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Presenter: Ambassador Paul Bremer

Thursday, June 12, 2003 - 10:45 a.m. EDT

Briefing on Coalition Post-war Reconstruction and Stabilization Efforts

(Video-teleconference briefing from Baghdad, Iraq, on the coalition's post-war reconstruction and stabilization efforts. Participating was Ambassador Paul Bremer, director of the Coalition Provisional Authority.)

Staff: Thank you for joining us today, and a special thanks to Ambassador Paul Bremer, who joins us today from Baghdad. He just finished up a session with the House Armed Services Committee. And he's here today to talk to you about his efforts over the past month since he's arrived in Baghdad and his ongoing efforts into the future.

The ambassador does have a few opening remarks, and then we have 30 minutes for some questions with him.

So, Mr. Ambassador, if you can hear me, go ahead and get started.

Bremer: Thank you very much. I hear you fine. Do you hear me?

Staff: Yes, we can hear you very well in the briefing room right now.

Bremer: Okay, good. Good morning. Let me say a few words before we get started.

I arrived here almost exactly a month ago. And in those last 30 days, I think we have achieved quite a lot, working with the Iraqi people. We've just begun the process of putting a country together that has been ravaged for 30 years by political tyranny and economic under-

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investment. It's been an enormous privilege, I must say, to have been able to play a part in this great undertaking, and I am determined that we're going to continue the same pace in progress in the months ahead.

The scars in this country run very deep. The thugs and the torture chambers may be gone, but every day we find new evidence of how bad the regime was that we threw out. And repairing the damage of the last regime, material, human and psychological, is a huge task, and it's a task that is only going to succeed if we have a real partnership with the Iraqi people. I am deeply committed to that kind of a partnership.

We've completed, I think it's fair to say, the first phase of the coalition's efforts towards the reconstitution of Iraq. The focus on that phase was getting basic services delivered, utilities turned on, and providing better law and order for everybody. We've got the water and the power on. In many parts of the country it's actually now above levels of what it was before the war. Here in Baghdad, we are producing 20 hours of electricity a day. The gasoline lines that you've read about have almost disappeared, as have the lines for liquid petroleum gas, which is what's used for cooking.

The second phase of reconstitution, which really begins now, has as its main emphasis restoring economic activity. I want to take a moment and talk about the economy because I think this is where our greatest challenge lies, and we must now create jobs for Iraqis. Unemployment today is a tremendous problem. Our best estimate is that before the war, the unemployment was at about 50 percent -- five-zero percent -- and we think it's substantially higher than that now. So there can be no higher priority now than trying to find a way to create jobs. The chronic underinvestment in infrastructure is going to have to be dealt with, and we're going to have to find ways to get productive activity going, particularly economic activity that creates jobs.

I come back to the question of a partnership with the Iraqi people. We have already begun to work with Iraqi businessmen and women and with officials to find ways to carry out the best economic policy. I had a meeting with a very large group of people in those categories here on Monday night, and I will continue to have consultations with them. I was pleased that the IMF, the World Bank and the UNDP also took part in that meeting on Monday night.

Among the initiatives I've announced was last week I announced a \$70 million community action program to help local communities identify areas where they can very quickly get some activity going. On Tuesday, I announced a \$100 million emergency construction program, the purpose of which is to try to get the construction industry turning over here. We focused on that industry because we get the most leverage, we get the most jobs per dollar in construction.

The \$100 million fund, I might add, is entirely funded from the Iraqi funds that we already have.

We are also trying to encourage trade. Now that the sanctions have been lifted, it's important

for Iraq to reenter the world economy. The most obvious example of that is the sale of Iraqi oil, the first sale of Iraqi oil directly into the world market by the Iraqis. The bids went out about five days ago. They have been received yesterday. And I expect they will be opened and announced here in the next 48 hours or so. And that is good news; it means Iraq will have reentered the world petroleum market.

This is all just a beginning. It's quite obvious that we face a major challenge in the economy. It's going to take time and patience, and we are going to be pushing forward as quickly as we can with the restructuring of what is a very sick economy.

