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Presenter: Brig. Gen. Mark Kimmitt

Sunday, May 30, 2004

Ask the U.S. Commander in Iraq, BBC

Sovereignty of Iraq will be handed over to a caretaker Iraqi government on June 30. It comes at a difficult time though for the American-led forces with attacks on coalition troops continuing on a daily basis. The coalition's moral authority has also been severely damaged by evidence of abuse at Abu Ghraib prison.

Who should be in charge of armed forces in Iraq? Can Iraq's security situation be improved?

Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt, the deputy director of coalition operations in Iraq, was our guest on the Talking Point programme.

Bridget Kendall: Hello and welcome to Talking Point, I'm Bridget Kendall. It's four weeks till the handover of power in Iraq, the security challenges are still enormous. So have the coalition forces helped or hindered in the past year and what will happen after June 30th?

Well who better to ask than our special guest today, who joins us from Baghdad, the chief spokesman for US forces in Iraq - Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt.

General Kimmitt welcome to the programme. And I'd like to say we've already had nearly two and a half thousand questions for you from our global audience on TV, radio and the internet, such as this one that came in via e-mail from Eve Metz in Melbourne, Australia who asks: The coalition has annihilated the only secular regime in the Middle East and created a haven for Islamic fundamentalists, quaintly referred to as terrorists. What do you feel about that? What's your response to that?

General Kimmitt: Well we certainly haven't annihilated the secular regime, what we've annihilated is a brutal dictatorship which held the people of Iraq under its thumb for 35 years.

It was a dictatorship which was bereft of human rights, bereft of any freedoms and democracies that we take for granted in our countries and it certainly wasn't a secular government that was working

for the good of the people.

Bridget Kendall: But there have been opinion polls recently, haven't there, that have shown that a significant number of Iraqis say, when asked, that they might feel safer if the American forces left Iraq.

General Kimmitt: Well there really is sort of a paradoxical situation here in Iraq. The vast majority of people in Iraq don't want to be occupied, they see us as occupiers, they would like to have life returned back to normal.

But they also tell us one other message, at the same time, which is we don't want you to leave because we recognise that if you were to depart there would be a very high chance of secular violence here - sectarian violence here. And so it is somewhat of a paradox and we work with that everyday.

Bridget Kendall: Thank you General Kimmitt.

Well we've also been out and about on the streets of Baghdad to see if there are Iraqis who have questions for General Kimmitt and here's one of them.

Omal al-Samauri: My name is Omal al-Samauri I live in Baghdad. My question for General Kimmitt is: What is the coalition forces going to do about the situation of security in Iraq? Most of the major roads in Baghdad are closed and the situation of the traffic is getting very hectic.

Bridget Kendall: Quite a specific question General Kimmitt, what's your answer?

General Kimmitt: First of all there are two reasons why the traffic is very, very hectic in Baghdad. First of all, the obvious reason is that there are probably three times the number of cars there were than during Saddam's regime, that's one of the healthy economic indicators and it shows that Baghdad is returning to be a vibrant economy.

But the reality is that many of the terrorists who would like to push this process off track, who want to stop us from moving towards passing sovereignty on the 30th June, continue to attack targets inside of Iraq. They attack innocent civilians, they attack coalition forces and we have had to make some security adjustments inside the city of Iraq - inside the city of Baghdad, to ensure the safety and security of not only the coalition provisional authority, the coalition forces, but in many cases for the safety of the average Iraqi on the streets as well.

We understand it's an inconvenience but we've got to balance the need for security inside Baghdad with certainly the desire of every citizen in Baghdad to try to live a normal life.

Bridget Kendall: Indeed so many Iraqis have said that what they want above all is a normal life and yet we're seeing with the security situation being so problematic the reconstruction has been hindered, some firms have pulled out, there are worries about kidnappings - there's a report today that

many doctors in Iraq have felt they've had to leave the country because they're worried about themselves or their relatives being kidnapped. What can you say to address those concerns?

General Kimmitt: Well it would appear to us that that just absolutely demonstrates why it is so important for us to move towards June 30th and transfer of sovereignty. There are terrorists out there who want to take this country and turn it into a Taleban like regime, as we saw in Afghanistan, or former regime elements that want to turn this country back to an authoritarian dictatorship as under Saddam.

Very, very few people causing very, very large problems inside this country and we're hoping that as we transfer sovereignty they will finally recognise that there is no hope, that the country of Iraq is moving towards independence, democracy, sovereignty, away from dictatorship, away from religious extremism or any extremism of any kind. The vast majority of the people in Iraq are embracing democracy, individual liberty, freedom of the press, freedom of religion.

