

DoD News Briefing from Iraq with Col. Butch Kievenaar, commander, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, Jan. 5, 2009.

MR. WHITMAN (Public Affairs): I know that some of your colleagues are just getting reoriented and readjusted for the new year, but it is the appointed time, so I want to go ahead and get started. Let me just make sure we've got good communications here.

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

COL. KIEVENAAR: Yes, I can.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, good afternoon, and good morning to the press corps here. We are privileged to have with us today Colonel Butch Kievenaar -- I hope I pronounced that correctly -- who is commander of the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, Multinational Division-Center. Colonel Kievenaar assumed his current duties in Iraq in August of 2008, and this is the first opportunity that we've had to have him in this particular format. So we appreciate your time this afternoon.

He is joining us today from Forward Operating Base Echo near Diwaniyah province in Iraq. And he is familiar with our format, so he's going to give you a brief overview of what his unit's been doing and then take some of your questions.

So Colonel, again, thank you very much for joining us this afternoon, and let me turn it over to you.

COL. KIEVENAAR: Okay. Well, good evening. As you stated, I'm Butch Kievenaar, and I command the 2nd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, also known as the Warhorse Brigade.

We appreciate the opportunity to talk to you today about our operations in southern Iraq. That includes Qadisiyah, Najaf and southern Babil provinces. The Warhorse Brigade has been here for about four months on a 12-month scheduled deployment.

Much has changed in the past four months since we arrived in theater. As background, the brigade arrived in Iraq in September of 2008. We replaced the Polish contingent in what was formerly known as Multinational Division Center South. After a brief transition period, we began joint operations on the 26th of September. Since our arrival in Iraq, we've been attached to the 10th Mountain Division, or Multinational Division Center, which is commanded by Major General Oates.

I'd like to take a moment to tell you about the brigade and our area of operations. The Warhorse Brigade Combat Team is about 4,000 soldiers strong. It's comprised of two combined arms battalions, a cavalry squadron, one field artillery battalion, a special troops battalion, and the brigade support battalion. One of our combined arms battalions

is currently serving in Multinational Division North, and my cavalry squadron is currently working with the 172nd Infantry Brigade in Karbala.

The Warhorse Brigade has a large area of operation. That encompasses two provinces and a portion of a third. We're responsible for about 14,000 square miles in southern Iraq. The brigade is headquartered in the city of Diwaniyah, which is in the Qadisiyah province, where I also have two battalions.

The Warhorse Brigade is responsible for the Najaf province, as well as southern Babil. Covering such a vast area is only possible due to the dramatic improvements in the security situation that the Iraqi police and the Iraqi army are providing to their citizens. This is my third OIF deployment, and I can tell you from my previous experiences that the Iraqi Security Forces have greatly improved and on a day-to-day basis provide the security that their population currently enjoys.

We work hard every day to professionalize the ISF leaders and to help them develop sustainable systems to ensure that the security forces can provide security well into the future. The focus of their training is no longer on individual soldier skills, but is on small unit tactics, on battle command, logistics, intelligence analysis and combined operations.

As I stated, the Iraqi security forces have made great progress. My first deployment in OIF was as a squadron commander in the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment, and we operated out in the Al Anbar province. I returned to Baghdad in 2006 as the division G3, the operations officer for the 4th Infantry Division, which was Multinational Division-Baghdad.

The progress of the Iraqi security forces from then to now is amazing and rewarding, because I've seen it from the beginning. The Iraqi police and the Iraqi army are conducting complex operations, both unilaterally and then some with our assistance. We've conducted combined operations with the Iraqi security forces; have targeted, identified and captured high-value targets. The Iraqi security forces, partnered with our forces, have captured six of our top 10 high-value targets.

The brigade does not run a detention facility. All of our detainees are processed through either the Iraqi police or the Iraqi army, and then processed through the Iraqi civil court system. So a lot of our training focuses on how to gather evidence at the site, as well as information to obtain proper warrants.

When we go out on patrol, they are all combined with the Iraqi security forces, and the Iraqi security forces are in the lead, with our forces providing assistance. Instead of having 10 U.S. soldiers to every one Iraqi soldier or police officer, we see a much more balanced ratio.

To help command and control these operations, we have established a combined operations and intel center with the 8th Iraqi Army Division in their headquarters. We

have U.S. soldiers working there daily with Iraqi soldiers, sharing intelligence information, planning and controlling bilateral operations.