I'd be happy to take your questions.

Staff: As you ask your question, if you could identify yourself and your news organization for the ambassador, that would help him.

Go ahead, Bob.

Q: Mr. Ambassador, it's Bob Burns from the Associated Press. I wanted to ask you about the effort to capture or otherwise account for the Iraqis who are on the various most wanted lists, and your assessment of whether most of these people are still in hiding in Iraq or whether they've found have elsewhere.

Staff (In Baghdad.): Guys, if you can hear us, we've lost your audio.

Staff: They've lost our audio.

Ambassador, can you hear me?

Bremer: Yes, I hear you now. And I heard Mr. Burns announce his name, and -- (Audio break.) -- dead.

Staff: All right. Sounds like our mikes might be -- try that mike again, Bob.

Q: Can you hear me now?

Staff: They're not getting your audio.

Bremer: That mike is not working.

Staff: What you're saying, they're not picking up.

Staff: (Off mike.) -- paraphrase the question, and Bob, you tell me if I got it wrong. Bob was asking about the most wanted, and what the progress was on the most wanted and whether or not they had -- your assessment was that -- if they had melted away or left the country. That

was the first part of it.

Bremer: We now have more than half of the deck of cards, 55, in custody or have confirmed them as dead. So we're making steady progress. We are picking them up every week, and we will continue to do that. We certainly can't exclude that some of them have gotten out of the country. But I've been encouraged by the number which we've been able to find in the country. And we're certainly going to prosecute that with great vigor.

Staff: Why don't you go ahead and state your question, and state it loudly. We can maybe get it from the overhead mikes while we're waiting for a new mike.

Q: It's Martha Raddatz from ABC News. Ambassador Bremer, can you talk about what sort of organized -- let's try with this mike.

Ambassador Bremer, Martha Raddatz from ABC News. Can you talk about what sort of organized resistance you're seeing in Iraq, how large that resistance is, and who you believe is behind it.

Bremer: Yes. We are certainly seeing some organized resistance, particularly in the area west of Baghdad and the area north of Baghdad. Now, I want to qualify that by saying we do not see signs of central command and control direction in that resistance at this point. That is to say, these are groups that are organized, but they're small; they may be five or six men conducting isolated attacks against our soldiers.

We are clearly on the lookout to see if this evolves into a more organized, more broadly and centrally directed resistance. But for the time being, it appears that these are small groups, usually Ba'athists or Fedayeen Saddam; in some cases they may be officers of the Republican Guard. And we are going to have to continue to deal with them in a military fashion, as we are now doing.

Q: They are small groups of five or six men. Are these small groups of five or six men connected in a larger way?

Bremer: Well, that's what I meant by saying we don't yet have evidence of central command and control. They look to be groups who have spontaneously come together and are attacking us. They may be colleagues from the Ba'ath movement, they could be several people from the Fedayeen Saddam or from the Republican Guards. But we do not at the moment see evidence of central command control of these groups. I certainly wouldn't exclude it, but we don't have the evidence yet.

Q: There's no evidence that Saddam Hussein is directing any of it?

Bremer: No.

Q: Ambassador, this is Pam Hess with United Press International. Two quick questions. Is

Iraq going to be selling its oil under OPEC? And are you -- in your efforts for de-Ba'athification, could you fill us in on how that's going, how far down into the Ba'ath Party you expect to get, what sort of that threshold is when someone becomes acceptable; because as you know, 15 million Ba'athists in the country? And are you planning anything like a truth and reconciliation commission for the Iraqi people?

Bremer: Iraq is selling oil now. The question of whether Iraq will remain a member of OPEC is a decision that we will leave to the Iraqi government. And it will be, certainly, a matter that I will discuss with the interim administration when we establish it next month. But this is a matter, I think, that is best left to the Iraqi people.

We -- I can't remember, what was your second question? I'm sorry.

Q: The Ba'athists.

