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Presenter: Richard Myers, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff

Tuesday, December 16, 2003

Media Availability from Baghdad, Iraq

(Participating was Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, Commander Joint Task Force and Richard Myers, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff.)

GEN. MYERS: I'm going to start with about a 45-second opening statement. It's great to be here with General Sanchez; particularly great to be here with all his troops. That's the purpose of our presence in Baghdad. This is a trip that's been planned now for many months, and it's mainly to visit troops.

The USO, as you know, has been kind enough to provide some entertainers -- Robin Williams, Mike Wallace, Kurt Angler, Leann Tweeden -- to come join us and talk to the troops. And they're out there, and they've been doing that since the time they hit the pavement here at Baghdad International Airport. And we've got several other places to go in the theater. And we'll be doing this for the next several days.

And with that, we'll take your questions.

Q General, how involved was Saddam Hussein in the insurgency? What have you been able to find out over the past 48 hours?

GEN. MYERS: I think there will be some intelligence that we get from the capture of Saddam Hussein. That will be analyzed and worked over time. And I think right now it's inappropriate to speculate on what we might find in terms of his involvement. But, of course, there will be intelligence value to the fact that he is now in coalition hands.

Q General, is he --

GEN. MYERS: Let me -- just a minute. Let me -- let me --

Q -- is he inside the country at the moment? Can you tell us where Saddam is?

GEN. SANCHEZ: Let me add my part to your question. As I've always stated, repeatedly, our expectation was that Saddam was probably involved in intent and in financing. And so far, that is still my belief. And more to follow from the interrogations. At this point, we have nothing further.

And he's at an undisclosed location at this point. That's what I can tell you.

Q General Myers, are you going to meet with him?

GEN. MYERS: No. We have the right people meeting with him.

Q General Sanchez, can you talk about in the past 48 hours what you've seen on the ground operationally as far as attacks go, whether there has in fact been a decrease?

GEN. SANCHEZ: No, at this point we had a couple of car bombs that hit police stations yesterday. We expect that those were in the planning for some time. We've had about 18 engagements that occurred over the last 24 hours. That's at about the level that we've seen in the past. We expect that it will take some time before we see any possible effects of what we've accomplished.

As I've stated over and over, we expect the violence to continue at some level for some time. We're prepared for that. And we'll just have to wait and see what the end results are.

Q General Sanchez, could you address the issue of whether the capture of Saddam has led you to new information -- (inaudible) -- arrest or capture other senior Iraqi --

GEN. SANCHEZ: More to follow. We're still in the process of developing the consequences of his capture.

GEN. MYERS: A lot of those questions get into the issue of operational matters that need to be close-held until we sort it all out, and that's where we are.

Q General Myers, there was -- I heard something today about the possible surrender of Mr. al-Douri, Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri. Is there any truth to that?

GEN. MYERS: We heard the same thing. From General Sanchez's headquarters, we chased that down. To the best of our knowledge, there -- we're not aware that that has taken place at this point. We know it's been reported by, I guess, a couple of networks, but we're not aware.

Q General Sanchez, these documents taken when you captured Saddam, has that led you to any intelligence that you've been able to act on in the last 48 hours?

GEN. SANCHEZ: I don't have anything to add to --

GEN. MYERS: That's the same question. That gets into the operationally sensitive business, and we're just not going to go there.

Q General Sanchez, can you talk about how you follow up on momentum you have now, with Saddam's capture, to win over hearts and minds, specifically in the central part of Iraq and the Sunni community?

GEN. SANCHEZ: Sure. I think what we have here is a great opportunity for us to reach out to the elements that have been resisting the coalition's efforts to bring security and stability to the country. We're -- we will be moving out with those engagement opportunities. We're working with all of the governing structures here in the country to attempt to embrace those possibilities, and that'll be developing over the next few days and weeks.

Q General Sanchez, do you think the insurgents were in active touch with Saddam? And was there a -- (inaudible) -- between Saddam and the insurgents?

GEN. SANCHEZ: I don't -- at this point in time, I don't have anything more to add than the question I answered a little while ago.

Q Are you going to be giving him POW status? And whether you are thinking about -- (off mike)?

GEN. SANCHEZ: No, I think what we've said is that he is being accorded all of the rights of a

prisoner of war. He is being treated in accordance with the Geneva Convention. And we will continue to do so.

