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Presenter: Lawrence Di Rita, Special Assistant to the SecDef

Monday, July 7, 2003

Briefing on Post-War Developments in Iraq

(Participating were Lawrence Di Rita, special assistant to the Secretary of Defense, and Emad Dhia, director, Iraqi Reconstruction and Development Council.)

Di Rita: Good afternoon. I hope you all had a fine holiday weekend and had a chance to think about all those great Americans out there defending our freedoms every day.

Our condolences, first of all, go out to the families of those troops killed and injured in Iraq and, really, throughout the U.S. military over the past days. We remember them and their families today.

Before taking questions, there's a couple of things I wanted to highlight that might help put some context into what we are doing in Iraq, in particular. Today Ambassador Bremer met for the first time with the newly selected Baghdad interim city advisory council. Ambassador Bremer describes this as the most important day in Baghdad since April 9th, which was the day that coalition forces entered the city and that the regime came to an end.

This council will provide a forum for Baghdad's citizens to discuss important local issues. The 37-person council will also offer advice and suggestion to the



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coalition and to the city's municipal and ministry administrators as they manage basic services for the residents of the city.

Without question, there's a lot of work for Ambassador Bremer and his team in Iraq, for the United States government and the coalition generally. And there's going to be more violence and other setbacks. There's no question about that. But make no mistake: Saddam Hussein's regime is gone and it is not coming back. All of Iraq's main cities and a large number of smaller towns now have councils, administrative councils, and slowly but certainly, Iraqis continue to take responsibility for their own circumstances in Iraq.

I have one other point, and then I would like to ask our guest to say a few words, and I will introduce him to you.

Today, as we speak, I think, General Tommy Franks is being relieved of his command in Tampa. I think that's happening right now. General Franks has served the nation with great distinction, and I don't need to repeat the many accolades he has earned, on behalf of the Central Command and on behalf of the United States. We wish him and his family the best as he moves on.

The president has chosen an officer of unique capability, in John Abizaid, to continue with the mission of leading the Central Command. And we wish General Abizaid and his family the best and Godspeed.

Earlier today, I think, some of you may have heard from General Carl Strock from Baghdad, as well as Andrew Bearpark, his British colleague, counterpart. And he talked a great deal about what the circumstances are in Baghdad, gave you a little bit of a sense of the sort of technical conditions in the city, in the infrastructure, et cetera.

I wanted to also offer the opportunity for you to speak to another gentleman today, a very special guest we have with us, Mr. Ahmad Dhia. He has recently returned from Baghdad. He spent the past several weeks there with the Coalition Provisional Authority. He is returning to Baghdad, was actually supposed to have departed Sunday. We prevailed upon him to remain for an extra day or two to brief some people here in the building, as well as to spend a little bit of time with you.

Mr. Dhia founded the Iraqi Forum for Democracy several years ago in -- here in the United States. He is a mechanical engineer and former project manager on a variety of engineering projects in Iraq. In 1982 he left Baghdad and has lived in the United States since then.

Earlier this year he put his life on hold to organize a global network of Iraqi volunteers, who made themselves available to go to Iraq after the conflict and to assist in the reconstruction and the post-hostility period. This group, known as the Iraqi Reconstruction and Development Council, consists of some 120, 130 Iraqis, and they are now sort of assigned across the ministries in Baghdad and across the regions in Iraq, offering technical expertise in fields as wide-ranging as agriculture to the various technical -- health ministries, et cetera, culture -- the Culture Ministry, things such -- of that nature. They bring energy, knowledge, skill and, most importantly, the firsthand knowledge, in most cases, of life under Saddam Hussein.

We've asked Ahmad to offer some of his reflections in these early weeks and months since the end of the major combat phase of this operation. Mr. Dhia.

Dhia: Good afternoon. I would talk first about the Iraqi people that I talked to and lived with for the last eight weeks in Baghdad. I would talk about the freedom. The people of Iraq, for the first time in 34 years, they feel free. There's no question about that. This is the truth. You can see it. You can feel it. And you can notice, when you talk to the Iraqis, they are speaking their minds. If they don't like something, they go in the street and demonstrate. That never happened under Saddam regime.