Bremer: We are going to continue the program of de-Ba'athification. I think our estimate of the number of Ba'ath Party members is somewhat more modest than yours, but it's still a substantial number, probably a couple of million. The Ba'athists who were immediately affected by my de-Ba'athification decree, however, represent a much smaller number, somewhere between 50 and 30,000. Don't -- the fact that the gap is that wide shows how poor our information really is. We're hoping that as we are able to examine documents captured, we'll have a better sense of what the actual numbers are.

We are continuing that process, and I have announced the establishment of an Iraqi de-Ba'athification council, which will be made up of Iraqis, so that they can carry forward in whatever fashion they wish the de-Ba'athification, classifying Ba'athists into various classes, for example, to decide which of them might have to stand criminal trial, which ones might be subject to some civil sanctions, and which ones might be in some fashion reprieved.

I have had preliminary discussions with Iraqi politicians about the question of truth and reconciliation. I think myself this is an area that could productively be explored by the Iraqis. My impression in the conversations I've had so far is that the Iraqis are simply still too -- understandably -- emotionally delighted to be rid of Saddam and the Ba'athists that they may not yet be ready to undertake that step.

Q: Ambassador, this is John Hendron with the Los Angeles Times. I've got two questions. There's a larger number of people in the military, something like 500,000 people, Iraqis, who are out of work now. What happens to them? How many will return to work as soldiers there?

And secondly, if I could ask, have you seen results from nearly tripling the number of troops in Fallujah by adding the 2nd Brigade of the 3rd Infantry Division there?

Bremer: On the demobilized military, the numbers are a little bit hard to be precise about. The order of battle of the conscript part of the army before the war started was 375,000. Frankly, I think most order of battle numbers are probably not very accurate, so we don't

really know what the order of battle was. And that, of course, was the order of battle before the war started. We don't know how many of those people were either killed, injured, or deserted or simply faded away during the war. So, it's a little hard to know.

But, it is the case that a substantial number of military people have been put out of work by demobilizing the army. We are approaching that in two ways.

Number one, we are getting ready to start the process of building a new Iraqi army. I expect that we will be -- we have identified training and recruiting sites only this week. We will be starting to clear those sites and clean them up and do the necessary construction. They are using, by the way, former enlisted army men. And so, we'll start building a new Iraqi army here, really, in the next month or so.

Secondly, we believe that these demobilized enlisted men can be very productively used in their private and ministerial security forces to help secure, for example, vital oil installations, electrical power plants, which are today being guarded by American soldiers. If we can hire back and train enlisted men who have some weapon skills already and get them to a high standard, then they can start to take over some of the site security from our soldiers, which then allows our soldiers to more aggressively try to reestablish law and order in Baghdad, for example.

On the question of the deployment of the 2nd Brigade to Fallujah, I think that that project is really only just getting underway. And I think we will see the results in the coming weeks. It's too early to say at this point what the effect will be.

Q: Ambassador, Bret Baier with Fox News Channel. I have two questions, and I'll ask them separately, if I may.

First, you've said that you believe the attacks on U.S. troops are from Ba'ath Party loyalists, Fedayeen Saddam and Iraqi Republican Guards that may have been sticking around. Within the last 24 hours there's been this strike on what CENTCOM calls a terrorist training camp in the West. Any new information about that and possibly that foreign fighters have been involved in attacks on U.S. forces? That's my first question.

Bremer: Well, it's really not appropriate for me to comment on ongoing military operations. We have had in the past some evidence of extremist operations, some of which might be classified as terrorist, in Iraq. We do have clear evidence of some Sunni extremism in the area to the west of Baghdad. Whether that turns out to have been involved in the operation you're talking about is a matter still, I think, to be determined.

And we do have clear evidence of Iranian interference in the affairs of Iraq. Of course, Iran is still -- correctly, in my view -- identified as the world's leading sponsor of terrorism. There was an Ansar al-Islam terrorist camp, as you will remember, at the beginning of the war, in the North. We are very attentive to the possibility of those people flowing back into Iraq, and we'll obviously take the appropriate steps if we get evidence that that's happening.

Q: And the second question, sir, is, you've said many times that a top priority of yours is job creation. Today there was a demonstration in front of the gates of your headquarters, of Iraqis demanding jobs. How do you go about creating jobs? How is that going? And what do you tell these people? How do they go about getting them?

