

**PRESS CONFERENCE**

**MAJOR GENERAL MICHAEL OATES, COMMANDING GENERAL OF  
MULTI-NATIONAL DIVISION CENTER; MS. JOANNE CUMMINGS, POLITICAL  
ADVISOR TO MG OATES, MNDC**

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**PARTICIPANTS:**

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INCLUDING SAM DAGHER, *NEW YORK TIMES*; AAMER MADHANI, *U.S. TODAY*;  
HAMID AKHMED, *AL-MALAF (PH) PRESS*; GINA CHON, *WALL STREET JOURNAL*;  
AND SHANE LIDDICK, *SAN DIEGO MAGAZINE***

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**INT = INTERPRETER**

**REPX = REPORTER 1-9**

MG OATES: As Salamu 'Alaykum. Good afternoon, everyone. My name's General Mike Oates and I'm the commanding general of Multi-National Division Center, and I'm joined by my political advisor, Ms. Joanne Cummings today. Thanks very much for coming.

I thought I might start out with just a couple of brief comments to acquaint you with Multi-National Division Center and our experiences over the last eight months. I guess the first thing I would bring to your attention is great change in our area, even more change than we observed when we first arrived back in May. Some of the facts on the ground that are readily observable: The number of attacks on our area has continued to diminish significantly; they were already low when we arrived, but in fact they've dropped to an average of one or two per day. In fact, in the last eight months we've had 60 days where we had no attacks at all in MND Center. And that's a very significant and positive development. I'll also update my assessment of the Iraqi army and Iraqi police. When I had my last press conference, I stated that I was amazed at how much they had improved since I last left Iraq in late 2006, and I think their progress has continued, in fact accelerated in the last eight months. The Iraqi army and the Iraqi police are in the security lead in all eight southern provinces that I currently have some operations ongoing in. And so this will be a historic year for us for progress. With the new security agreement in place, we are going to shift our focus primarily to developing civil capacity within the

provincial Nahia and Kada (ph) governments, and continue to professionalize the Iraqi army and Iraqi police. But they clearly already are in the security lead in our entire area. I think that as we look forward in the southern Iraq, we'll be challenged with a number of things. First is to continue to enable and support our Iraqi partners in the defeat of extremist groups. Although they do not attack us very frequently, they are still present in our area and they do conduct attacks, even though at low level. We have to ensure the implementation of the security agreement is done properly, and we are right now working through that with our Iraqi partners and have experienced no difficulty to date. We've got a series of elections in 2009, the first of which is the provincial elections on January 31st, and our participation there is to enable the Iraqi Security Forces to conduct a safe and secure election, and ultimately that the election be regarded as legitimate. And finally we have to balance some of the external threats to the country, even as countries outside Iraq seek to meddle in Iraqi politics and support extremist groups within the country, we still have a challenge there.

Our mission at Multi-National Division Center remains unchanged from when we arrived, and that is in partnership with the Iraqi army and police to protect the Iraqi populace. And we are currently operating at the request of the Government of Iraq through the security agreement to conduct these operations in full partnership with the Iraqi Security Forces.

And we'll expand our partnership with the American embassy and our provincial reconstruction teams and seek to enable them as they go forward to develop civil capacity and the local governments. And that's all I have to -- for opening remarks, and I'll turn to my colleague, Ms. Cummings and see if she has anything she'd like to pass along to you.

MS. CUMMINGS: It's -- It's a pleasure being here because I've -- this is my third tour in Iraq. And coming back this time and seeing the improvements has given me substantial hope for the direction that things are going. My role as POLAD, or political advisor, with MND-C is to work in partnership with Major General Oates, which is an honor and a privilege. And it indicates the increasing coordination and cooperation between the Department of State and the Department of Defense. That's something that we work on at all levels here, whether it's at the PRT's or at national level. And that will be my role while I'm here.

MG OATES: We'd be happy to take any questions that you have at this time. Yes, sir.