Also, in the street of Baghdad, you see over 50 newspapers, all these newspapers representing different parties and political (Inaudible.). They write with no fear of prosecution or imprisonment. And that's the first time happening in Iraq.

Then I talk about the Iraqi living conditions: how they make their whole lives, and what's -- if there is any improvement happen in the Iraqi lives. The average government employee income multiplies between the time before the war and after the war, after liberation. Before liberation, an average employee monthly income was about 10,000 dinars, which runs about \$5. The first advance that they received to cover their living expenses was \$40 for the government employees and for the retirees. Some of the retirees, actually the military retirees, they received \$60. And that runs about 60,000 dinars to 80,000 dinars. That's compared to the 10,000 Iraqi dinars they used to receive as a monthly salary on average. And that's not counted as a salary. They also start receiving (Inaudible.) salary. An (Inaudible.) salary itself is substantially more than the original salary or the average salary the government employee used to receive before liberation. That, coupled with stabilities -- stability in prices of the good and groceries, some of the prices stay put; some of them, they went down.

On the services. The Iraqis now have better access to electric power with all the challenges we have on the distribution side. Unfortunately, the remnants of Saddam's regime, they are shooting our high-tension lines, which they run in Iraq for hundreds of miles. They also go and throw a grenade on a switching station or a transformer to sabotage the process of providing electricity to all Iraqis. And this is happening at the middle of the summer, and the environment of 130 degree outside, and at a time when the average Iraqi student in Baghdad trying to sit down and read and get ready for his final exams. So Iraqi families are really frustrated by what they are doing. And that exactly tells you which side those remnants of Saddam regime are standing on. Definitely it's not the people's side.

And I will talk about the general security issue. The security in Iraq continue -- the situation will continue as long as those Saddam's remnants exist, and, as the president said, that these Ba'ath Party officials and the security officers of Saddam regime, they will not stop at -- they will stop at nothing to regain their power and their privileges.

Their privileges during Saddam regime was extensive, up to we've seen salaries of his people, between the grants he gave them and between their truthful salaries, up to 100 times their peers; you know, the guy sitting next door to his office. He receives 100 times more money than what his peer receives. That's how Saddam was employing those people. Those people they lost those privileges, they lost their power, and they are fighting back. We understand that. And we're going to fight them back and we're going to defeat them.

Di Rita: Thank you, Ahmad. And do you have more, or do you want to just take some Q&A?

Dhia: Just one point I'd like to mention here. The objectives of those people, the remnants of Saddam, are different from the objectives of the Iraqi people. The objective of the Iraqi people is to enjoy liberty and start the democratic process. They are looking forward to have a free and just Iraq, and they try to enjoy the new future that the United States are helping to build in Iraq. And unfortunately, those remnants will be there until we take them out. I think Iraqi people, once they realize Saddam and his sons are either dead or captured, we will have much more cooperation from Iraqi people in this process.

Di Rita: Thank you.

Again, I will take a handful of questions. I know there's a lot of current issues of the day. I'd like to try and take advantage of the fact that Ahmad remained back for a day or so, if you want to get some of his reflections.

Go ahead, Charlie.

Q: Very, very briefly, aside from this issue, there are a lot of questions about Liberia. Could you tell us how long you expect the assessment team to take to complete its assessment? And while we understand the president's made no decision yet, what kind of -- what size force and kind of force is being looked at in terms of peacekeeping --

Di Rita: I will emphasize that the president's made no decisions, and therefore it would certainly be premature for me to discuss any speculation on your part.

With respect to the humanitarian assistance team that's out there, it's not operating against any particular time line. It's going to conduct the assessment that it needs to see -- get an on- ground sort of situational awareness and be able to report that back through the chain of command, for the decision-makers to continue their own assessment. So it's -- I certainly am in no position to speculate about what the next steps would be, other than at some point this team will report.

Q: What specifically, briefly, are they looking at?

