

DoD News Briefing from Iraq with Lt. Gen. Frank Helmick, commander, Multi-National Security Transition Command – Iraq, August 20, 2009

COLONEL DAVID LAPAN (Defense Department Spokesman): General, this is Colonel Dave Lapan at the Pentagon. I'll be moderating the press briefing. Do you still have us loud and clear?

GEN. HELMICK: I got you loud and clear, Dave. Thank you.

COL. LAPAN: Roger, sir.

Good morning, all. And good afternoon to the general. We are privileged to have with us today Lieutenant General Frank Helmick, who is the commander of Multinational Security Transition Command-Iraq, also known as MNSTC-I; and also, NATO Training Mission-Iraq. General Helmick assumed his current duties in Iraq in July 2008. This is his first time briefing us in this format. He joins us today from Forward Operating Base Prosperity in Baghdad. General Helmick will make some opening statements, and then he'll take your questions.

General, thank you very much for joining us today, and over to you.

GEN. HELMICK: Dave, thank you very much. And good morning to all of you. I just want to say up front I'm very happy to be here today to talk to you about the situation in Iraq and the role of the Multinational Security Transition Command and NATO in Iraq. But first, I must address the horrific attacks that took place yesterday in Baghdad.

We want to express our condolences to the victims and their families and all those affected by the attacks yesterday. These events clearly demonstrate that security is not only an ongoing process, it really is a never-ending commitment.

One attack in Iraq is one too many, but we must remember where we've been. The Iraqi security forces have demonstrated their increased capability, and the declining

number of attacks over time is proof of that. Yes, we have much work to be done, and the U.S. forces will continue to work with the people of Iraq to improve the capabilities of their security forces.

Over the past months, U.S. forces have handed over most responsibilities to the Iraqi military and the Iraqi police. As this responsible drawdown continues, the number of U.S. forces in Iraq will shrink from about 132,000, which is the current set, to more -- to no more than 50,000 by August 2010. Further, as directed by the president of the United States, all U.S. forces will be out of Iraq by the end of December, 2011.

As the drawdown continues, the role of U.S. forces is increasingly focused on advising Iraqi security institutions. We continue to help Iraq develop the institutional capacity necessary for their security forces to protect the Iraqi people, to do so within the rule of law, in accordance with international standards; all the while respecting human rights.

What do I mean by institutional capacity? In short, I mean helping the government of Iraq develop the capacity to train, equip, employ and supervise their security forces. Iraq has come a long way in these last couple of years in being able to field tactically proficient soldiers and police.

But supporting these soldiers and police in the field remains a challenge. The government of Iraq still needs help in establishing fully functional maintenance and logistics systems, as well as help in things like effectively managing the personnel actions required in a nation-wide police system which employs today over 400,000 policemen.

Along with other improvements, the government of Iraq is also making positive strides in the professionalization of their security institutions. Iraq's security forces are visibly proud to serve their nation. Unlike the past, security forces are effectively resisting sectarian and other negative influences. This is in stark contrast from a few years ago when some units refused to follow lawful instructions, or simply melted away.

In closing, Iraq's security forces are also benefiting from the range of professional development activities facilitated by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization training

mission here in Iraq. About 270 NATO personnel from 13 NATO nations and one Partnership for Peace nation are helping to teach and advise the next generation of leaders in Iraq's military staff college and police academies. Together, the efforts of the Multinational Security Transition Command and NATO in Iraq, and the broader international community, are helping the Iraqi people and the government of Iraq toward a free and prosperous future.

We condemn yesterday's attacks of terrorism and will continue to partner with the Iraqi security forces to help protect the people of Iraq, the service members of the Multinational Security Transition Command and NATO in Iraq are proud to be part of this effort.

Thank you for allowing me to say a few words, and I look forward to answering some of your questions.

COL. LAPAN: Thank you, General.

Pauline.

Q Pauline Jelinek with the Associated Press. Sir, on yesterday's performance by the Iraqi security forces, was this outcome, do you think, more a case of they made mistakes or are not effective enough, or rather, there was collusion or infiltration by insurgents, or all of the above?

