






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**Presenter:** Lawrence Di Rita, Special Assistant to the SecDef

Wednesday, July 16, 2003

### DoD News Briefing - Mr. Di Rita and Gen. Abizaid

(DoD news briefing. Participating were Lawrence Di Rita, special assistant to the Secretary of Defense, and Gen. John Abizaid, commander, U.S. Central Command.)

Di Rita: Good afternoon. Before I introduce our very special guest today, I'd like to just emphasize one or two points.

We continue to make progress in the global war on terror and in Iraq in particular. I think everybody saw the announcements and the meetings of the governing council, which is obviously a very important step toward Iraqi self-rule. We also see that those who don't share that goal, which is a goal we believe most Iraqis want, are continuing to target some of these successes. And just today, I understand there have been reports of a local mayor who was killed. Again, as the governing council is forming, as progress is being made in self-governance, we're seeing now mayors, apparently, being targeted.

So, there will continue to be targeting of our successes. We understand that. Things will -- there will be more setbacks along the way, we understand that. But we will not be deterred. Saddam Hussein's regime is gone and it is not coming back.



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As I said, we have a very special guest today. This is the first opportunity that he's had to be here since he assumed command of the Central Command. He certainly needs no introduction to this press corps. He insisted on coming down and spending time with you before he left Washington -- (Laughter.) -- so we acquiesced. We are very grateful that he's here, and he's available to -- I think he's going to make a short statement and take some questions.

General Abizaid?

Abizaid: Thanks very much.

Good afternoon, everybody. I'm sure you all know that I did not volunteer to come here. We'll leave it to your imagination as to who volunteered me. But actually, it's good to be here. I'm leaving for the region here tomorrow, and I think it's important to describe the security situation in Iraq as I see it and then answer your questions.

About two weeks ago, Rick Sanchez, our ground commander in Iraq -- actually, the commander of our combined forces in Iraq -- and Jerry Bremer and I met, and we discussed the security situation as we saw it. We knew that there was a period between the 14th and the 18th of July where we could expect a lot of activity from Ba'athist elements, and also, we were picking up a lot of information that indicated that there were significant terrorist groups and activities that we were having to be concerned about, as well; most of this all happening in what we call the Sunni Triangle, that area vaguely described by Tikrit, Ramadi and Baghdad, but often stretching up into Mosul.

It was at that time when we discussed the redeployment of the 3rd Infantry Division. One brigade was already back in Kuwait. We thought it was prudent to let that brigade continue its redeployment. And it was at that time when the three of us conveyed to the secretary that it would not be prudent, in our estimation, to bring force levels down below the six division-plus equivalents that were in the country.

Now, you can talk in terms of total troop strength, which a lot of people like to do, but I would prefer to talk in terms of capability. I'd actually prefer to talk in terms of, you know, brigade and certain types of battalions. But we'll say six division-plus equivalents, which comes out to about 148,000 Americans and 13,000 coalition, under the current structure, which is about 160,000 troops.

I believe that for the next couple of weeks, at least, that that needs to be the size of the force. And I also believe that we need to continually reevaluate the size of the force.

We did not at the time, of course, say the 3rd Infantry Division had to stay, because at the CENTCOM level we don't deal with specific unit rotations particularly, we deal with capabilities that we need on the battlefield. We did say, however, that for a brigade to come out, we needed to have an equivalent capability of either U.S. or coalition troops arrive. And I think from that point, once that discussion reached the field, there was probably some various discussions, promises -- I don't know exactly how to describe it -- words that had gone out to the troops about when they were coming home. And then it went to the opposite extreme, that not only will you not come home when we told you, but you're delayed indefinitely. And I'd say "indefinitely" is certainly the wrong answer.

We will bring those troops home by September, certainly out of Iraq by September, and they'll be moving towards home in September. And a lot of it, of course, will depend upon the rotational scheme that either the U.S. Army, U.S. Marine Corps, or allied coalition forces happen to submit to us in the next week. But we'll know the specific answers to the questions in about a week.