Di Rita: Well, they're looking at the circumstances on the ground in Monrovia and what exactly the conditions are, so that -- as -- again, as the president continues to deliberate, he can have the benefit of very firsthand focused insights from people who have recently been there.

Yeah?

Q: Larry, the new tape of Saddam Hussein appeared. The CIA says they believe that in fact it is highly likely that it is him. Mr. Dhia just made the point that until Saddam Hussein is either dead or captured and his sons are, the situation is not going to resolve itself. How much havoc is his apparent still being alive causing in problems for the U.S. in Iraq?

Di Rita: Well, I won't say any more than what the secretary has already said, which is it's not helpful, to the extent that people believe that there is -- that there are individuals who are -- hold out hope that Saddam Hussein may be alive -- and again, I wouldn't speculate as to whether he's alive or not. I simply don't know. But it's -- as long as -- as Ahmad said, as long as there are sort of holdouts from the Ba'athist regime that have hope that they may be able to restore their privileges or have their privileges restored, they'll be very unhelpful to the Iraqi people. And that appears to be what's happening.

Q: Is there some sense, either directly or indirectly, that he is guiding what is going on over there now, the violence directed at U.S. forces, particularly incidents like the soldier being shot while he was buying a soda at the university, or another GI being shot while he was buying some sort of CD?

Di Rita: Well, again, remember -- and General Abizaid has spoken to this at some length; I think General Myers spoke to it over the weekend -- there's -- there are a number of strains of activity that we think we see. We see these Ba'athist holdouts who sort of -- as the secretary has described them, dead-enders, who hope that there will one day be another Saddam Hussein regime. There will not be.

We see hard-line Islamists who want to cause mischief, some of them from inside the country, some of them very likely from outside the country. We see criminal elements.

And so you see a number of strains, and it -- nobody has been able -- nobody has indicated or has a sense whether there's any sort of regional or national organization level behind these. There's a lot of different strains of activity, and we're going to take them as they come.

Yeah?

Q: Could I ask one of Mr. Dhia, along the same lines?

Di Rita: Okay. Go ahead.

Q: Because you were talking about how the Iraqi people are feeling more relaxed now that Saddam is not there. But is the specter of him affecting the civilian population also, in -- do they want to be seen as collaborators? Are they afraid of that in their dealings with the U.S. and is that having an effect?

Dhia: Well, they are mad on him, actually, because his impact on their lives, as I said -- like they're a student trying to ready for the final exams in the high school, which is happening, I think, the 14th of July or 13th of July, and they can't find a light in the night to sit down and read, for example.

Q: And they blame Saddam, not the U.S.?

Dhia: They are blaming Saddam, of course.

Di Rita: Let me provide just a little context, and then we'll go to another question. But this soldier -- and again, we mourn his death today -- he was killed

at a university. Baghdad University, I think, has something on the order of -- and I'll be off by a little bit -- but 50,000 students. They're preparing for exams. They have an entirely new leadership selected by the faculty. Most of the Ba'athies (sic) are gone. So while we have a obviously regrettable and unfortunate circumstance where a soldier has been killed on the campus of Baghdad University, the broader context is, Baghdad University's operating very much in a post-Saddam Hussein environment.

Q: Larry?

Di Rita: Yup?

Q: Can you quantify at all how many holdouts there are, either one of you -- numbers, percentage of the population that are still fighting against the coalition or sabotaging the Iraqi people? And if not, how do you get a handle on this? How do you know when you've made a dent in it, other than things like

Di Rita: Well, I don't think we're prepared to -- we know, for example, that our estimate is somewhere in the orders of tens of thousands of prisoners were released. That's a number. It's a big number. It's a problem.

Dhia: Twenty-nine thousand, to be exact.

Di Rita: Yeah. So I mean -- so we have that to deal with. We know that there are some number of disgruntled former Ba'ath officials who may or may not be involved in this activity. How one would quantify that -- it's very difficult to make that kind of assessment.