REP1: Sam Dagher with the New York Times. I'm sorry for arriving late, but the main road is closed to the Green Zone, so I'd imagine that's why many of our colleagues didn't show up. But anyway. Just coming in, I heard you talking about extremists in your area of operation, and also you spoke about meddling from neighboring countries or other countries who are

seeking to interfere in Iraq's internal affairs. I would just ask you to elaborate a little bit on what types of extremist elements are we talking about, you know, purely Shiite militias, Special Groups, other groups, maybe Sunni groups. I mean, we've seen an uptick in violence in Babil Province recently, I mean, in Yusufiyah and places like Jurf al-Sakhar which had been cleared and then declared, you know, a success recently. And then just -- I mean, lots of violence happening there recently. And also if you could touch on the meddling and what forms that type -- that meddling is manifesting itself. I mean, there was a report, I think, by the Pentagon talking about specifically Iranian interference in the upcoming elections. Thank you.

MG OATES:

Sure. That's a great question. First on the extremist groups. I'll start first with al Qaida in Iraq. In southern Iraq, the eight southern provinces that I operate in, al Qaida is very inactive at this point. They have been severely degraded and they really don't constitute a serious threat in southern Iraq at this point; although, they still have the capacity to attack very spectacularly. Their preferred method, of course, is suicide bombers and suicide vehicles. So we still see a very low level of these attacks; they're still present. They have attempted over the last several months to regenerate some of their cells in southern Iraq, but have not been very successful. With the Shia extremist groups, there's a positive report still in place in that JAM militia still remains largely compliant with Muqtada

al-Sadr's request that they not conduct violence. And that's a huge and significant piece of security in our area. But there are splinter groups that have not foresworn violence and still continue to attack both Coalition and Iraqi Security Forces and innocent civilians. While fewer in number, they still exist in our area and periodically they still are responsible for attacks. What's interesting is the number of attacks has gone up against Iraqi Security Forces as compared to against Coalition Forces, and we believe that this reflects the fact that these extremist groups are purely driven by violence against those who don't share their ideology. With regards to meddling from outside Iraq, we have continued to see some evidence of Iran's involvement -- and I would have to tell you quite frankly that a number of the weapons that we have attributed to Iran in the past, the 240-mm rockets and the explosively formed projectiles, we've seen fewer of those over the last six months, fewer attacks, fewer caches with those type of munitions. I'm not prepared to make an assessment they that have shut done lethal smuggling, but it is instructive to note that there are fewer of those types of explosives. But we still continue to see significant influence in terms of "soft" power, and that is involvement in Iraqi internal or domestic politics through the use of "front" commercial companies, much of which activity you could ascribe to being beneficial, that is, assistance to renovating hospitals or providing for the poor. But it also provides them the means by which they can seek to influence the upcoming elections by supporting certain candidates over others. And

we're watching this very carefully. The Prime Minister has been very clear about his desire that countries outside Iraq not meddle in their internal policies and politics, and we support that obviously, so we watch that very carefully. When you indicated there is an uptick, I would not use that term because the very small number of attacks that we actually see each week, you know, if you get two attacks, that would be considered an uptick. But two from zero is not significant, in my opinion. So --

REP1: (Inaudible). Sorry sir, maybe (fades). Sorry, I was just referring to some attacks in a specific area of Babil Province --

MG OATES: Okay. Sure.

REP1: -- in Jurf al-Sakhar, I mean, there have been -- I mean, we've been getting weekly reports of Awakening members targeted. There was obviously that big bombing in Yusufiyah that targeted a tribal gathering. I mean, granted, that's part of Baghdad Province, but it's still kind of...

MG OATES: It used to be part of our area --

REP1: Right.

MG OATES: -- Yusufiyah, very tragic attack against a group of Khargouli tribal members that were assembled -- [Sound lost for 30 seconds.] We in fact lost one of our Iraqi colonels, Iraqi Army colonels, who was an advisor to my division headquarters working there in the headquarters was killed in that attack as he was meeting there with his fellow tribal members. Those attacks, while they're spectacular, a number of people were killed and injured, still remain few in number. But they are spectacular when they happen. And I think that that attracts our interest and makes for news. But still, across the south, the number of attacks is very low. We had one down in Mussaib, a suicide bomber about three months ago, very unusual, had not seen a suicide bomber in there in a long time. And we've had one, and while it was spectacular for that week and significant for that week, overall these have really diminished significantly.

REP1: I mean, would you attribute some of this to -- excuse me. I'm sorry. Would you attribute some of this to intra-tribal fighting or...