So what is the situation in Iraq? Certainly we're fighting Ba'athist remnants throughout the country. I believe there's mid-level Ba'athist, Iraqi intelligence service people, Special Security Organization people, Special Republican Guard people that have organized at the regional level in cellular structure and are conducting what I would describe as a classical guerrilla-type campaign against us. It's low-intensity conflict, in our doctrinal terms, but it's war, however you describe it.

The troops are doing a magnificent job facing this particular problem. And I would -- I would think it's very important for everybody to know that we take casualties and we cause casualties to be inflicted upon the enemy because we are at war. And it's very important to know that as many of the casualties inflicted upon us have come at the initiation of military action offensively by the United States as by our troops being attacked by the enemy. It's very, very important to all of us to make sure that our soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines know when they're coming home.

I know this personally. My son was stationed in Korea. He was told he was coming home in 12 months. Two days before he got on the plane, he was told he was going to stay another three months. My wife immediately cried.

My son-in-law was in Afghanistan. He was told he's coming back in so many months. He got extended two more months, and my daughter cried.

We understand these things, that -- we are professional soldiers. The most important thing that we face is accomplishing the mission of the nation. And the mission of the nation is to ensure that we achieve stability in Iraq, and that requires defeating the Ba'athist threat and defeating the terrorist threat that we're facing now.

I am now happy to take your questions. Yes, sir?

Q: General, today a U.S. soldier was killed in a grenade attack. A surface-to-air missile was fired at a C-130 as it approached the Baghdad airport. And the mayor has been mentioned who was killed west of Baghdad. Is the resistance escalating, aside from just coinciding with these dates that you mentioned? What more needs to be done to suppress it?

And also, can you explain why you consider this a guerrilla war? Because there's been some hesitance to describe it as that inside this building.

Abizaid: Well, I think that, you know, all of us have to be very clear in what we're seeing. We're seeing a cellular organization of six to eight people, armed with RPGs, machine guns, et cetera, attacking us at sometimes times and place of their choosing. And other times we attack them at times and places of our choosing. They are receiving financial help from probably regional-level leaders. And I think describing it as guerrilla tactics being employed against us is, you know, a proper thing to describe in strictly military terms.

Di Rita: Let me, if I can, answer that briefly. The discussion about what type of conflict this is, is -- like so many other discussions that we're having within the context of Iraq, is almost beside the point. The objective is clear. There are a large number of -- some number of opponents to the coalition that have one objective, and that's to restore the regime of Saddam Hussein.

So what tactics they use will change. They're using the tactics General Abizaid has described at the moment. But they are -- they seek one thing. And for those who wish to discuss whether it's this type or that type of war, it's always better to keep in mind what they're after. And what they're after is to restore Saddam's regime to power, Saddam's regime. So it's worth kind of remembering that as we kind of have this almost kind of, you know, academic discussion, is it this or is it that.

Abizaid: I think that's a great point. Look, war is a struggle of wills. You look at the Arab press; they say, "We drove the Americans out of Beirut, we drove them out of Somalia; you know, we'll drive them out of Baghdad." And that's just not true. They're not driving us out of anywhere.

Yes, sir?

Q: General, good afternoon, sir. I'm not trying to quibble with the words used, but words are our business oftentimes. You've left the impression that if everything goes according to your plan, the 3rd ID will be in Kuwait and on its way home in September, based, if I understand you correctly, sir, on a couple factors, replacements for them coming from either the United States or coalition forces.

Abizaid: Yes.

Q: And you also mention the phrase "capability." In other words, that doesn't necessarily mean one-for-one soldier, but replacing capability.

Abizaid: That's right.

Q: My question is, sir, it doesn't seem to be the numbers out there to replace the 3rd ID at this time. And if you could sort of point us the direction of where those soldiers may come from -- where those troops may come from. And I'm choosing the word "troops," as opposed to "soldiers," carefully.