Q: You've put out a press release or Central Command put out a press release saying how many weapons were confiscated and a list of some of the former Ba'athists that were arrested. Is this significant? I mean, there are thousands, millions of weapons in Iraq --

Di Rita: It's significant. Sure I mean, there's a handful -- I think they collected some couple hundred of rocket-propelled grenades. Those are 200 rocket-propelled grenades that won't be used against coalition forces. So it only takes one to kill soldiers. So yeah, that's significant.

The question is, what's the context? That's a difficult question to answer. There's no question that as you gather -- roll up more people -- and I think they did arrest several hundred -- you gather additional intelligence, it isn't a one-for-one type of measurement. You look at the kinds of people you have, and you start to work against other information you already have and develop additional

intelligence and move on from there. It's a difficult challenge, no question about it.

Q: All right. All right. A question for Mr. Dhia. (Inaudible.)

Di Rita: (Inaudible.)

Q: You were in Baghdad, and we get press reports that there is strong anti-American feeling in the Sunni area of Baghdad up to Tikrit, west of Al Fallujah. How much of that did you come across? How much of it did you gather where there is expression that we are an army of occupation, U.S. forces, and that the population would prefer we left and just turned the country back to whomever?

Dhia: Most of these points of -- where the terrorists gather themselves and act against our forces, they are the concentration of the (Inaudible.) systems, which is -- they are the most loyal part of the military to Saddam Hussein regime at the time. He selected them from those areas where you see the attacks on the American soldiers right now.

Q: But among the populace, the civilians you talk to of all ranks, did you find that there is a strong or growing anti-American feeling because our forces are there?

Dhia: To the contrary. I saw the people of Baghdad, and I saw people of other provinces. They are mad on those people. Those people, they were the thieves. They are the people who abuse their power. To give you an example, I passed by the -- (Inaudible.) -- and there were like 10 or 12 houses, very lavish houses. And I said, "Who those houses belong to?" And they said, "Those are the (Inaudible.). Those are the people who are fighting us." Understandably, they have all these privileges. And they say they don't pay a penny for those houses.

Q: Larry, you said that there are 50,000, more or less, students at Baghdad University. Many of the teachers there were selected by the Ba'ath Party, they are loyalists. Are any efforts being made to change the school leadership or teachers there at all?

Di Rita: Well, I'll let Ahmad speak to that. I mean, we've done that.

Dhia: Actually, a lot of work being done at the Ministry of Higher Education and the Ministry of Education itself as well. I'm proud to say that some of the IRDC members, they were very instrumental in the process of weeding out those high-ranking Ba'athists in the universities and helping the election process that

followed that -- eliminating of the Ba'athists or the high-ranking Ba'athists from the universities followed by election process. For the first time, they elected the president of the University of Baghdad for the first time in Iraq history. Usually it's assigned by the government.

And this is a new era. This is the real freedom that the Iraqi people now enjoying and living it with its all reality. They feel it, I hope, as we go. It takes time to have all these elements of democracy and freedom set in place and people start practicing it. It's going to take time. We've been there three months only. I mean, three months is not a long time in a history of a nation of the age of our nation. It's a very short time, actually. And look how much we have done already.

Q: Can you give us any update on the review the secretary of Defense apparently ordered on troop levels, force structure in Iraq now?

Di Rita: I think what you're referring to is sort of, if I'm not mistaken, when General Abizaid was up here a couple of weeks ago he said that we're conducting sort of as part of our ongoing review of force rotations, force availability, disposition within the country. We expect to be continuing that and maybe have something to advise the secretary on within the next few weeks. I think he used the date of June 30th, but the secretary from this podium, I believe, said with the chairman that they think that they'll have something to look at within the next week or two.

I mean, again, this is part of an ongoing sort of keep the evaluation, keep the assessment of do we have forces properly -- the disposition is proper within the country, do we have any need, particularly as we get additional forces from coalition, maybe to reposition forces or even redeploy forces? Those are the kinds of questions that they'll be looking at. And as I said, I would expect the secretary and the chairman to be getting some information from the Central Command within the next week or two, would be my guess. I wouldn't want to put a deadline out, but this is an ongoing thing. This wasn't something ---

Q: It wasn't a review that the secretary ordered up specifically in response to concern that there were not enough forces?