MG OATES: You know, one thing I've learned while serving in Iraq is the simple answer is never usually the accurate one. There's all kinds of complex reasons why people conduct violence. I think that some of that will play out here in the elections with regards to just political infighting. I think there are obviously are times when there's intra-tribal strife. There are criminal elements as well. I mean, we tend to discount the amount of

violence that might be a direct result of criminal elements operating in the area. But clearly that's present as well. We tend to look at all attacks and try and assess who's behind them. But as you know, this can be very difficult to determine. Clearly suicide bombers, suicide vehicles, large explosive devices tend to be attributable to one of the extremist groups; that tends to be their method for attack. It's -- Not to belabor this point, but it's very instructive note that over the most recent religious holidays, we have experienced very few attacks in the south, and they've been generally very safe. Most recently Ashura Holiday passed with no attacks in my area. Yes, ma'am.

REP2: (Asks question in Arabic.)

INT: Secretary (ph) (inaudible). Major General, we do not forget the -- Iran and its intrusion in Iraq. Iran has lots to do with what's happening in Iraq. But some sides are within al Qaida, such as Mosul. Iran is not involved there. Also Yusufiyah, Latafiyah areas, they are within al Qaida control. How come you're blaming Iran specifically as the "hidden hands"? The Iraqi prisons are full with terrorists coming from Syria, Tunisia, from Afghanistan, from all over places. How come you only focus on one side? The southern parts are safe, still safe, after 2006 which was the most dangerous. But the hot zones now are the west and the north now. Whom do you blame? Thank you.

MG OATES:

Thank you. That's a good question. And I would -- I would remind you that I started out talking about extremist groups, mentioning al Qaida. But the fact is in southern Iraq we don't see al Qaida's influence. So I'm just speaking about southern Iraq. Clearly al Qaida exists in greater numbers in Mosul and parts of Diyala, and certainly had significant activities out west. But in southern Iraq, the majority of the violence that we see, even though it's low level, tends to be the work of Shia extremist groups. There are not many of them, but they do exist. And I don't -- I don't blame Iran for everything. What I said was: Iran has influence in southern Iraq, and some of it is good. They do seek to provide help for building hospitals. They do provide support to the poor. They clearly have an interest in southern Iraq. My concern is the degree to which they may seek to influence Iraqi politics. And the Prime Minister has indicated that he's not in favor of any country, whether it's Iran or any other country, becoming involved in Iraqi politics. But we also know that there are elements within Iran who have supported extremist groups in Iraq with lethal munitions that have been used to kill Americans and kill Iraqis. While these attacks have gone down significantly, they still occur. And so I am optimistic, based on the number of attacks dropping, that we will see a reduction in this type of support for lethal activity. And I'd -- I don't seek to blame Iran for everything here. And if I gave you that impression, that was not my intention. Yes, sir.

REP3: (Asks question in Arabic.)

INT: As Salamu 'Alaykum. My question is about as we see the map, the operation, your operation area is giant operation. Was it in Maysan, according to the map, is within your operation area? There are common borders between you and Iran. What is your role in controlling and securing the borders and to stop the smuggling of such weapons to Iraq and to prevent it from being a harm against U.S. and Iraqi forces? Thank you.

MG OATES: Thanks very much. With regards to border security, our role -- we have -- we are operating in two provinces that border Iran, Wasit Province and Maysan Province. And our role is to strengthen and develop the Iraqi Department of Border Enforcement. They are the ones that are conducting the security operations right at the port of entries (sic) in Zurbatia and al-Waheb (ph). Back from the ports of entry, we continue to work with the Iraqi army to develop the ability to interdict any lethal smuggling of munitions. And that's been very successful. The United States Army directorial in interdicting lethal munitions is very small. We do all of our operations with the Iraqi Security Forces and enable them. We believe that they're enjoying a tremendous success. We see fewer and fewer lethal munitions coming across the border. And so I give all credit to the

Department of Border Enforcement and to the Iraqi army. Further, the Iraqi police have been very successful inside the cities discovering caches of lethal munitions that have been able to go by the army and the Department of Border Enforcement and have also arrested a number of people who have been involved in that smuggling. So this is great strength between the Department of Border Enforcement, the Army and the Iraqi police, and I think that's why we're enjoying such great success. Yes, sir.

REP4: Aamer Madhani, U.S. Today. I was wondering, the GOI is now looking at about a \$15 billion shortfall as a result of declining oil revenue and oil prices in next year's budget. I was wondering, one, in your area of operation, and perhaps both of you might be able to weigh in on this: Are Iraqi officials identifying projects either to put aside or postpone or cut altogether? And two, what significance does this have and what -- is this a serious threat to the security gains you guys have made in this area?