Q General Myers, are you concerned about the -- about the pro-Saddam rallies? You see them in Fallujah, in Ramadi and around Baghdad -- (inaudible) -- Tikrit. Tell us about how concerned you are, or are you not?

GEN. MYERS: Well, I think there are obviously still some elements in this country that don't want a free Iraq. They don't want a better chance for their families to prosper and live in a society that provides for everyone, not just for those -- the chosen few.

And I don't think it would be unnatural to know -- we know there are elements out there that would be pro-Saddam. I think -- over time, I think what you'll see is that by far the vast majority -- probably, it would be my guess, even in these communities -- that will decide they want a better life for their people, too, and join this whole push that the coalition is making to make this a much better place, a place of democracy for the Iraqi people.

But no, I'm not surprised. And as Rick said, they're prepared for any contingency. We're the same force we were three days ago. We've got the same rules of engagement we had three days ago. We're at the same level of preparedness and we're ready to deal with whatever comes our way. We do think it's a time, though, that this would lend some oomph behind the notion that it's time for all Iraqis to pull together for one Iraq. And that's clearly what our strategy's directed toward and what Ambassador Bremer and the rest of the coalition are pushing for.

Q (Off mike)

GEN. MYERS: I don't quite follow you. The --

Q A lot of the people who are killing American soldiers today are not Ba'athists, are not pro-Saddam, are simply nationalists who think you're here as occupiers, and they (don't need to have ?) Saddam to recruit more followers.

GEN. MYERS: I think that the facts don't support that. I think the facts support the people that we've been engaging, the people that we detain -- and as you know, we detain hundreds a week -- they're not nationalists. These are former regime elements that are prosecuting the violence on the coalition and, just importantly, on the Iraqi people, and probably and maybe even more importantly, on international organizations like the Red Cross and the U.N. These aren't just nationalists. These are terrorists. These are former regime elements.

And I don't know what's going to happen to recruiting. I mean, it could be anybody's guess. I don't think, though, it's going to be a good thing for recruiting when, if it's true, as I've just asserted, that it's the former regime elements that are the primary threat to the coalition, that when you take their leader -- and how well he was connected to the various cells throughout the country will remain to be determined, but when you take this leader, who was at one time the leader -- very powerful leader in this region and find him in a hole in the ground, that that's a powerful signal you may be on the wrong team and you need to be thinking about some other line of work, which is building a new Iraq.

Q General Myers, at one point General Abizaid said that there were 5,000 -- or believed to be 5,000 enemy fighters overall in Iraq. Is there a new assessment of now what the enemy force looks like with the different cells, number-wise?

GEN. MYERS: Well, I think in general -- I'll let General Sanchez give you more granularity here, perhaps, but I think the estimates are what the estimates are, and I don't think they've changed dramatically. We still think the main -- as I said, the main enemy right now are the former regime elements. We know there's -- Ansar al-Islam is active inside this country. They have captured many members of that organization. Lots of intelligence that tell us there are other foreign fighters and

terrorists that may be in here as well, not as obvious. And I think this is something we take stock of every day. I mean, there's an analytical process that goes on every day and with every detainee and with every interrogation. With every scrap of information we get, we keep refining that.

But I think that's my understanding of the situation. Rick?

GEN. SANCHEZ: No, sir, that's right on the money. We don't have anything further that tells us it's more or less.

Q General Myers, considering the crimes the coalition accuses Saddam of, and the Iraqi people, why POW status for Saddam Hussein but not for the captures from Afghanistan -- the Taliban, (al Qaeda)?

GEN. MYERS: Well, I think, as General Sanchez says, he does not have POW status; what he has is, he's being treated as an enemy prisoner of war in accordance with the Geneva Convention. Status is -- the final status to be determined, as I understand it. And that's the situation.

Q But why Geneva Convention rights for him now but not for (captured citizens ?) from Afghanistan?

GEN. MYERS: Because that's a standard of treatment that the international community understands and we want to abide by those standards.

Q General, have you got any information from Saddam Hussein on foreign fighters entering Iraq?

GEN. SANCHEZ: Already I think we've answered about three or four times that we are not going into the specifics of the intelligence that has been obtained, if any, from Saddam Hussein. Those are operational matters.

Q General Myers, what's your assessment now -- (off mike) -- today of how long American forces will have to remain in Iraq?