Di Rita: Highly unlikely. I mean, as I understand this, and as I think the secretary has spoken to it, this is just what he's -- I mean, what he's expecting from Central Command based on the Central Command's sort of ongoing evaluation of where we stand inside the country.

Q: Mr. Dhia, I want to go back to the Saddam tape. If it turns out that the

tape is authentic, how much of a setback will that be to U.S. and Iraqi efforts to convince the public he is gone and not coming back?

Dhia: In all honesty, I don't think there were an effort to convince Iraqi public he was dead. We said from the beginning we don't know if he was dead or not. The perception of Iraqis, he is not dead and his sons are not dead. For Iraqis, his departure was the best thing probably happened in their life for the last 34 years.

The tape itself, I watched Al Jazeera yesterday and they had a program about the tape. And there were eight Iraqis called, if I remember correctly. Seven of them, they said, "We really hate this tape; why you played it? It's really hurt our feeling to listen to it. We don't want to hear this guy again. We despise him. We hate him."

Q: But how much does this, though, help those hard-core Ba'athists or Republican Guard hard-core members who think he may be coming back? Will this complicate our efforts to weed those types of people out?

Dhia: In one point, that it will inflict more fear in some of Iraqi people hearts and minds.

Di Rita: But the fact is -- and Jerry Bremer acknowledged this when he announced the other day that the United States is offering a \$25 million reward for either his capture or evidence that he is dead -- this is -- we recognize this. It would be much better to be able to prove that Saddam Hussein is captured or dead. There is no question. And this tape doesn't change that. There's no news in terms of how this affects our view of it would be much better that he were -- that we could demonstrate he were captured or killed.

Pam?

Q: Could you tell me how your -- the IRDC people are being received? Are they being viewed as carpetbaggers that left Iraq when the going was bad and now are coming in and trying to, you know, live off the largess of the U.S.? Are you viewed as helpful? And from the U.S. side, are you getting the support that you need? Because we heard lots of reports that many of your people were sidelined in Kuwait for a long time and couldn't get in. And could you also tell me if there's any kind of retribution that you --

Di Rita: That sounds like two questions, Pam. Let him answer --

(Cross talk.)

Q: Yeah, but retribution that you fear for the folks that helped get rid of the Ba'athists. Are they in any danger?

Dhia: First of all, not all the IRDC members left Iraq when Iraq was tough to live in. Actually, a lot of them left Iraq when Iraq was living its golden days. They left to finish their PhDs or masters', and they stayed in the Western world to practice their profession or finish their higher education.

A lot of Iraqis, they received them very well, actually. A lot of them, they have friends and family members in government, in ministries, or in the universities. And they are colleagues to a lot of university professors. And actually, they did work with those people in the last two to three months in achieving what we said as far as the process of de-Ba'athification, executing the order of the Ambassador Bremer, number one, or in the process of electing the people who -- University of Baghdad staff, chosen to be their president, or other universities around the country.

Di Rita: Eric?

Q: Larry, the secretary has left the impression, I think, over the last couple of months from time to time that basic services in Baghdad and the rest of Iraq have been basically -- certainly improved, and at a steady level, and sometimes he is dating back in pre-war levels. And yet this morning we've heard from General Strock and the British administrator in -- certainly in Baghdad, at least, electricity and water supply is not yet up to the pre-war levels. And I'm wondering is -- were these impressions that he was mistaken when he gave them initially, or did -- and, indeed, they reached those levels, but they've fallen back because of the saboteurs and looting or -- what --

Di Rita: Well, I -- I don't --

Q: Help me out here.