MG OATES: We are aware that the Iraqi budget has had to be recalibrated based on the drop in oil prices, and we do anticipate that there will be some reduction in the ministries that operate in our area. We've not seen the final numbers yet, but I think that's probably a reasonable expectation. I don't expect that it will have a significant impact in the security gains. I'm most concerned now that we build on the security we have to deliver essential services to

the Iraqi people. What they tell me they want is electricity and clean water and healthcare and safe food and their agriculture sector reestablished. This is going to take money; and those ministries, if they're properly funded, I think will begin to establish long-term security for Iraq. We are already enjoying short-term security in the south. As I indicated, you know, we average one attack a day in all of southern Iraq, not including Basra Province. But that's extremely significant. There -- I can't imagine it getting any safer than it currently is right now. But the absence of attacks doesn't mean that we're going to enjoy long-term security. I think long-term security is going to be a function of the Government of Iraq developing the capacity to serve its people and to deliver these essential services. And that's why there may be some risk if the budget is cut too significantly in those areas. The Iraqi army and the Iraqi police are still growing and developing; certainly they'll need to be funded. And we'll be anxious to see what the budget numbers are when they're released. And then I'll be able to give you a more accurate assessment what the impact may be.

MS. CUMMINGS: I don't have anything to add to that although I will say that the embassy, through the economic section, follows this very closely. And for more information from that side, I would refer you to the embassy.

MG OATES: You did ask me if there had been any specific projects cut, and I've not been informed of any specific projects that are going to be cut yet. Yes, sir.

REP5: Thank you. Question to both of you, if possible. I mean, you mentioned twice already that the Prime Minister of Iraq has indicated that he would -- doesn't want to see a -- sort of a neighboring country, perhaps like Iran, interfering in local politics. And you are in a way kind of involved in, in carrying out that wish. Is that -- I mean, you seem to have indicated that, it's almost like you said the wish of the Prime Minister is to have no, no foreign country interfere in local politics. I mean, is it the mission of the U.S. military at this stage to make sure that wish is carried out?

MG OATES: No. And when I indicated that it was the wish of the Prime Minister that foreign countries not meddle in Iraqi politics, that was a statement of fact. I tend to agree with it, quite frankly. But, but our involvement in the elections is very minimal. We are helping the Iraqi Security Forces develop plans for security. But quite frankly, in southern Iraq, they have developed all the security plans and they are very sound, and I am very confident they will handle the security mission very well. We'll be able to provide some additional assistance to them if need be. The Independent High Electoral Commission is doing a great job in terms of getting information out to the voters. I've had several conversations with the

IHEC representatives in each of the provinces to offer our assistance, and they have indicated that they don't need any assistance from us at this point, they've got things well in hand. So when I made that comment, it's purely from a statement of fact that we would absolutely concur with that, and as foreign countries seek to influence domestic politics through "soft" power, which would be information campaigns, maybe psychological operations, financing certain candidates, we would see that as not consistent with the desires of the Prime Minister or the people of Iraq who, who seek to have this election free of that kind of influence. That's -- That was my only point on that.

REP5: Did you actually encounter concrete evidence of this stuff taking place? I mean the financing of certain candidates?

MG OATES: I will tell you that I would categorize it a lot of anecdotal evidence to indicate that people who may not have had a significant amount of resources suddenly do and are able to provide for, you know, campaign posters and information. There's a great deal of speculation out there in the population about who may be financing these kinds of things. I think it's worth watching, and that was the point I made earlier: We -- you know, we're not casting any stones at anybody; we're purely making the statement that we would agree with the Prime Minister that everybody

should allow Iraqis to settle this election, and we are observing that as best we can.

REP5: But it is something you are concerned about, that would be -- that would be a valid thing to say; it is an issue that you are concerned about currently?

MG OATES: I would be concerned purely because we've seen Iran in particular seek to influence events in Iraq in the past through the smuggling of lethal munitions and enabling certain violent extremist groups. I have also indicated that it appears that that has dropped off significantly. So I'm -- Although I'm not prepared to say that they did that consciously, I have to report the facts as I see them. I can only be hopeful that Iran is taking this to heart and that they will not seek to involve themselves in Iraq's internal politics.