Abizaid: Clearly we have capability within the Marine Corps, clearly we have capability within the United States Army, and clearly there is allied capability out there, all of which I believe can be brought to bear soon enough to allow the 3rd Infantry Division to meet the timetable I've outlined of September. And that capability hasn't been determined, but I would -- I would offer that I think it's most likely that the 3rd Infantry Division's two brigades that are remaining in the country right now will be replaced by Army units in the near future. And it may not be one brigade -- you know, an exact swap, where you take one armor brigade combat team and you pull it out, it could be that we take other types of forces because as the situation in Iraq changes, we need different type of forces. And I wouldn't like to discuss specifically what those change capabilities might be, but you can imagine that as we go into this phase of the conflict, we're just not going to sit around leaving our tactical face unchanged.

Q: General Abizaid?

Abizaid: Yes?

Q: Can I ask you again on the troops coming home. An ABC reporter in Baghdad yesterday, during the last couple of days, talked to several soldiers, many soldiers, actually, from the 3rd ID. If I could read you a couple of quotes:

"If they were able to talk to" --

Abizaid: You really don't have to do that, Martha.

Q: Sir, I bet you've read them --

Abizaid: I've read them. (Laughter.)

Q: Well, let me go through a few: "If Donald Rumsfeld was here, I'd ask him for his resignation." And perhaps this one, more troubling: "I used to want to help these people, and now I don't really care about them any more."

Abizaid: Yeah. Well, I mean, it's very unfortunate that soldiers, professional soldiers made comments like that. And -- and I find it, you know, very -- very saddening as a professional soldier to hear that sort of thing. On the other hand, I imagine that we can go out and find a lot of -- a lot of troops that are working as hard as they've ever worked in their life, that are experiencing the toughest danger they've ever experienced in their life, and every now and then we've got to look at our young people and understand why they said what they said and then do something about it.

Q: And what do we do?

Abizaid: What we -- what we do about it is we improve their quality of life, and we ensure that they know when they're going home. And we make sure they understand why they're fighting.

Look, we can either fight this battle against terrorism at home, or we can fight it abroad. Our soldiers got to know the -- in their heart of hearts that they've got to fight it abroad.

Q: General, we've been told by military planners that the units heading into Iraq in the coming weeks and months could expect year-long deployments. Does that sound about right?

Abizaid: I -- I think you really need to go to the Department of the Army, but I think if you look at contemplating keeping the force structure stable for a while until the security situation improves, that --that year-long employments or deployments are possible for certain units. And it'll depend on service, and you really need to go to the Army for that. But looking at what I contemplate being the force levels for a while, probably the next 90 days, you know, we need to probably say to our soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines, Here's the maximum extent of your employment; if we can get you -- or deployment; if we can get you

home sooner, we will.

Q: We haven't seen lengths of time like this since Vietnam, have we?

Abizaid: Haven't seen what?

Q: Lengths of deployment time like that since Vietnam.

Abizaid: Oh, no. Our 1st Armored Division went to Bosnia for a year. So, we've done it before; we can do it again.

Yes, sir.

Q: Two questions, one about the 3rd ID, specifically one about the sort of general idea of giving troops certainty about when they're coming home.

On these -- some of these soldiers who made these remarks which you have expressed disappointment in, are they being reprimanded in any way, or punished, or is anyone talking to them? Are they free to say whatever they want to say?

Abizaid: Look, it -- none of us that wear this uniform are free to say anything disparaging about the secretary of Defense or the president of the United States. We're not free to do that. It's our professional code. Whatever action may be taken, whether it's a verbal reprimand or something more stringent, is up the commanders on the scene, and it's not for me to comment. I'm too far removed from the chain of command.

But look, let me say something about the 3rd Infantry Division. Never has there been a division that has fought as well and as hard as that division has in the recent history of the United States Army. It performed magnificently during the war. All of us had reason to believe that we would be able to get the 1st Marine Division and the 3rd Infantry Division home relatively soon, provided certain expectations were met on the security front. All of us were a bit taken aback by the complete destruction of the Iraqi army and the near-total dissolution of Iraqi security institutions, especially police. Once we started to understand that environment, we knew that we were going to have to extend people longer than we had hoped.

That having been said, you know, we stand by this notion of first in, first out. The 3rd Infantry Division will be coming home. We'll get some replacements to them.