We also work with our interagency team in support of the provincial government. I believe one of our greatest achievements so far is the creation of a unified common plan. This is a collaborative effort between the provincial government, the provincial reconstruction team and the brigade.

It integrates the province's five-year plan, the provincial reconstruction team's joint common plan, and the brigade's civic action plan. The unified common plan then synchronizes and binds our forces, the PRT and the provincial government together to essentially have a common vision for increasing civil capacity.

The unified common plan has been successful and has improved the quality of life for the Iraqi citizens in the Warhorse area of operation by completing over \$1.3 million in projects. These projects include three electric grid system overhauls, 54 school renovations, two combined medical operations, several humanitarian-assistance operations and six micro-grants for small businesses.

We already have another half-million dollars worth of projects that are pending, to continue to help the Iraqi citizens improve their own economy.

At this time I'd like to take any of your questions.

MR. WHITMAN: Who'd like to start us? Jeff, go ahead.

Q Colonel, Jeff Schogol with Stars and Stripes. Do you have any indications that al Qaeda or other insurgents are targeting Shi'ites during this Ashura season?

COL. KIEVENAAR: As you know, we're down in the southern provinces, so it's a 90 percent or better Shi'a population. There is some limited reporting of possible female suicide bombers that would try to target the Ashura in both the Najaf province and the northern portion of the Babil province. We have been working closely with our Iraqi security forces in developing plans, teaching them search techniques and establishing a security plan to try and prevent that from occurring. And any information that we do get we rapidly transition over to them. So the answer to your question is, yes, we've heard some very limited reporting in the areas I'm responsible for, and I believe we've taken most of the appropriate actions required to help deter or prevent that from occurring.

Q If I could follow up, who are these female suicide bombers? What organization are they working for?

COL. KIEVENAAR: As best that we understand, they are aligned with al Qaeda. I don't have specific reporting more than that, in terms of the fact that they had -- there have been 39 female suicide bombers to date that have impacted across Iraq. And so that

means that there is a capability out there. And they're as -- though not as capable as they used to be, they're still capable of causing a spectacular event to occur.

There are some al Qaeda cells along the Sunni-Shi'a fault line up in the Babil province -- that's in northern Babil -- and then out to the north and west of Najaf that can both have the potential to impact against the Ashura pilgrimage. And that's what we're taking as the information, seriously, with our security forces, to try and prevent.

Q One last thing. The 39 female suicide bombers, when you said "to date," do you mean so far this year or since March 2003?

COL. KIEVENAAR: Since -- well, not this year; I mean, we're only, like, three days into it. Basically, in the last year, the last 12-month period.

MR. WHITMAN: Donna.

Q Sir, Donna Miles with the American Forces Press Service.

I'm curious, just several days into the new year, what impact in how you're conducting your operations are you seeing, now that the Status of Forces Agreement is in effect?

COL. KIEVENAAR: I had a hard time hearing your question. I think your question is, what is the impact of the strategic agreement on our operations here?

MR. WHITMAN: Correct.

COL. KIEVENAAR: It has very minimal impact to us here. As we came into this province, this province was what we call a PIC province or provincial Iraqi control. And so a lot of the requirements that were specified out, in the strategic agreement, were already the requirements for us in operations here.

We do all of our operations what we call by, with and through the Iraqi security forces. They're all joint. Anybody that we detain we detain with a warrant.

We do not take detainees. Our detainees are handed over, as I talked earlier, to the Iraqi army and the Iraqi police. And all of our operations are planned and conducted with our security forces. So the provincial government has already been made aware of the operations that we're doing. So it has very minimal impact to us here in the province.

MR. WHITMAN: Al, go ahead.

Q Colonel, it's Al Pessin from VOA.

Just to follow up on that thought, what impact do you anticipate then from the June deadline if any? And what preparations are you making?

COL. KIEVENAAR: What I expect is that by June, the JSSs and COPs that we are in; we will have withdrawn and handed those back over to the Iraqi security forces. And that was part of the plan even without that strategic agreement.

We are currently in two JSSs and a COP, well, correction, two COPs at this point. We have Iraqi army, Iraqi police. We have joint command and control. And that's where we do our joint patrolling from.

They have moved from, when we first got here, with very few forces there, to a much more robust presence and command and control capability. They are now the ones planning the operations.

We will continue to work through those and help them, to get through the election period that is the end of the month, and then reassess.