I do believe the election will be safe. But what's terribly important, I think, to the Iraqi people is that the election be credible and legitimate. And I think that once people start to influence the domestic politics from outside the country, that may make that problematic or difficult. And that's my only desire. Yes, sir.

REP5: Just a question of clarity. Is there any sort of concrete evidence that you have of the Iranians financing any parties? And if so, can you quantify it at all?

MG OATES: I don't have any concrete evidence of that at this point. I have circumstantial and anecdotal evidence, and that would not be enough for me to cast aspersions towards them at this point.

REP6: (Asks question in Arabic.)

INT: For the general. What are the key initiatives of the Coalition Forces as to the Green Zone?

MG OATES: Let me ask for clarity on the question. What are the Coalition's initiatives for the Green Zone; is that correct? The International Zone --

INT: (Asks question in Arabic to the reporter.)

MG OATES: -- as it's referred to, is not inside my area of operations, and I'm not terribly conversant with what the long-term plans are for the International Zone. So I'm not sure I can answer your question directly, sir. I do know that I was here on 1 January when the security provisions of the International Zone were transferred to the Government of Iraq, and it

seemed to go very well. But all my area of operations is in southern Iraq. So I'm not -- I don't have any additional information on what the long-term plan is for the International Zone.

REP7: (Asks question in Arabic.)

INT: Major General, Hamid Akhmed, al-Malaf (ph) Press. Southern Iraq, what are your tasks -- According to your tasks, do you and Iraqi forces have fears against Islamic Trends that are nominating for the provincial elections in case there should be some disputes from foreign sides? Southern Iraq, have you put this in your mind?

MG OATES: I can tell you that the primary tasks of the Iraqi army and the Iraqi police and the Coalition Force is to ensure that the elections are conducted in a safe manner; that is, that the Iraqi people are free to go to the polling sites free of violence so they can cast their historic vote. That's our primary task.

With regards to what's actually going on in terms of campaigning, I'm very happy to see that so many Iraqi citizens are actually running for office. I think almost 15,000 people. But what this means is many people are interested in serving their government and serving their people. But very few of them will actually be elected; most of the provincial councils have

somewhere between 30 and 25 members. So very few will actually be elected. But for so many Iraqis to step forward and run for election is a very positive sign. I have seen over the last several weeks a significant increase in campaigning and posters showing up, people out talking to the citizens about why they want to be elected, seeing a great deal of information on the TV and heard over the radio. These are all positive signs. And I -- I don't anticipate that there will be a significant amount of violence leading up to the election or actually on election day. I am a little concerned about after the election and in the transition of power in February and March before we seat the new provincial councils. And those who, who did not win the election or those who were voted out of office, or those people who voted and their candidate did not win, that they're willing to accept this election's results peacefully and transition power peacefully. This will be a historic time in southern Iraq, all of the major parties are involved. And I believe that they will share power in most of the provinces. And my hope is that those who are disappointed don't take out their disappointment in violence. This will be a great thing for this transition of power to occur peacefully. Yes, ma'am.

REP8: Gina Chon, Wall Street Journal. I apologize if any of these questions were asked before, because I came in late. One question related to --

MG OATES: I hope I answer them the same way.

REP8: One question related to Iranian influence, you talked about possibility of traffic coming into Iraq, but have you noticed anything the opposite way in terms of either like Iraqi journalists going to Iran or candidates or others for a certain -- I've heard like, media training or so-called media training for local journalists or other aspects that are related to the elections, but they're not doing that in Iraq, it's taking place in Iran itself.

And then my other question related to what you just said about sort of the post-election period and, you know, with election results never really coming here in a timely fashion. If you are concerned about that transition and how it goes, what is the plan to do something about it if you do see a spike in violence, you know, what can really be done if that is the case?  
Thank you.

MG OATES: Let me make sure I understand the first part of your question again. You're interested in what transit we're seeing going from Iraq into Iran?

REP8: Yeah, I don't know if you would have any -- Sorry. I don't know if you would have any even anecdotal evidence about that, but it's just some things that we've been hearing, just from people sort of here and there, whether they've been asked to do it or have seen it themselves.