Yes, sir?

Q: To follow up, the other part of my question, I'm sorry, is about -- you've explained the situation with the 3rd ID. Is there a plan in place to give some certainty to all of the other troops who are in Iraq? Will they be getting definite end dates, where they know how long they're going to be there?

Abizaid: Yeah, absolutely. Yep. Yes, they will. I'm going to head there. I won't tell you exactly when I'm going to be in Baghdad, but we're having a meeting with all the division commanders, General Sanchez and all the various other component commanders. And we will insist upon ensuring that every soldier, sailor, airman and Marine know what their end dates are. It's very important. We need to do it and we should be able to do it.

Q: Okay, General, if you came to believe that it took more than the current footprint to secure the victory, would you ask for it? And what is your -- (Inaudible.) -- on that question now?

Abizaid: I think our current force levels are about right. If the situation gets worse, I won't hesitate to ask for more. The most important thing in all of this is causing the level of violence to go down so that governance can move forward. And governance has moved forward in a pretty interesting way. And I think that -- you have to understand that there will be an increase in violence as we achieve political success, because the people that have a stake in ensuring the defeat of the coalition realize that time is getting short as the Iraqi face becomes more and more prevalent on the future of Iraq. And that's precisely what's going on now.

If you look at the local level throughout Iraq, in the South and in the North in particular, local government is moving ahead in a pretty spectacular way.

In the areas where we're having difficulties with the remnants of the regime, it's less secure, and people that cooperate with us are at risk. We have to create an environment where those people do not feel at risk. That means we have to take our military activity to the enemy, and we have to defeat these cells.

In addition, y'all have to understand it's not a matter of boots per square meter. Everybody wants to think that, but that's just not so. If I could do one thing as a commander right now, I would focus my intelligence like a laser on where the problem is, which is mid-level Ba'athist leaders. And we're trying to do that. And I think, as we do that, we'll find that we have more success.

Di Rita: Bret?



Q: General, it was mentioned earlier, but --

Abizaid: Larry's going to call on you guys, because he knows who to call on.

Q: (Laughs.)

Q: He knows who's got the nice questions.

Q: But nice -- (Laughter, cross talk.) --

Q: Okay. It was mentioned earlier that a surface-to-air missile was fired at a C-130 today at Baghdad airport.

Abizaid: Right. Uh-huh.

Q: If I'm not mistaken, that's the first time we've seen that weapons system in recent weeks. Is that true?

Abizaid: No.

Q: It's not true. There have been other surface-to-air missiles?

Abizaid: I think we've had two events in two weeks. Matter of fact, I was on the deck of a C-130 the other day, and we had a missile warning. And the guy made a hard right bank. And we fired off all of our flares and, you know, we looked out there. And these were guys from the Oklahoma National Guard, and they actually thought it was fun. I was terrified. (Laughter.)

Q: But let me -- is there an assessment that surface-to-air missiles are still a problem in Baghdad? Do you think that there are a lot still out there?

Abizaid: Yeah, it's a problem. Sure.

Q: And the level of resistance that you're seeing overall --

Abizaid: But the level of resistance -- and this is getting back to a question over here -- but the level of resistance -- I'm not so sure that I would characterize it as escalating in terms of number of incidents. But it is getting more organized, and it is learning. It is adapting. It is adapting to our tactics, techniques and procedures, and we've got to adapt to their tactics, techniques and procedures.

Di Rita: Tony?

Q: Sir, I want to take you back to one of the original reasons the U.S. troops are over there fighting, and that's to disarm Iraq. A couple weeks ago, in the Senate Armed Services Committee nomination hearing, you said you were perplexed, given all the prewar intelligence, that no weapons of mass destruction had, A, been used or, B, been found. As you know, that's been a big debate this week in Washington -- about the quality of --

Abizaid: Right.

Q: Here's my question. Based on what you know now, what realistically do you expect the U.S. to find over there by way of either weapons or program? And if you don't find it fairly soon, will your credibility as a new commander be hurt in the region?

