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Presenter: Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld

Monday, February 23, 2004

Secretary Rumsfeld Interview with the Iraqi Media Network

Q: The first question, Mr. Secretary, for you on Iraqi Media Network, give your evaluation of the security situation following the meetings with the military personnel here.

Rumsfeld: My impression is that each one of my now many trips to Iraq is that I've seen improvements each time. The U.S. and coalition military leaders today have a strong partnership with the Iraqi security forces and every week the number of Iraqis who are participating in the security forces is growing. Today there are some 200,000 Iraqis who are serving in the police and the civil defense corps and the border patrol and the army. Today the Iraqis are the biggest partners in the coalition.

Q: Mr. Secretary, why has the border protection not happened in a complete manner after the regime's fall?

Rumsfeld: The border protection is a very difficult thing to do. My impression is that the border with Kuwait is very secure. The border with Jordan and with Turkey is secure. The borders with Syria and Iran are not secure. Part of it is that we're not getting good cooperation by Syria or Iran, and part of it is that we need more Iraqi border patrol to help do that job.

Q: Mr. Secretary, do you find, and if you do, why is the slowness in forming the Iraqi security forces?

Rumsfeld: That's an interesting question. I would say that there has not been a slowness in forming

the Iraqi security forces. Indeed, if you think about it, last June or July there were no Iraqi security forces. Today in February of 2004 there are over 210,000 Iraqis serving in the security forces. That's an amazing accomplishment. There are a number of thousand more that are currently in training. The goal is that by April there will be over 226,000 Iraqis serving in the security forces. All across the country Iraqis are moving forward and taking responsibility and helping to protect the Iraqi people and that's a good thing.

Q: Mr. Secretary, how do you see the morale of the soldiers after your meetings with them?

Rumsfeld: America's soldiers or Iraqi soldiers? I've met with both and their morale is very high. I met with some of the Iraqi civil defense forces and they are very upbeat. They're proud of what they're doing, they recognize the historic role they're playing in helping to liberate the Iraqi people. The American soldiers and the coalition soldiers recognize fully that what they're doing is noble work, it's important work, and they're proud to be doing it. They're all volunteers. Every one of them is a person who volunteered to come over here and to work with the Iraqi security forces to help assure a free Iraq.

Q: Mr. Secretary what about the mechanics for the replacement of the troops inside Iraq?

Rumsfeld: It's complicated, but starting in January we began moving something like 120,000 American troops. We're doing it in pieces, in units, and they're being replaced by another 115,000 or 120,000 American troops. Most of them are coming in by air.

Last night I landed at Shannon, Ireland, at the airport; and as I got off the plane so they could refuel our plane there were 250 U.S. soldiers -- National Guardsmen from Oklahoma -- flying into Iraq to replace some of our soldiers who were going home. They are proud to be serving, they're well trained, and they'll do a wonderful job.

Q: When will this process end?

Rumsfeld: The current rotation should end in May. Those that have been here for a year will be gone and the new ones will be in in their place.

Q: Mr. Secretary. Maybe one last question. What is the way the government would be formed following the cancellation of the plans for the elections and the postponement of the elections according to the U.N. reports?

Rumsfeld: That is a matter that Ambassador Bremer and the Governing Council will be discussing. It is everyone's goal that there be elections, and the only question is when is it feasible to have elections. It is everyone's goal to see that an Iraqi sovereign government is established, and I'm sure that the Governing Council, and the Coalition Provisional Authority, and the United Nations will fashion an

approach that will be acceptable to everybody.

Q: Personally, Mr. Secretary, when do you think the elections will happen?

Rumsfeld: Oh, my goodness. I am no expert on that. The people from the United Nations and the people in Iraq will have to decide what circumstances will permit elections -- elections that everyone wants to be held.

Q: Thank you so much for the (Inaudible.) and see you soon.

Rumsfeld: Thank you.



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