GEN. HELMICK: Well, let me state, number one, that, again, we strongly -- along with the government of Iraq -- condone -- I mean, condemn, the bombings that took place in Baghdad. It is terrible, and no one can say otherwise.

Having said that, the government of Iraq is conducting an investigation right now. Clearly there was a lapse of security, or this would not have happened. However if you look across the board, over a period of time, this type of attack has not been seen since back in 2007.

On average, if you look around the country, we have today the lowest levels of attack since we've been keeping statistics on the levels of incidents, security incidents, throughout the country.

So again we condemn this attack. It really served no legitimate purpose. The Iraqi government is taking this very, very seriously and conducting an investigation to be sure.

Q (Off mike) -- security forces that were detained and are being questioned. Should we take away from that that there was infiltration, that they were involved? What do you make of that?

GEN. HELMICK: Again I don't want to speculate on who has been detained and who has not been detained. All I can say is that again the government of Iraq is taking this very, very seriously. And they have an investigation that's ongoing.

Q General, Tom Bowman with NPR.

Prime Minister Maliki blamed these bombings on Sunni insurgents linked to al Qaeda. Do you have any sense of who was behind these bombings? And also Maliki said that Iraq, quote, "must reassess its security measures." Do you know what he was talking about?

GEN. HELMICK: Again I don't want to speculate on what Prime Minister Maliki knows and the information that he has received. But as I mentioned in the opening statement, you know, providing security in this country is a never-ending commitment. You are never good enough in Iraq on the security situation.

So it's a continual training process, partnering process, and developing the capability necessary to provide a secure environment for the people of this country. Sure, we should reassess. And that is exactly what the government of Iraq is doing now.

Q Who's behind these bombings?

GEN. HELMICK: Again I do not know who's behind the bombings. I would not speculate who is behind the bombings. As I mentioned, again, the government of Iraq is doing a thorough -- is beginning a thorough investigation, to determine who in fact is behind these bombings.

COL. LAPAN: Yeah.

Q General, this is Joe Tabet with Al Hurra. Based on what happened yesterday, in what direction do you think Iraq is going? Are you expecting more attacks in the next few weeks?

GEN. HELMICK: Well, clearly, you know, the Iraqi -- the attacks yesterday looked like, based on where they happened, was against the government of Iraq, to try to discredit the government of Iraq, at two government buildings.

Do we anticipate more attacks in the future? I think there are going to be some bad days ahead. I don't know if, in fact, how many bad days there will be. But again, if you look at the progress of the Iraqi security forces across the board, there are more good days ahead than there will be bad days ahead. And again, this is a constant challenge and a constant commitment to maintain security in this country.

Q General, just to follow up, in the scenario of bad days, as you said, how much do you think the possibility to review the security agreement with the Iraqi government could take place?

GEN. HELMICK: The review of any security agreement with the Iraqi government is up to the government of Iraq and the United States. That is a policy decision that will have to be discussed between the two governments.

Q General, it's Mike Mount with CNN. Has General Odierno at all consulted with you regarding these attacks yesterday to kind of get a sense of where Iraqi security training is? Obviously, he's said in the past that he's going to look at how the security situation is on the ground before he starts kind of making decisions on troop withdrawals. Have you all had a conversation at all to see where the level of security is and maybe what went wrong yesterday?

GEN. HELMICK: General Odierno is in constant contact with us, in constant contact with the governor of Iraq, the officials. As a matter of fact, just before I came over here, we discussed this situation, and, again, what our commitment to the governor of Iraq is to continue to provide any assistance, any and all assistance that they've requested or they will request in the future.

So there is a -- General Odierno is on the cutting edge of -- the forefront of this, and he is keeping a constant pulse, really, if you will, on the situation as it unfolds.

Q Can you share at all the conversation between you and the general on -- about yesterday's attack?

GEN. HELMICK: The -- General O. was clear about, again, we will provide any assistance and all assistance that the government of Iraq requests from us, to include technical assistance on some of our more technical capabilities that we have that the government of Iraq has yet to have the opportunity to have inside their military and police forces -- for example, some of our forensics capabilities. If requested, we'll provide that. The intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance platforms that we have that the Iraqis have yet to develop that capability -- if requested, we'll provide that.