MG OATES:

I will tell you that I go out to the border port of entry at Zurbatia and to Waheb on occasion, and I have forces that are physically present at the port of entry helping train the border police. And I can report to you very honestly that the flow of traffic from Iran into Iraq is significant. Trucks, thousands of trucks coming in every day with produce, manufactured goods, and virtually no trucks going from Iraq into Iran. Still a tremendous number of pilgrims coming from Iran into Iraq to head to the holy shrines as well, so still a lot of people coming in. I have not seen a significant increase of people or vehicles going into Iran, and I have no evidence or reports of people training in Iran, although periodically we get anecdotal intelligence reports that there are training camps; I don't have any specific evidence to, to support that with. With regards to post-election violence, I'm not saying that there will be post-election violence; I am merely preparing myself in the event that people who are disappointed by the results of the election may seek to manifest their disappointment through violence. And if that should occur, the Iraqi Security Forces are well prepared to handle that. We will continue in our role to support them. If they ask for help, we will provide that help. But I will tell you in the last six months, in all of southern Iraq, the Iraqi army and the Iraqi police have had the security lead and have done incredibly good work in keeping the area safe. And I believe they will continue to do that. I have tremendous confidence in them, and I know the two division commanders, the 8th Iraqi Armored Division, Lieutenant General Utman

(ph) and the 10th Iraqi Army Division Commander, Major General Habib, and every one of the provincial directors of police, I know them personally, and most of the brigade commanders, they're very, very capable men and they've done tremendous work. So I'm not concerned about them being able to handle the violence; I'm just hopeful that there won't be a lot of it and that we safely transition power. Does that answer your question?

REP8: (Inaudible).

MG OATES: Okay. Are there any other questions? Yes, sir.

REP9: Shane Liddick, San Diego Magazine. I spent the last few months out in Anbar Province with the 3/7 marines. I know one of their major objectives right now is legitimizing the government. Security and stability is the word of the day out there. There aren't many attacks. But they're trying to get people to buy into the new government now, and that's their plan for establishing more security. I'm wondering if you see -- if you're working one of the same phases in your area of operations right now. And I'm curious about corruption as well. Corruption was definitely a problem in the local government out in Anbar. And the perception out there was that corruption was really bad in Baghdad. So I was wondering when I came to Baghdad if I was going to see a difference in opinion of the

population, but the people that I've talked to here, the Iraqis, civilians, professionals, seem to concur that corruption is a problem in the central government here. So I'm wondering if you're facing that in your area of operations as well, and particularly, Ms. Cummings, as a political advisor, how do you counter those perceptions of corruption? I don't necessarily need you to address corruption itself, although I would be interested to know your assessment of the level of corruption or the corruption problems in the central government, if you could, and the area of operations here. More importantly, how do you counteract those perceptions?

MG OATES: Do you want me to start with that? All right. The first is, the question I thought you might ask, I'll go ahead and answer. It's kind of a segue to what you asked me, which is with the security situation as good as it is and the low level of violence, why are we still here? And the answer to your question is we are continuing to develop the Iraqi Security Forces to make them as professional as we can be -- as they can be. But we are moving towards addressing this issue of building civil capacity in the provincial governments. We do believe that long-term security in Iraq is tied to the government being able to deliver essential services and have credibility with its citizens. This would be the antithesis of corruption and the concern that things are just done because you know someone. And so I think that there's a lot of still good work that we can be helpful with in

terms of working with the local governments. The corruption piece is a --

There's actual corruption, no doubt. There is a significant perception of corruption, and some of that, in my opinion, directly reflects a lack of ability of the bureaucrats to actually take care of the business of government. So when the government at the low level is unable to address a problem promptly, then there's always the perception, well, there's corruption involved. And sometimes it's just a function of not having the skill to get that done or that in order to get the resources they have to go through this massive bureaucracy in order to secure the resources necessary. So I do think there is some actual corruption; I do think there's more a perception of corruption than anything. And depending on where you go in Iraq, the people that you talk to will all tell you that somebody else is doing better than they are. I find this everywhere I go that all the resources are going somewhere other than their home, town. And so I think there is a significant perception of lack of delivery of essential services and corruption that exacerbates the already existing problem. What can we do about that? Believe it or not, one of the major things that has improved in the last several months is the Iraqi press. Right here in this room is the antidote to corruption and public perception. Because the more information that is reported accurately to the Iraqi people, the less perception of corruption and less perception of ineptitude, because the facts are displayed for what they are. So I would encourage you to continue the great success in particular the Iraqi press has had this last six

months. It'll be enormously important after the election that the Iraqi press reports accurately on what happened, good and bad, so that the people develop confidence. And that will start to mitigate this perception of corruption and everything else. To physically attack corruption, I think we need to make sure that those people who are elected to government, that they have as much skill as possible to execute their duties. And we have a joint mission to work on that. And I do believe that if they're capable of doing their job, that most of them will do that. Corruption is with us forever, as you well know, every country. Joanne, anything you want to add to that?

