of other facilities -- they're being moved to various other bases, some of them just up the road in Camp Baharia. Some of them will go up to al Qaim -- correction, out to Al Asad, which is the big airbase we have up that way. So in various places.

The key point is, we will not lose contact with the Iraqi security forces, or for that matter, the Iraqi people.

But it's just a big base we no longer -- (audio break). And of course it takes, you know, Marines to guard it. And frankly it's a big piece of property just outside of Baghdad there. It's about a 40-minute drive to Baghdad, six miles from Fallujah, and they could certainly use it for something other than us sitting here.

It will also reduce the -- the vast number of vehicles. And even though -- logistics vehicles. And even though we do all of that movement at night to stay out of the -- you know, to stay away from the Iraqis and keep the inconvenience factor down, there's still an awful lot of movement in and out of this place, because it is -- it is a logistics hub, too. So we've moved that logistics hub out to Taqaddum. That'll -- you know, that'll free up this base and at the same time will not be inconveniencing the Iraqis as we have in the past.

I mean, sometimes the roads out here look a little bit like 95 North in Northern Virginia, and of all of the things we're trying to bring -- the good things we're trying to bring from America and give to the Iraqis -- (short audio break) -- I wouldn't put on them, and that is 95 North that I've experienced myself on a couple of tours in the Pentagon. So -- but that's what it'll mean to the Iraqis.

MR. WHITMAN: Gordon?

Q Sir, it's Gordon Lubold from the Christian Science Monitor. Because of the timing of the Anbar Awakening and all of that, the peace in Anbar seems to be well established. And it appears from this side that the pressure will be on General Odierno to begin making recommendations to draw down Marines perhaps even first. Where are the weak points or the concern points for you if the recommendation does come down sometime next year, whatever, to start really substantially drawing Marines down?

GEN. KELLY: Frankly, I don't have any -- I don't have any concerns at all. I'm getting an echo.

But I don't have any concerns at all. The -- I guess the one issue I would offer to you is that Anbar is not a -- an island. And even though it's going very, very well here - - and frankly, it's going very, very well in a lot of other parts of Iraq that maybe didn't have the name association that Fallujah, Ramadi or Anbar does. But, you know, this story that's going on in Anbar is going on in a number of other provinces and a number of other places. Again, it just doesn't have the star power, the name association.

But Anbar is not an island. If it was an island, we could look at doing certain things in terms of drawdown, but it's not. We have al Qaeda still here in Iraq. I'd characterize them as Iraqi -- or correction, al Qaeda refugees.

They're hiding out. The insurgency has lost its network; it's lost the support of the people. We have some individual cells, but again I'd characterize them as refugees more than I would -- vastly more than I would an insurgency.

But that said, depending on what decisions the Iraqi government makes -- I mean, I spend most of my time really at my level trying to influence the Iraqi government to speed up the process of reconstruction and economic development. That's really what I need, for them to move out. Not to say they're dragging their feet. It's just that, like any bureaucracy, it's a little slower than, say, military type A's would really like to see. But it is an ebb and flow thing, and what's happening very good in Anbar and other parts of Iraq, and improving throughout Iraq; you still have places where the enemy is active and they come and go. So I would say that I'm very optimistic that we could start to reduce numbers.

But remember, Anbar is not an island, and the people here rely on us. We are, the coalition, absolutely the most trusted institution in the country. I have relationships of trust with sheikhs, government officials, police -- (inaudible) -- that the government of Iraq doesn't have. And sometimes when they have meetings in Baghdad, they'll then call me and say, "What do you think if they're telling me this or that?"

So even though we're beyond the kinetic combat-type mission, there's other things we bring, security, a sense of security we bring, particularly as we roll into the elections, which they very much look forward to. And I believe most of them would tell

you that after the elections, so long as they go well and they're transparent and all of that, regardless of who wins, at that point, post-PIC, post-election, I think they'll start to really settle down and be comfortable with their own central government and with themselves, because there are different agendas and different fissures here in Anbar itself. And we help to bridge the gaps, if you will.

I hope that answers your question.

Q Those cells as refugees, if the Marines start really pulling out, will they just die, in your assessment, or is there still the potential that they could come back?

GEN. KELLY: Well, you know, I walked through the city of Kharma this afternoon with the provincial police chief. No helmet, no flak. And now, it's not -- you know, you do certain things for certain reasons, but we walked down through there today and met with the Kharma city council and the mayor and all, did the same thing yesterday -- two days ago, rather, in Ramadi with the police chief.