So again, this is a part of the security agreement that we will continue to work with the government of Iraq.

Q (Off mike) -- has not requested anything officially yet?

GEN. HELMICK: Oh, they did. Yesterday they did request some intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance platforms. We provided that. They've also requested some medical assistance, which we provided as well. As a matter of fact, last night I had an opportunity to see a few of the Iraqi wounded at the hospital late last night, just to see how they were doing. So again, we have provided any and all requests that the government of Iraq -- any of all capability that the government of Iraq has asked for.

Q (Off mike) -- with that one. One last question. How about any forensics assistance?

GEN. HELMICK: Absolutely. And the government of Iraq did ask for that yesterday, and we're providing that capability.

COL. LAPAN: Gordon.

Q Gordon Lubold, with the Christian Science Monitor. So what was the scope of what you provided on the ground to the Iraqis yesterday in the aftermath? But also, are you frustrated -- you've mentioned that -- by request, by request, and that's subject to the security agreement, but I mean, are you guys at all frustrated that the requests haven't been more forthcoming, more requests from the Iraqis?

GEN. HELMICK: No, I don't think we are frustrated because the requests are not forthcoming. If you look -- again, if you take this incident in isolation -- and again, I do not want to discount this, but if you look at the past 18 months, the security trends have been very, very good -- again, at an all-time low. And this clearly is a spike, and there was a breakdown in security.

So I don't think that we are -- or at least I am not frustrated with the lack of requests.

What I am personally frustrated with is that, again, we must continue to develop the capabilities inside the Iraqi military. And we are doing that as fast as we can. My frustration is we -- I am not doing it fast enough. And we want to continue to do that as we move to the timeline of 50,000 in August of 2010 and down to zero in December 2011.

Q Point of view, from that standpoint, what are some of the things that you want to work on with them from where you sit?

GEN. HELMICK: Right. You know, what we have done so far to date is the -- I don't want to say the easy things, but the less difficult things. It's easy to build an infantryman and an infantry unit; it's very, very difficult and it takes time to build an intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance technician to build a platform for the Iraqis. In other words, airplanes with qualified crews, Iraqi crews that can fly them and analyze the data; for example, in the ISR platform.

In the police side of the house, it's easy to build a policeman; it's very, very difficult and it takes time to build forensics labs for the Iraqis, where they have scientists that are trained, where they can secure a site and exploit the evidence on that site to convict someone vice a confession to convict someone.

All of these things are very, very difficult to do, and it takes time. Another frustration, of course, is building a logistics system for the Iraqis. It is very, very difficult and very time-consuming to build a national logistics system, something that just doesn't happen overnight.

So those are the kinds of difficult things as we move forward into the rest of 2009 and '10 that we really have to focus on and accelerate. That is my personal frustration with where we are today.

Q General, this is Viola Gienger from Bloomberg News. Can you talk a little bit more about the capacity that -- the requests that the Iraqis did make yesterday in a little bit more detail and tell us about that?

Was that during the incidents? Was that afterwards? And what exactly is that going to involve?

And you mentioned that this attack yesterday was the first time since 2007 of this type of attack. What did you mean by that? And do you still have sort of mentors -- you still have a sort of mentor or training capacity within some of the police forces, right? And what are they doing at this point?

GEN. HELMICK: The -- when I say "this type of attack," this magnitude of an attack is something that was commonplace back in 2007, June of 2007, when we had 1,600 attacks a week in this country -- some sort of attack, whether it's a direct-fire attack, IED attack, BBIED attack. But back in June of 2007, there were about 1,600 a week in the country on average. Today there are less than 80 a week. So that's what I said when I talk about the magnitude of the attack.

In MNSTC-I, we do have advisers that are embedded inside the security ministries, inside the different director generals, both in the Ministry of Defense as well as the minister of the -- Ministry of the Interior. And for us, we have advisers in the institutional training bases -- in other words, where we train recruits, where we train detectives, where we train recruit policemen and also recruit soldiers and logistics units. That's where we have advisers embedded, inside those organizations and at those institutional training bases throughout the country.