MS. CUMMINGS: Corruption in a country in transition is always difficult because institutions are in flux. And the effort to assist the Iraqi government in dealing with its own institutional capacity to combat corruption has been something that's been part of what we have all been trying to do, and of course other Coalition partners and other groups that have been working in the country. This is not to say that everything is perfect. And it is part of our partnership in our region, part of the work of PRT's, including USAID, the Department of Justice, other groups that are working on developing local capacity to respond to that. But I would strongly agree with what Major General Oates said, that it is -- it is, in a way, the press that brings things to light, both the good and the bad.

MG OATES: Are there any other last questions? We'll go ahead and wrap up if not.  
Yes.

REP9: One more while I got the mike.

MG OATES: Sure.

REP9: Again, out west, one of the major factors, again, going back to corruption, one of the major factors out there was oil smuggling, and the interaction that I had with the military, they were very pragmatic and real politic about the fact that oil smuggling has been part of the landscape here for a long time and it's not going to magically go away any time soon. I'm wondering if it's -- if oil smuggling is a problem and a recognized part of the GDP, as they call it, in the south as well?

MG OATES: Not so much. As you know, the oil smuggling in Anbar is largely heavy fuel oil going out by trucks, not to Syria, but in the south, the oil is exported largely by pipeline. And so much more difficult to smuggle when using a pipeline. And you can measure how much goes into it and how much comes out of it. But I will tell you it's of some concern that the Government of Iraq relies very heavily on its wellbeing through the export of oil. And so this is an area where the press in particular, and full disclosure of the ministries of what's being exported out of the country and

how much money that's generating will be very helpful to mitigate any perception of corruption. And once those things are brought to light and the public can see how many barrels of oil were exported, what the net proceeds were from that and where it went into the Treasury -- I think that -- it doesn't eliminate the perception and reality of corruption, but it significantly mitigates it. And so I would -- I would once again encourage the press to ask those hard questions and bring that to light.

I would like to thank all of you for coming. It's a pleasure to meet with you. I will tell you that there isn't a free society in the world that can exist without a free and robust media and press. And you have a very valuable contribution to the Government of Iraq as it goes forward. I tend not to look at news as good or bad; it's just news. But I do know that without a free and active press, the Government of Iraq will struggle. So I encourage each of you to continue to support this country as it seeks to develop itself. I'm very optimistic about the future; I have also been here a number of times. I am very encouraged by the fact that violence is way down. I'm very, very encouraged by the will of the Iraqi Security Forces to stand up and defend their country. If I did not feel that way, I would tell you. Because that's what I said when I left here last time, I was concerned about that. But I'm not now; I'm very optimistic about it, and I spend about five days of every week out with the Iraqi army and the Iraqi police. And across the board, they are performing magnificently. There's

room for improvement; they are a tremendous force for managing security within Iraq, but they are not as capable as they need to be to defend Iraq from external threats. This is what a professional military does is defend the sovereign borders of a country. And they will continue to improve over the next several years. And by invitation of the Government of Iraq, the U.S. military will continue to support them as they develop into the army that they want to become. I do think the long-term security of this country, as in any country, is the connection of the government with its people and the delivery of essential services and a confidence of the people that the government will serve them. And I think that these elections in January and the subsequent elections in '09 are going to go a long ways towards improving long-term security for Iraq. It's very difficult for people outside or inside Iraq to incite violence or cause people to take up extremist ideologies if the Government of Iraq is providing those services to the people and if the people feel confident in their government. And so that's where we're going to put our efforts this year to help them. And I appreciate you coming today, and you are welcome to travel in southern Iraq with us at any time. We, we travel all over the eight southern provinces. And any time if you'd like to come out and see anything in particular, all you need do is ask. And we're a very user-friendly organization with regards to the media. So please take me up on that. Thank you very much. Shukran jazilan.

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