But we believe at that point we will be ready to start to back out of those, because they no longer require us to be there, and that they are -- both the Iraqi army and the Iraqi police -- working very effectively together in joint command and control for their own country.

Q To follow that, then, where will your troops go? I mean, how far away will they go? And how would you describe their role after they've withdrawn from the urban areas?

COL. KIEVENAAR: Well, they won't go very far. I mean, all that will happen is, is they will withdraw back -- as a basing piece -- back to the FOBs that we're in. In terms of the operations, they'll -- we'll continue to do joint operations with the Iraqi army and the Iraqi police.

We are working on what we call professionalizing their security forces. That's focused on their leaders, their NCOs, and teaching them how to train, how to sustain themselves; working with the battalion leadership, the brigade leadership and the division leadership on how to do effective targeting -- instead of doing a sweep operation or a cordon and search, doing precise targeting -- and how to integrate both the intel with your maneuver.

And so we are working all of those things and we'll continue to work all of those training objectives with them as well as joint operations. It just means we won't live in the town as we currently do in those COPs and JSSs.

Q So you'll continue to do joint operations with the Iraqis, including operations in the cities, but you just won't live there. Is that right?

COL. KIEVENAAR: Yes.

Q And Colonel, it's Andrew Gray from Reuters, here. Can you give us your assessment of the security situation around the provincial elections? Are you anticipating incidents? Are you making plans to make any changes to take account of the elections?

COL. KIEVENAAR: Yes. We've been already conducting joint planning with both the Iraqi police and the Iraqi army for the elections. And there is a security plan that is in place that will be executed. And actually, we've started the basic reconnaissance and low-level operations of patrolling in the different areas already.

But as we move towards the elections, they will establish their security for each of the different voting centers and polling sites, with the Iraqi army providing the outer security, the Iraqi police providing the inner security at those locations. And we are there in support. We will help them with enablers, things like our ISR assets, our tac aviation and ability to respond, if required and called upon by the government, to anything that may happen.

In terms of what we see, I can only talk to the provinces that I am responsible for. What we see right now is voter education ongoing. We see campaigning that has started. We do not see any real indications of any significant levels of violence as it leads up to the election. We don't really see a whole lot of violence on the election day.

Where we think the critical period is, is between those that get elected and those that do not. And if I was the governor and I was in power and then I did not get reelected, this country has not gone through a peaceful transition of power. And so that's what we're looking at. That's what we're trying to help them with. And that's where we see the greatest friction point.

And we use our election that just happened with the -- for president as a great example of how there was a change from one party to another, in terms of who's going to lead the country, and how the current incumbent is working very hard to hand over the reins of power, to the incoming president, and how that is being done peaceably and amicably versus what they're used to, which has been a coup, how they have changed power in the past.

Q Colonel, Bill McMichael, Military Times.

You called the progress of the ISF, since your last tour in OIF, amazing and rewarding. I wonder if you could be a little more specific and tell us how far the Iraqi military and separately the Iraqi police, in your area of operations, are from operating completely independently.

COL. KIEVENAAR: Okay. Again that was a little bit hard to hear. But I believe what you asked me is to expound a little bit on the differences I see, in the security forces, from my previous rotations.

Q Correct.

COL. KIEVENAAR: Okay. I'll start with the Iraqi army.

The Iraqi army, from my last rotation, was really just forming itself and did not have really good battle drills and really good individual soldier skills to execute the COIN operations we were asking it to do.

It was trying to grow, train and execute at the same time, and the tempo that it was facing really didn't allow itself to train properly.

What I see now is an army that is fully capable on its individual skills, is capable of unilateral operations, especially in a COIN environment, and is now focused on also training itself while it is doing that, and now has a -- at least in the province that I'm responsible for, the enemy level is low enough now that they have the ability to train -- cycle forces off to train while they're executing operations.

From the police perspective: One, there's a lot more. Two, they are much more proficient. It was a challenge the last time I was here to get them to conduct patrols, to man checkpoints. And if we weren't there or we didn't take them out on the patrols, they wouldn't go. That's not the case now.

When you go down through Diwaniyah, as an example, about every 400 meters you will see police or Iraqi army with checkpoints or out on patrol, talking to the local citizens and providing the security. And we don't need to be standing with them for them to do that. They do that 24/7/365. So, I mean, just their commitment to it, and then the improvement in terms of their capabilities. The security of Diwaniyah is very good. And it is provided by their security forces.