Abizaid: Well, I don't think my credibility as a new commander will be hurt in the region, you know, over this particular problem. I think that we'll find evidence of a biological program. I think we'll find evidence of a chemical program. And I still believe that before it's all over -- and I can't tell you when it's going to be all over -- that we'll uncover specifically what happened to either biological agents or chemical agents.

Q: What about finding weapons though, the tactical weapons we thought were going to be used?

Abizaid: I believe that some way or other, we'll find them.

Q: General, the -- back to the enemy. You had mentioned earlier significant terrorist groups. Could you tell us who they are and who's supporting them? And second, are these attacks against American forces better coordinated now than was originally suspected?

Abizaid: At the tactical level, they're better coordinated now. They're less amateurish, and their ability to use improvised explosive devices and combine the use of these explosive devices with some sort of tactical activity -- say, for example, attacking the quick-reaction forces -- is more sophisticated. It's not necessarily a problem that we are not -- that we can't handle. We can handle the tactical problems that are presented.

Q: Any evidence of central command?

Abizaid: No evidence of central command. No, I don't think so.

Di Rita: We have the central commander right here. (Laughter.)

Q: Okay.

Abizaid: (Then it's no. ?)

Q: And then another question about terrorist groups.

Abizaid: Yeah.

Q: Who are they? And who's supporting them?

Abizaid: Ansar al-Islam, which is a terrorist group that we hit very hard in the very opening stages in the war up in the area of northern Iraq and northeast of Sulimaniyah, is coming back. We don't know exactly how they're infiltrating. There's some impression that they could be infiltrating through Iran. There's also possibility that there were people that instead of moving away from the center of Iraq after they were hit, moved down into Baghdad. So it's clear that Ansar al-Islam is reforming and is presenting a threat to us.

And then it's unclear, but it's troubling that al Qaeda either look-alikes or al Qaeda people are making an opportunity to move against us.

And then I think you all know about the terrorist camp we hit several weeks ago at Ar Rahwah, and that was not necessarily a group that I could describe to you. But it did have external support in a way that's similar to what we've seen in al Qaeda.

Q: Do you put any credence then in this recent claim, I believe last weekend, in a taped message that al Qaeda is in fact responsible for some of these attacks against American forces?

Abizaid: I don't know that I would say that Osama bin Laden has made an order that has been conveyed to people that has caused them to move into Iraq to kill us, but I do know that there are those that would sympathize with him that have moved into Iraq and are trying to kill us.

Di Rita: Tom?

Q: Actually, (Mick ?) had my question, but if I could just draw you out a little more on that. You mentioned your main concern being the Ba'athists. Is that -- am I correct in understanding that?

Abizaid: That's correct.

Q: As opposed to these foreign fighters.

Abizaid: That's correct.

Q: And does that mean you're just not seeing sort of significant numbers of foreign fighters moving in?

Abizaid: Not significant numbers. But there are some foreign fighters, some of which may have been stay-behinds. Remember in the early stages of capturing Baghdad, there were an awful lot of foreign fighters, and it's possible that we missed some of them, they stayed there and they've reformed and reorganized. So foreign fighters are present on the battlefield, but I would state without any -- you know, any hesitation that the mid-level Ba'athist threat is the primary threat that we've got to deal with right now.

Di Rita: I think we probably have time for maybe a couple more. So right here and --

Q: (Inaudible.) -- there's no central command of -- control of attacks, but is there evidence that some of the attackers are working with Saddam go-betweens, people who are sort of one person removed, working with Saddam and his sons?

Abizaid: No, not that I've seen. But there is some level of regional command and control going on. And when I say regional, probably you look over at the Al Ramadi area, there's probably something going on over there, if you look up in the Tikrit-Baiji area, there's something up there, Mosul. That they are all connected? Not yet. Could they become connected? Sure, they could become connected.

Q: General Abizaid, you have laid out a number of things here today where you say, to use your words, you were taken aback: this organization could develop these financings, regional command and control, al Qaeda, possibly, Ansar al-Islam re-forming inside Iraq, a number of things that I think we are hearing about for the very first time today, certainly from someone on your level.