Di Rita: I think his -- the way he's discussed it has been nationwide there are some areas that are doing better, other areas that aren't doing as well, without focusing on that, because I don't think he had any of the specific knowledge of whether Baghdad is at 6,000 megawatts -- and I'm not going to get into that, because I don't know. But I know that Strock and Bearpark do. But the fact is that across the country -- and I'll let Ahmad speak to it, because he's been there more recently than I have. Across the country, if you look at the country sort of as a whole, some places are doing better, some places aren't doing as well. And the goal is to get up to some pre-war base line that we can all think is moving forward, and then start deciding on what kind of investments need to be made to

improve what was essentially throughout the country a very poor infrastructure. The infrastructure in Baghdad itself, which was probably the best in the country, was -- electrical, for example, I think when we went to that plant, most of the gauges were missing. It was amazing not so much that it was providing power, but that it was doing anything, that the turbines were operating. And it was circa 1960s technology. So even in the best parts of the country it was pretty poor. And I think the secretary's point has been that across the board what he has gotten from Bremer and from the reconstruction folks is that across the board there are some places doing better than others, and we're going to just keep pushing forward.

And I don't know if, Ahmad, you have some texture to provide to that.

Dhia: Yeah. After the war, after liberation we -- we used to have, like, generating problems, power generation problem? And later we have distribution problem as well. And our people, especially General Carl Strock, they are working very long hours to help resolve these problems.

As I said, the sabotage and shooting the lines did not help us. Actually, it's complicated the problem for us a lot. People at the CPA -- and I say this with -- being part of that effort for the last two months -- you go eight o'clock in the morning, they are sitting working, and you walk 12 o'clock midnight, and they are sitting working, and those people working 16, some of them 18 hours a day to accomplish our mission and to achieve our objectives. I have a lot of respect for those people.

Di Rita: And I would just emphasize, in the case of utilities in particular, it's a sort of thin management layer, working with some very skilled Iraqis with some significant technical expertise, as I said, which kept this system operating during a period when it was -- when, you know, Baghdad was probably the crown jewel of the system, and it was still very decrepit.

Q: Is the secretary still using that color-coded metric system he described to us in May, of kind of red, green, blue, over 27 or 28 cities around the country and --

Di Rita: I have not -- I was not here at the time, so I'm not very familiar with specifically what report you may be referring to. If there's a copy of it, I'll be happy to tell you whether that's still in play.

Q: (Off mike.)

Q: Well, no, this is -- he briefed us at the end of May, I believe. He talked

about a metric system that the department was using to keep track of the conditions in very -- in basic services around the country, and he identified cities, identified something like two dozen cities around the country. And it went from red, which is worse than before, to green, which I think meant essentially meeting prewar standards, to blue, which was beyond those standards --

Di Rita: I don't know. I would say --

Q: (Off mike.) --

Di Rita: Yeah -- (Inaudible.).

Q: Are y'all still using that as a metric --

Dhia: We use it to track the zones and the cities, how they are doing and the improvement, where it's happening and which area that needs help most.

One thing I want to talk about -- the infrastructure that Larry was talking about and the power generation facilities that we have in Baghdad or in other sites of the country. Because of the oil-for-food programs, some of the -- these generators -- like you buying a chair. The leg's coming from China, the back coming from France, the seat coming from Yugoslavia. And those Iraqi technicians in these generation facilities -- they have to do a lot of work to make all this happening and function as a unit and talk to each other. Those elements has to talk to each other to make that power generation possible. So it's a huge challenge, and the electric power staff in Iraq -- they doing a lot of work, and they doing an excellent job in bringing that power alive, with all these challenges.

Also, there's major contractors working there to help in the process, like Bechtel.

Di Rita: I think we have time for one more, and we'll take it right here.

Q: On Iraq, are you doing anything differently, anything -- changing any procedures, telling soldiers to do anything differently, so they become less of a target to people that are Saddam sympathizers?

Di Rita: Well, I wouldn't want to get into specific rules of engagement. We don't discuss that from here. Obviously, force protection is something that's constantly evaluated. We look at -- for ways to kind of vary patrols and such things as that. But I think, for the most part, if I'm telling you, I'm telling others, and it would be best not to get into that.

Q: On Liberia -- one last, quick question, on Liberia: What's the first priority, the very first thing the team wants to accomplish there? What's their first priority?

Di Rita: Their first priority is to begin the assessment that they've been asked to go begin.

Staff: Thank you very kindly.

Q: Thank you.

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