What we do is, as we were discussing before, trying to help them learn how to properly train, how to sustain their force and then how to do more precise targeting, and then how to effectively communicate together. One of the things that wasn't working as well when we got here was the Iraqi army communicating with the Iraqi police. We've helped bridge some of those gaps, and now what we have is them doing joint operations. And when we say joint, we're talking Iraqi army and Iraqi police, vice as just a coalition force with one or the other. So they take a look at the security situation, they hold meetings, they share intel, and then they prosecute their own operations against those that would threaten the security of the local population.

So I am really impressed with where they have come in the 18 months since I was last here.

Q Just to follow that up, Colonel, how does that compare to the experience of your unit that's up in Multinational Division-North right now? And would it be fair to say that, if they're more intensively engaged with the enemy, that those abilities are aligning somewhat, especially the ability to send folks off, rotate people off to train?

COL. KIEVENAAR: That one I didn't really get. I know you want to ask me a question about my battalion that's up north, but I did not understand the specificity beyond that battalion up north.

MR. WHITMAN: Let me see if I can help. And I'll try to paraphrase accurately, here. But the question pertained to your unit up north, and the differences in their situation and whether or not, for example, they're not able to pull people off of --

Q (Off mike.)

MR. WHITMAN: -- being able to pull them off to conduct training and things like that while they're engaged in more intense combat operations.

COL. KIEVENAAR: My unit that is up north is in the vicinity of Kirkuk, and they are -- the only real difference between what we're dealing with and what they are dealing with is that they were not in a PIC province. So when the strategic agreement came into effect, it changed some of what they had -- they were able to do, in terms of -- they needed to get warrants and that all of their operations needed to be joint.

In terms of their -- the enemy situation that they're dealing with up there, it is -- they have more incidence of attacks than we have down here, but it is still far less than it was even when I was over here for what we call a pre-deployment site survey in June, when we thought the whole brigade was going up to the north. And they have very effective partnership programs with both the IA and the IP. And in fact, in Kirkuk, Kirkuk City is the security responsibility of the IP only. In Diwaniyah, it is the security responsibility of both the IP and the IA.

So they have a little bit more incidence of attack and, of course, they're a little bit closer to Mosul. But they're still able to do the same things that we're talking about here. In fact, I was up there with them on Thanksgiving, and went out to their patrol bases and went out to see what they were doing. And it is fairly similar to the same challenges that we deal with down here and being able to train the force. But they are able to get units to cycle off. They're able to work that training and they're able to work joint operations with their Iraqi security forces.

MR. WHITMAN: Jim?

Q Colonel, it's Jim Mannion from Agence France-Presse. Could you walk us through the procedures for detentions with warrants? And to what extent has that been an impediment in your operations?

COL. KIEVENAAR: It really hasn't been an impediment.

We have good relations with both the security forces and with the investigative judges, and so we are able to provide that information to the investigative judges and they make the determination that you have a warrant. And all of the individuals that we have

detained we've had warrants for. So we started that process, I mean, the minute we came in, because in a PIC province that was one of the requirements.

If we don't have a warrant on the guy, then we probably don't have all the right information. And so we continue to build and conduct reconnaissance, and once we are able to put together all the pieces that would justify a warrant, we're able to get a warrant pretty easily here. We take it before the investigative judge, he takes a look at the information and then issues a warrant, and then we can go conduct the operation.

So it has not impacted us here. And like I said, it was a PIC province when we got here, so we already started with those kind of operating procedures. In terms of what other units may be experiencing further north or in Baghdad, it's probably a little bit different; but those systems were in place when we got here.

Q If I could follow, what happens in the case of somebody -- or people who are picked up in the course of an operation who are not targeted by the operation? Are they simply released, or what's the procedure there?

COL. KIEVENAAR: Well, it really depends on what they were doing. I mean, if they were actively engaging in attacks against us, well, then they're going to be picked up and detained, and then we're going to turn them over to the Iraqi army or the Iraqi police and they'll put them into the Iraqi court system.

If they just happen to be on the objective, we will then do some joint interrogations with the Iraqi police and the Iraqi army and they'll make the determination. If there's enough information or enough statements and facts that would justify a warrant, then the investigative judge will issue a warrant and they'll be put into jail and they'll go before a judge. If not then they will be released.

Q And just one follow-up, one final follow-up. Are you detaining far fewer people now than you were before? And you might - to answer the question, you might draw on your previous tours, experience in your previous tours.