GEN. MYERS: Oh, that's a -- I mean, I don't think --

Q (Off mike.)

GEN. MYERS: Eric, I don't think anybody can answer right now. You know, we've got roughly a little less than 130,000 U.S. troops. We've got about 160,000 Iraqis in various organizations. We've got about 25,000 coalition. We're preparing for the next rotation of U.S. forces. It's likely, though not finally determined, that that number of U.S. forces will be down a little bit, and we'll talk about that as we get into the rotation. And about as far as we're looking is through the next couple of years. And beyond that I don't think we can make any judgment at this time. It's going to have to -- it's going to have to depend on events on the ground, how transition to Iraqi sovereignty goes and lots of items like that, how fast the new Iraqi army stands up, those sorts of things. So it's to be determined, I think, at this point.

Q General Myers, were you surprised the way Saddam Hussein was found -- (off mike)?

GEN. MYERS: Well, you know, in a way not. I mean, we knew he was -- we thought, based on previous tips, previous cordon-and-search operations, that in fact he was very busy trying to protect himself. Very -- that -- I mean, that was his focus of his life, was to protect himself.

And I think it was probably not a surprise to these folks that found him in a really tiny hole that in fact that's where you might find somebody. That's why they searched the hole. That's why they picked the cover up and didn't just pass it by, because, I think, they thought that those were the kind of lengths he would go to to protect himself.

And so no, I don't think we were surprised at that. The fact that he was armed and didn't use his weapons -- I mean, that can be anybody's guess. I don't know. Rick, if you have a --

GEN. SANCHEZ: No.

Q What does it say about the -- (inaudible) -- the soldiers?

GEN. MYERS: From my opinion, that's obvious. And it's -- but it's been a truth we've known for a long time. That's -- leadership from a hole is not leadership.

STAFF: We have time for two more questions.

Q General Sanchez -- (inaudible) -- perhaps you've seen in the last 48 hours more ordinary Iraqis coming forward with any information, now that Saddam has been captured, about matters large or small?

GEN. SANCHEZ: Well, that number has been fairly high for some time now. I think it's still a little bit too early to tell whether we have an order of magnitude increase in that. But we still continue to see the cooperation from the Iraqis, and I think in the next few days we'll be able to gauge better whether in fact there's an increase.

Q How many -- (inaudible) --

Q General Myers? General Myers?

GEN. MYERS: Okay, somebody that hasn't asked a question. You have.

Q Thank you. Sergeant Williams -- (affiliation off mike) -- sir. Back to the American --

GEN. MYERS: I met you earlier, Sergeant Williams. Yeah. Good.

Q Yes, sir. (Inaudible.)

GEN. MYERS: How long you been here?

Q I've been here three weeks, sir.

GEN. MYERS: Good for you.

Q Back to the American forces, specifically the Reserve forces. How do you feel we have acted and mobilized in accordance to your needs? And looking forward, how do you feel the rotation is going to affect the Reserves -- (off mike)?

GEN. MYERS: Well, the U.S. Reserve forces, both Reserve and National Guard, are critically important to mission. We are a nation at war, and when the nation goes -- when the U.S. goes to war, we rely heavily on our Reserve component. We have. They've responded magnificently, almost -- I'm sure there are Reservists and Guardspeople standing in this very room with us, no doubt. Their performance on the job is not in question.

I think providing them predictability, which we did not do perfectly in the first rotation of this, because there were a lot of unknowns, and we were figuring out, frankly, how to do some of this -- that our ability to provide predictability, which the families of the Reservists need and their employers, was not perfect. We're working very hard in this next rotation to make that much better.

Q General, can you clarify your two years -- you're saying they're definitely staying two more

years?

GEN. MYERS: Oh, no. No, what I said is, you know, about as far as you can look out maybe is about a year, maybe two years. Beyond that, you can't look out.

There's a lot that has to go on. There's going to be a sovereign Iraqi government here, standing up, fairly shortly, and there are going to have to be negotiations with them.

And I mean, nobody can say right now -- I'm not saying we're staying for two years. I'm saying we are prepared to come in with the next rotation of forces, what we call Operation Iraqi Freedom II. They start coming in over the next four months, and it'll be step by step after that.

STAFF: Okay. Thank you very much.

GEN. MYERS: Thank you.

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