Bremer: The job creation problem can be divided into two phases. The first phase, which we are in now, is to try urgently to get jobs going for regular day laborers and workers and demobilized army personnel and just young people.

That's why our emphasis in the fund I announced on Tuesday was on -- this \$100 million fund -- was on construction, because in construction we will create more jobs per dollar spent than in any other area. And we do have a number of construction projects that were stopped before the war which we can start up relatively quickly and therefore begin to soak up some of this unemployment.

But realistically, job creation is going to require a much deeper economic reform. It's going to require us to create a private sector, which can in turn create jobs. And that is going to be a more difficult and longer-term problem.

So I think it's useful to think of these immediate steps we're taking as bridging steps, bridging us towards a more fundamental economic reform that's going to take longer.

Q: Mr. Ambassador, Rick Whittle with the Dallas Morning News. I was wondering if you could tell us what the thresholds for the United States will be of the sort of government that Iraq will be allowed to have, and the sort of economic system they'll be allowed to have. Once the Iraqi people actually form their own government, what role might Islam play in governing the country, and what role might socialism play, given the country's socialist past?

Bremer: Well, questions like the role of Islam are so fundamental to the kind of society that the Iraqis will rebuild that I believe this is a question that needs to be left to the constitutional conference, which will be convening towards the end of July. We are going to try to make it clear -- we have made it clear that the constitution that Iraq needs to write must be written by Iraqis; it must take into account Iraqi history, its culture, its social experiences. It will not be a constitution dictated by the coalition or by Americans.

Now, the fact is that Iraq has lived under two different constitutions since 1925, both of which established Islam as the state religion, so there's nothing unusual in that. Both of which guaranteed the free -- freedom of worship. Since 1970, when Saddam promulgated his constitution, freedom of worship has been honored more in a breach. But it's possible that they will decide that they want to have a constitution which establishes Islam. We would, of course, be much more comfortable if it also established freedom of religion, and I don't think that will be a problem.

In terms of what kind of economic system they wish to establish, as you point out, the

Ba'athist Party was a socialist party. I think it's very hard to imagine any strong support in this country for a return to that economic system, which has left the country really flat on its back, and which does not really provide a model for getting the kind of vibrant private sector which I think most Iraqis now realize is a sine qua non for a stable economy and stable economic growth. So if they choose socialism, that will be their business. My guess is that's not going to happen.

Staff: All right, this side of the room. So let's go ahead with you and then up here to Tony, and we'll take a couple on this side.

Q: Mr. Ambassador, George Edmonson with Cox Newspapers. You've mentioned several times the difficulty of rebuilding the Iraqi economy and the need for patience. How long do you anticipate that the United States would have to maintain a significant presence in Iraq?

Bremer: Well, I get that question a lot. It's a question, among others, my wife tends to ask me about once a week. So, it's always on my mind. My guess is that it's going to be a substantial amount of time, but whether that is measured in months or years will depend on developments. I don't think we should set any artificial deadlines. I think the president has painted it very clearly, as has the secretary, which is we will stay until the job is done and not a day longer, and we won't leave until the job is done.

So, the pacing issue, assuming we establish security throughout the country, which I think we will -- the pacing issue will be how fast the Iraqis can write a constitution, get it ratified by the Iraqi people and then call elections. And we hope to convene a constitutional conference, as I mentioned, within the next four to six weeks. And then, the process of writing the constitution will have to start. And we will see how long it takes.

As for the Iraqis, I have no deadline. If they write it fast, that's fine; I get to go home earlier. If it takes them longer, then we'll just stay here longer. I don't think we should put ourselves in any deadline boxes.

Staff: Tony?

Q: Sir, this is Tony Capaccio with Bloomberg News. Question on troop levels. In order to maintain a viable security situation throughout Iraq, roughly how many troops do you feel will need to be maintained throughout the country? There's about 145,000 U.S. troops right now. Will that roughly be the threshold?