My question is, really the broad picture, very candidly; did the military get surprised by all of this emerging over the last several weeks, since May 1st? How is it that you didn't sort of see it coming? How has all of this, the whole list of things you've gone through, come to pass and get so reorganized inside Iraq?

Abizaid: So I think if you look at my Senate testimony, you'll see that all of these things were discussed in, you know, fairly open and clear manner.

That we didn't see it coming, if you were to look at our planning documents that we prepared back in December, you would see that there was a period we said that we would need seven-plus divisions in Iraq. We're actually, you know, one division below that.

So, did we know that Iraq would be fractious? Did we know that Iraq would be difficult? Did we know that there would be various levels of difficulty? Absolutely. We knew. And a lot of it had to do with: What's the enemy going to do? I mean, there was always this possibility that the Iraqis would rise up against Saddam and take him out themselves and then cooperate on a level that's been different from what we've experienced. But that didn't happen.

I think if you look at the planning, it's clear you see that, you know, we planned, like we always do, for all different sets of contingencies. But we are where we are and we've got a security problem in Iraq that we are approaching in a very steadfast manner; the troops are doing a great job. You will go around that country like I do -- I've been to most of the major cities and I've visited with our troops all over the place -- and you come away from a trip to Iraq confident; you come away from a trip to Washington after a week here saying, "Oh, my God, what's going on here?"

Q: Sir, with all due respect, one other question. Saddam Hussein -- any number of high-level government officials, have said getting Saddam would be very crucial because it would take away some people's belief that he's coming back. But you've described a scenario that's so multifaceted, I'm wondering if you still think it's still all that crucial to get Saddam. Will it solve all these problems?

Abizaid: No, I think getting Saddam is crucial. And I said that in my Senate testimony. You should read it.

Di Rita: And what he also said was that it's the mid-level Ba'athists. And the reason why that's so important is because those are the mid people holding out hope that the regime can come back and they can restore their privileges. It's not going to happen, but that's the largest -- probably the largest concentration of these various strains.

And I'd also caution you against -- I mean, we've said for some time -- terrorist activity, probably from foreign sources, hard-line Islamists, things like that. So I don't think we've seen anything particularly new in that vein today. So I think --

Q: May I ask a question just about --

Di Rita: Last question, because the General Abizaid's been very generous with his time.

Q: -- follow-up on the weapons of mass destruction question. You were asked in general about weapons of mass destruction, and you talk about chemical and biological weapons. You didn't mention nuclear weapons. Of course, as you know, that's an issue in terms of the statement about selling uranium. What are your thoughts about the situation of the nuclear weapons program in Iraq now, and whether it was overstated?

Abizaid: Well, I've been asked this question about the overstatement of WMD -- I can only tell you that as a military commander, all of us looked at the same intelligence, and we believed that we would immediately find WMD in Iraq. And --

Q: (Finding ?) nuclear weapons --

Abizaid: Not nuclear weapons, no. But a nuclear program, yes.

Q: Well, what is your -- what is your thought about the issue of whether the Bush administration may have exaggerated the threat, Iraq's nuclear --

Abizaid: You really want me to give you an opinion on that? (Laughs.)

Q: Well, I --

Abizaid: I won't give you an opinion on it. I don't believe professionally that any of the intelligence I saw was exaggerated, hyped, or otherwise manipulated.

Di Rita: Thank you.

(Cross talk.)

Q: Well, the reason I ask that is because there are -- there's a growing concern that Afghanistan is at a dangerous tipping point, that Taliban, al Qaeda with the help of warlords have reconstituted, and the threat is not only serious but imminent. Do you share that opinion?

Abizaid: No. But there is a tipping point ahead. The tipping point is for greater success militarily, both in Afghanistan and in Iraq, and elsewhere in the region. The global war on terrorism is going to be long, it's going to be hard, it's

going to be difficult, and we're going to win.

Di Rita: Thank you very much.

Q: Mr. DiRita, one quick one on North Korea, could you please? The White House said that the North Koreans told the U.S. they had finished reprocessing. Do you have information to back up that?

Di Rita: There's a transcript of -- (Off mike.)

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