And their security concerns -- or a better way to put it, when they talk to me about the things that they need from me, they'll talk about electricity, which is absolutely number one. In the last several months, we have solved -- for all intents and purposes -- we have solved, with the government of Iraq, the fuel problem in Anbar province. We went from 8 percent of what they needed here, gasoline and diesel and that kind of thing, 8 percent, and we've solved that now and they're -- and they're getting at least 90 percent of their allocation every month. So that's off the table. But they talk about health care and schools and all of this.

When I first got here, they'd hit security at the three or the four mark. Now, when we talk, they'll talk about five, six, seven things that they need -- they need help from me; they need help from the government of Iraq -- and then I'll have to say, well, what about security? So we'll remind of them security and then they'll say, "Well, yeah. Okay, security, too." But then I'll look at the police chief and say there's nothing right now that I can conceive of that could come back here that the police, in partnership with the Iraqi army, couldn't handle. And that is my message to them. They can handle it.

Would more people get hurt or be killed, meaning Iraqi army, Iraqi police? Sure -- then if -- then if the Marines took care of it. But these guys are proud and they see it as their responsibility.

And as I say, months ago, they used to ask us for help. Now they don't ask us for help at all. They just, the next morning, brief my people about what happened during the night, if there were any gun fights, anyone that may have -- they may have killed or whatever. So they very much have the fight. And unless something really strange happened that I almost can't conceive of, they've got it.

The only thing they're concerned about is, frankly, Iran. And you know, they're very vocal about the Iranian activity inside Iraq from a -- from kind of a terrorism and a --

and kind of an infiltration point of view. But you know, with no -- with an army that's only fledgling, with no air force, no navy, no armored forces, no conventional military capability, they're also afraid of Iran at a higher level, and that is an actual incursion.

So they're not quick to have us leave -- not that they want us to do their fighting for them. They just want us to reestablish something that we decided to disestablish. And when we do that, they're very confident that we can -- we can, you know -- you know, be friends with Iraq forever and not be here forever. That's the key point.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, General, I apologize for running us over the time that we had allocated for this. But before I bring it to a close, let me just turn it back to you in case there are any final thoughts that you had that -- or anything that we missed in our questions that perhaps were stimulated by the conversation.

GEN. KELLY: No, just probably I -- every time I talk to any of their colleagues, I just kind of make the point that there are an awful lot of real good things happening over here. And I would -- I would tell you that several months ago I used to use the term that we're in the last ten meters of Iraq, ten yards of this fight. And that 10 yards really -- it's not kinetic. It belongs to the -- to the provincial government and the government of -- in Baghdad to make the connection with the province.

But I think that's increasingly the kind of thing that is more and more prevalent across the -- across the country, and that is, as kinetics have gone down, as the gunfights have gone down, as the Iraqi security forces have started to take control, the next obvious step is to just get things rebuilt and reestablished, whether it's health care, education and all that.

And the one thing I would want to end with, of course, today's the 25th anniversary of the Beirut bombing. That's something that's seared into the -- certainly the hearts and the souls of every Marine, I think probably most Americans as well. I think as we look back on that, that fundamentally was the beginning of this long war that we call the war on terrorism, although we didn't know that at the time. An awful lot of very, very good people lost in that -- in that incident. And certainly, I think for America, as you look back, it probably was the beginning of this war that will go on for some time.

But so long as we have, you know, the kind of troops that we have in the American military and -- you know, we can see this thing through. And I certainly appreciate all of you out there reporting not only the bad news but the good news, because there is so much good news out here that we ought to start to dwell on that, because we certainly focused for a long time on the bad news for obvious -- for obvious reasons, because there was a time here, not too long ago, that there was nothing but bad news.

But you know, the Marines that go out of here every night or the soldiers that leave their bases every night or the aviators that fly over the skies, they're the biggest witnesses of what's going on here. And I hate to turn this into a "mom and apple pie"

thing, but if you ask them, they will -- they're the better and more believable people to ask about what's going on in the province, because they'll tell you everything I've told you, but more at the human connection level of families and mosques that are open and schools that are open.

So please keep on reporting and thanks for doing what you do. Out.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you, General. And thank you for your time. And hopefully we'll have another opportunity with you while you're still on this tour to get another update in the not-too-far future.

GEN. KELLY: Thanks to you as well. And I am a little bit late for salsa night - we do that every -- every Wednesday night -- so I got to run. But the time I spent with you is certainly worth -- worth my time. Thanks so very much.

MR. WHITMAN: Thank you, general.

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