Bremer: You know, I kind of stay away from these games of guessing the right troop strength. I take the position that the troop strength should be determined by the conditions. As conditions improve, we hope we can draw down our forces. If conditions get worse, we're going to not be able to do that.

For the time being, I think we have an adequate force level here. And what I hope is in the months ahead, we see that we are successful in imposing our will on this small group of

people who are attacking us and causing us casualties. But we -- our troop levels should be condition-driven. They should not be driven by some artificial deadlines about when we want to take troops out, or some number of troops we ought to have here. I think we've got it about right now, and let's just see what the circumstances dictate.

Q: Mr. Ambassador, Bryan Bender with the Boston Globe. Can you tell us -- can you give your assessment of how much the lawlessness, how much these pockets of resistance, if you want to call them that, are affecting or could affect your job in rebuilding the country?

And as part of that question, can you talk about the big question mark of Saddam Hussein, how that -- his fate being unanswered -- how that might affect your job as well, at least in convincing the Iraqis that is a new day and this is a new country?

Bremer: Well, on your second question first, I would obviously much prefer that we had clear evidence that Saddam is dead or that we had him alive in our custody. I think it does make a difference, because it allows the Ba'athists to go around in the bazaars and in the villages, as they are doing, saying, "Saddam is alive, and he's going to come back. And we're going to come back." And the effect of that is to make it more difficult for people who are afraid of the Ba'athists -- and that's just about everybody -- it makes it more difficult for them to come forward and cooperate with us, because they are afraid the Ba'athists may return.

We have to show through our de-Ba'athification policy, through our military operations against Ba'athists and through other measures we take that in fact the Ba'athists are finished; they're not coming back. And we have to obviously continue to leave no stone unturned in the search for Saddam.

Q: Hi. It's Patty Davis with CNN. There have been reports of significant psychological stress and pressures on U.S. troops, being that they've gone from fighting a war to trying to stabilize the country, and with these ambush attacks almost daily. Do you see that? And what can the U.S. do to help?

Bremer: Well, let me say, first of all, that I am really full of admiration for the young men and women who fought such a successful war. And I'm full of admiration for how well they have made the transition to what they really weren't trained to do, which is to set up civil administration in villages and town all across this country. It's really quite amazing to go see the guys and women in the 82nd Airborne, one of the great, renowned units in this country -- they have an area. Their area of operation is south of Baghdad. And they're working on restoring hospitals, trying to fix the sewage system, helping set up generators for the hospitals, restoring amusement parks. These are not things that they normally get trained to do, and they're just doing a magnificent job of it.

We are in a transition phase here where, as we do get stability, we will need to transition a lot of those kinds of things away from the military and to the civilian part of the Coalition Provisional Authority. And we're in the process of now trying to bring forward here to Iraq more civilians to help us -- to allow us to relieve the military of these tasks.

So I can't say that the transition from the warfighting to the peacekeeping has produced at least a lot of psychological stress in the men and women I've spoken to. They seem to be doing an excellent job of it. But it is true this is not what they were trained for. And in the long run that has to transition over to civilian leadership.

Q: Ambassador, I'm Carl Osgood. I write for Executive Intelligence Review. I'd like to ask you about something you just made reference to, which is, you know, the hospital situation, the health care situation in the country. Can you say anything about what the conditions are now in the hospitals? Are they beginning to function? What are you doing to try and improve conditions -- the health care conditions, and who do you have working on that?

Bremer: The first thing to remember is that the health care situation in this country probably for the last 20 years has been really substandard -- again, an illustration of what happens when you have a government that spends about a third of its gross domestic product on military and underinvests. And in particular, in the south, in the Shi'a parts of the country, Saddam really used health care and -- he withheld health care and social services as an element of political repression of the Shi'a. I'll give you an example. I visited the main hospital in Basra yesterday, which is a Shi'a city. And it was quite clear that very little money had been spent there over the last 20 years. They're still operating out of a building that was originally built by the British when they were the colonial power here 80 years ago. They do have 24-hour power now, something they did not have before the war. So they've got better power than they had before. But by Western standards the situation in a hospital like that is pretty depressing.