COL. KIEVENAAR: Yes, sir, far less. In any of the previous tours, we would detain a number of individuals on a daily basis. We don't here. Like I said, I don't run a detention facility. If we find somebody, one of our HVTs and that he may have information, he will be transported to Baghdad. He won't end up staying here more than about, you know, 18 to 24 hours. And that's just long enough to arrange for his transportation. When they are done with the interrogations of the individual, they are returned back to us and we turn them back over to either the Iraqi army or the Iraqi police depending on who was part of the joint operation when we picked him up. And then they take them through the Iraqi system.

So we've had a total of about eight individuals, all told, that have been picked up any level of an operation that we have done that we have either shipped off to Baghdad for initial interrogations or just turned back over to the Iraqi court system.

Q (Off mike.) I don't have my hand up -- (laughter) -- so Mike can have it. (Laughter.)

Q Colonel, it's Mike Mount with CNN. Just briefly, you sort of answered it a little bit earlier, but what exactly is the threat level in your AOR? Are you looking at -- and who's involved? Is it mainly AQI or is it thuggery or -- and it seems to, down the road, tend to get worse. Do you have any confidence in the Iraqi army, Iraqi police since it has been a relatively quiet area that they would be able to actually control it without the help of the U.S., or with limited help of the U.S.?

COL. KIEVENAAR: To answer the kind of the overall piece, it's, yes, I think they can control it. In April, March and April of last year, this was not a very calm place. And the Iraqi army conducted an operation they call "Lion Bounce (ph)" in which they got rid of a lot of the significant JAM influence that existed in Diwaniyah province. Since those operations, there has been a dramatic reduction in the number of events that occur. Now, we don't have a huge al Qaeda presence in the province that -- or the provinces that I'm responsible for. It is mostly what we call JAM special groups or criminals.

What we have right now is a situation where your low-level fighters, those guys that would then go out and do something if somebody gave them money, gave them direction and gave them resources, they're still around. But they're not doing anything because none of their leaders are here. Their leaders have been targeted, picked up or they're hiding in a neighboring country. And every time they come in, try to come back into this country, they're effectively targeted and picked up. The example is the six HVTs that we picked up since we came into the province.

Without that leadership, without the money and without the resources then they basically return to their normal lives. And so we have a very safe and secure environment right now and I don't see anything on the horizon that their security force, both the police and the army, cannot handle. They still need our help because they don't have all of the enablers that we come with, but they don't need our help on the day-to-day operations. And what we're trying to teach them how to do is to look out into the future and into the rural areas where these guys are now trying to hide and do the preemptive strikes that prevent them from being able to reorganize themselves and then start to impact the population.

And so the answer kind of like right up front was, yes, I believe in the areas that I'm responsible for that the security forces are fully capable of being able to handle those things. And I believe by the time that we leave here that we will have taught them how to be able to sustain themselves and sustain their training and to do a more effective targeting that will enable them to deal with any of those types of enemies in the COIN environment.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, Colonel, we have reached the end of the time allocated for this. Again, we want to thank you for taking the time this evening and hope that not

too much time will pass before we have the opportunity to do this again with you. But before I close, let me just throw it back to you in case you have any final thoughts.

COL. KIEVENAAR: Yeah, I do have two. The first one is, you know, we've had some great accomplishments already in missions that we've been given down here, but they didn't come without a great cost. Unfortunately, we lost three soldiers on Christmas Eve, Staff Sergeant Christopher Smith, Specialist Stephen Okray, and Specialist Stephen Zapasnik. They died while they were on patrol in Babil province. They were crossing over a bridge that was over a small canal when the bridge collapsed, causing the vehicle to roll over on its top down underneath the water, stuck into the mud. And they drowned. I'd just ask that you remember those fallen heroes, as well as all the other ones who have lost their lives while serving in Iraq. They may be gone, but as we always say, they are never forgotten.

And secondly, I'd like to recognize the true heroes of this war, and that's our families. They make the ultimate sacrifice each time we deploy to defend our nation's freedoms. And I know there's a big campaign on about thanking soldiers, but instead of thanking those soldiers, I'd ask you to thank the families that we leave behind, because they're the ones that provide us the strength every day to accomplish that mission. They're the ones making the ultimate sacrifice, and you know, a little thanking goes a long way in keeping the whole Army family together. Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: Colonel, thank you.

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