Q And the assistance that you were asked to provide yesterday, can you talk a little more about that, please?

GEN. HELMICK: Yeah. I was not directly involved in the assistance. This was after the fact, where I heard about the assistance we provided. We can get back to you on the specifics, if you really want to know exactly what time they asked for the assistance.

COL. LAPAN: Courtney.

Q Hi, General. This is Courtney Kube from NBC News. Can you update us on the Sons of Iraq program, how many Sons of Iraq have transitioned into the Iraqi security forces, how many are still hoping to, if you know that, and where that stands to date, I guess?

GEN. HELMICK: Yeah, the program with the Sons of Iraq seems to be going along very, very well. Again, I am not intimately involved in the Sons of Iraq program. We're -- in my command. That is really General Jacoby's command. I can talk to it on -- at a strategic level, if you will.

That was a commitment made by the government of Iraq and the coalition force to ensure that all of these Sons of Iraq were paid and employed by the government of Iraq, and that includes the security institutions, both the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of the Interior.

Just recently -- and all these people are -- have been paid and accounted for, and General Jacoby and the Corps are going through an elaborate process to ensure that everyone is paid and their pay is current, as they continue to provide security in some way, shape or form inside the government -- inside the country of Iraq.

There is programs ongoing where these Sons of Iraq are retrained and employed in other ministries inside the government of Iraq besides a security ministry. There was a -- an event recently held in Baghdad where thousands -- I want to say more than 2,000, less than 3,000 -- were, in fact, given jobs in other ministries. And that was a ceremony held by General Abboud and Multinational Division in Baghdad for that.

So the program is working. The commitment remains firm between the government of Iraq, the coalition here -- in other words, the United States, Multinational Force-Iraq and the Sons of Iraq, to ensure that these Sons of Iraq, who made a commitment to us --

when I say us, the government of Iraq and the force here -- to continue to help us provide security for this country.

Q General, Bill McMichael, Military Times newspapers. General Odierno has recently talked about possibly moving more forces up into the more restive northern areas to try to alleviate security concerns there and bring the various factions in the Iraqi forces together. Have -- do you have a concurrent effort, as far as training goes, up in that area as well, or is that being considered along with those -- with General Odierno's considerations of moving more forces up north?

GEN. HELMICK: Well, clearly the relationship between inside the disputed internal boundaries is something that General Odierno, something the government of Iraq and -- the central government of Iraq and the regional government in the KRG region are working through. This is a concept that General Odierno has discussed with Prime Minister Maliki. So it's yet to be determined exactly what will happen.

I know there are other discussions that are going on operationally, as we continue to refine a possible way ahead. There's no question that this -- the relationships between the government of Iraq and the central -- the Kurdish regional government is something that is foremost on everyone's mind here.

Q Do those discussions include possibly moving more U.S. trainers up north?

GEN. HELMICK: There was no discussion with me about moving any trainers from the Multi-National Security Transition Command up north. Not at all.

Q General, it's Gordon from The Monitor again.

I just wonder if we could go back to the ISR platforms you talked about earlier and the training. Is there any lack of American assets there to help you train the Iraqis as you need to?

GEN. HELMICK: There are no lack of assets to help us train the Iraqis on the ISR program. We have -- we have Air Force training teams embedded with the Iraqi air force. The Iraqi air force have purchased sufficient platforms, ISR platforms. Pilots are being trained. Technicians are being trained.

They do have a capability. I do not want to overstate their capability. It is a very, very limited, basic capability now, where they are flying sorties and providing live downlinks to mobile stations, for ISR on -- for operations, for -- they did so in the provincial elections.

So there is a capability, albeit a very, very basic, limited capability. Again as I mentioned, this takes much more time than it does to build, you know, an infantryman. And that's what we're working through. However we are partnering as well with the Air Force as we move forward in this endeavor.

Q General, Tom Bowman again with NPR.

When Prime Minister Maliki was here a short time back, he said it's -- that the Iraqi government may need U.S. trainers and mentors to remain after 2011, when all U.S. forces are supposed to be out of there.