Now, we have done several things. First of all, all 12 hospitals in Baghdad are now up and running. I have had the Army Corps of Engineers go out and examine all of their generators because when we had power outages in Baghdad, it obviously was a severe problem for hospitals, who need regular power, particularly in their operating rooms. We have now examined all those generators and either repaired them where they needed repair or set in train replacing them so that the hospitals in Baghdad will be able to have constant power. We have got a nation-wide program going on, researching the hospital situation throughout the country, and the pharmaceutical situation.

You asked who's doing this. We are doing it. We are also getting NGOs to help us and U.N. agencies to help us. It's an enormous undertaking. I think the health care situation is not, however, the crisis that we thought it might be, and we now seem to have enough pharmaceuticals in the country, though they are not being -- we are having distributions problems. But it's not the crisis we thought it would be.

Staff: We have about four minutes left. I'm going to go right here and then back on this side of the room, back over to Pam. And that might be our last one, depending on how long your questions are.

Q: Ambassador, this is James Cullum from the Talk Radio News Service. Regarding captured officials on the 55 Most Wanted List, in your estimation, how will they be tried,

and how long do you see their detainment without a trial?

Bremer: It's obviously a sensitive question on which I think we need to have responsible Iraqis give us advice. The people of this country suffered tremendously under the regime of these 55 men, and more, and one can, I think, understand that they will want to have some say in what kind of a criminal procedure is established to deal with these people. Whether that will be, as I think many of them hope, an Iraqi tribunal or a mixed Iraqi-international tribunal, these are subjects that, again, once we have an interim administration here, which I expect will happen in the next four to five weeks, it's one of the subjects that we will basically put to them and try to seek their views. And once we have a consensus view on that from the Iraqis, we may be able to start those trials forthwith.

Q: Ambassador, this is Pam Hess from UPI again. Could you please tell us what the structure of the interim government will be; how those people will be selected and what their powers will and will not be?

Bremer: The interim administration, which is responsive to U.N. Security Council Resolution 1483, will have, at least initially, two bodies in it. The first body will be a political council; the second, a constitutional conference. The political council will be made up of some 25 to 30 Iraqis from all walks of life and from the various strands of Iraqi society: men, women, Shi'a, Sunnis, Kurds and Arabs, tribal leaders, Christians, Turkomen, urban people, et cetera, professionals.

That group is the subject of some rather intense consultations that we're undergoing right now with people from all of those walks of life. And I would expect that we will arrive at a list of agreed candidates, as I said, in the next four to six weeks.

The political council's responsibilities will be quite significant right from the start, and they will fall in two areas. First of all, the political council will be encouraged to nominate immediately men and women to become interim ministers in the 20 or so ministries that make up the Iraqi government. The interim ministers will in turn have substantial responsibilities in how those ministries are run.

The second area that the political council will be active in will be in setting up commissions to study longer-range questions that have a major impact on Iraqi society; for example, what to do about educational reform. Ba'athism is very much a part of the curriculum throughout the school system and university system here. How do we get rid of it? What do we do to the textbooks? They will want to look at issues like how to take a census, something that must happen, obviously, before there can be elections next year. And there must be another half-dozen commissions you can think of.

The second body will be a constitutional conference, which will be a broader and more broadly selected group, probably several hundred, who will convene, we hope, also in the next six to seven weeks, and will have the task of drafting the new Iraqi constitution. It will have to organize itself. It will have to select a drafting committee and maybe some

subcommittees, and then will undergo a very intense, we hope, intense political dialogue with the people of Iraq on fundamental issues: like whether this will be a presidential system, whether it will be federal; and what federalism will mean; what will be the role of religion. All of these questions will have to be dealt with by that constitutional conference.

Staff: Ambassador, we have come to the end of our time. And I'd like to thank you for taking the time today. I know you spent some time earlier today talking to the House Armed Services Committee members. And we really appreciate the opportunity to have a dialogue with you and help our understanding back here. And we hope that we can do this again soon with you.

Bremer: Thank you. Nice to see you all.

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