Now, you said it's going to take a while to build the capacity within the police or within the army or logistics or so forth. You can probably answer this better than anyone in Iraq: What's your sense of what they're going to need after 2011, when all U.S. forces are supposed to be out of there?

GEN. HELMICK: Well, Tom, that's a very good question, and it's really the million-dollar question. We look towards 2011, December 2011, and we do not have a crystal ball, that's for sure. The security situation will impact on how fast we can accelerate a capability for the security forces. And I -- when I say that, we talk about every one of the different security forces, the Iraqi army, the Iraqi navy, the Iraqi marines, the Iraqi air force, and then the host of different police forces.

Much of this capability that we will need to develop by the end of 2011 requires decisions by the government of Iraq to purchase certain platforms. For example, the governor of Iraq just about a month ago decided to purchase the needed patrol boats for security for the territorial waters and the oil platforms. These patrol boats take a year to build.

So as we move forward, we look at when these patrol boats will be here, do we have the crews that we can train, will the crews be trained in time by the end of December 2011. So they're -- these are very, very complex issues that require government of Iraq intervention, the security situation intervention, money to purchase the platforms, et cetera. And I can go -- each one of them is very, very different in nature.

So this would take a very, very long time to discuss, but basically, I think we will be close on everything. The air force sovereignty issue could be a challenge by the end of December 2011.

I have to say, Prime Minister Maliki's visit -- if you don't mind me digressing a little bit, I had a chance to go back to Washington with the Prime Minister and the Minister of Defense and Minister of the Interior during that visit, and things struck me -- two things struck me as we did that visit.

Number one, I was proud to be an American, just by the way the American people and our government treated the leadership of this country as they went to visit the senior members of our government, as well as the senior members of our Department of Defense and Department of State. It -- I was very, very proud to see how that worked and how we hosted the Iraqi leadership.

And I was also very proud, as we drove around Washington, D.C., how friendly the American people were to the prime minister and both the minister of Defense and minister of the Interior.

And the other part that I have to say is, I was struck when the minister of Defense and minister of the Interior requested to go to Walter Reed to see some of the wounded soldiers, and I had an opportunity to escort them there as well. And it was a very, very emotional event when we went into many of the rooms there, which included many of the family members there, as they said a few words to each one of the wounded soldiers that they had an opportunity to see.

So I was proud to be an American in that sense, and also I was very proud to be part of the Iraqi operation here in a sense that it was humbling to be part of that group and humbling to see the great work that our soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines are doing over here for this country.

Q As you say, the complexity of this training effort, particularly with the Iraqi air force -- again, do you think that some trainers, U.S. trainers and mentors, will be needed after 2011?

GEN. HELMICK: Well, I guess it depends on how we identify air sovereignty for the Iraqi air force. There will be a team that comes here from Washington, D.C., in the next week or so, to kind of refine where the Iraqi air force is and where they think the Iraqi air force should be, based on the current glide path, if you will, on procurement of systems and the situation -- the security situation as we move forward.

Q (Off mike) -- require trainers after 2011, then?

GEN. HELMICK: (Off mike) -- complex. It is very, very complex. Again, it's -- you -- it goes all the way from identifying a pilot to get the pilot into English language training, to get the pilot successful into pilot training, to get him into the right airplane, and then to provide him with the operational training he needs to provide air sovereignty for this country.

Again, that is a very, very long process and there has to be equipment decisions -- read that "types of airplanes the Iraqis want to purchase" -- made and there has to be

money to be paid r those airplanes. So this is a very, very complex process as we move forward.

As I mentioned, building the military, the easy part of all that is complete. We're getting to a very technical, costly part of that now.

COL. LAPAN: Last question. Anyone. No? Okay.

General, over to you, sir, for any closing comments you'd like to make.

GEN. HELMICK: Thank you very much for your time. Thank you very much for allowing me to say a few words about the Multinational Security Transition Command and also the NATO mission, which is a very, very important mission here, which gives the government of Iraq an agreement with NATO to be here as well to provide the training until the end f December 2011.

I appreciate all of what you have to do for your job, and I thank you very much for allowing me to say a few words.

COL. LAPAN: Thank you, General.