Bridget Kendall: Let's go to our first caller, who's on the phone now, and this is Mehreen who's in New York in the USA. Merion what would you like to say to the General?

Mehreen : Hi, I'd like to ask General Kimmitt: Why is it that the US military repeatedly refuses to divulge the number of civilians killed during fighting in Falluja and Najaf because since the US is the occupying power right now it must have access to this information? Thank you.

Bridget Kendall: General Kimmitt.

General Kimmitt: Yeah I think the question I heard was why is it that the US military refuses to publish the casualty numbers of civilians inside of Falluja. Quite frankly we don't have good numbers for the civilian casualties. We always defer to the Iraqi Ministry of Health to try to determine those numbers.

It has only been a short period of time that the Ministry of Health has been allowed into the city of Falluja and we're waiting for them to come back to us with their count of what they believe to be the number of casualties that have been incurred over the past few months in Falluja.

Bridget Kendall: Mehreen, does that answer your question?

Mehreen: Yes. Also I'd like to ask a follow up. I mean there's been one year since the war has supposedly ended and we have no figures for the one year casualty figure either for the civilians.

Bridget Kendall: That's the case, General Kimmitt, isn't it. There have been other organisations who suggested the number of civilians who died might be as many as ten or eleven thousand. They tried to make an estimate but we haven't heard anything from you - why not?

General Kimmitt: Well again it's not a matter of we're trying to evade the question or hide the

answers. The fact remains that we don't have those numbers, we don't keep those numbers. For example, any time we have a terrorist attack inside the city of Baghdad we rely on the Ministry of Health and their persons to go to the city hospitals to try to make the adequate determination. But that is a role and a responsibility for the Iraqi Ministry of Health and as a result we don't track those numbers and we look to the Ministry of Health for the publishing of those numbers.

Bridget Kendall: But it would help to increase confidence in the coalition forces, wouldn't it. We have this e-mail from Dr Hisham al Bakri who's in Iraq and he says: I want to ask General Mark Kimmitt does he believe his forces have behaved in a civilised

General Kimmitt: My answer to that would be - in the vast majority of cases the American soldiers, all the coalition soldiers, have treated the people of Iraq with dignity and respect.

We try to conduct all our operations recognising that we not only have to achieve our military objective but it doesn't make any sense at all for us to conduct our military operations if we're not extremely sensitive to the people of Iraq - their desires and their concerns. We are attempting to build a partnership between ourselves and the people of Iraq.

Bridget Kendall: I think the point of view that we've been getting from the e-mails and calls we've had is that we hear in meticulous detail about American deaths but then we don't hear much detail about Iraqis. This is Will Smith in Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia who asks: Do you treat the death and injury of an Iraqi as seriously as the death or injury of an American?

Bridget Kimmitt: Well of course we do and we dread and we grieve every time we lose a friend and we lose a fellow military member or we lose a civilian that is working for us and working with us.

What I would just hope and what I just wish is that people would recognise that we have great respect for life, whether it's an Iraqi life or whether it's those of our own citizens. And I would ask them to contrast that with the terrorists in this country who intentionally go and put car bombs in the middle of crowds, put car bombs near schools, put car bombs and other explosives inside large crowds during celebrations for the specific purpose of creating death. And I would suggest that they are the ones who don't respect the citizens of Iraq, don't respect the people of Iraq, don't respect the civilians of Iraq.

We go out of our way in excruciating detail to plan our operations so that we minimise the amount of collateral damage. By contrast those that we fight here in Iraq go out of their way to create collateral damage, to create the shock value and the terror value by killing civilians and children and women.

Bridget Kendall: But on this issue of collateral damage we've had a lot of people get in touch with us about the American military raid that took place a couple of weeks ago, the so-called "wedding massacre" - people who believe that there was a wedding party which was bombed, that there were civilian casualties - women, children - seen in hospitals afterwards. And let's go now to a caller who has

a question about this. He's in Iraq - he's an Iraqi who's here in the UK and his name is Haider Al-Najjar. Haider what would you like to ask General Kimmitt?

Haider Al-Najjar: Hi there. I'd like to ask Brigadier Kimmitt about military issues because he's a military man. First of all I'd like to ask about the wedding bombing which was independently verified by journalists from the Associated Press.

Yet, Brigadier Kimmitt, made the comment that bad guys have parties too, which was as inappropriate as it was irrelevant because there were women and children present, whether they were bad guys or not is irrelevant. Under the Geneva Convention you are not allowed to attack such a gathering.

And second quick comment is on the Abu Graib scandal which, as it turns out, isn't limited to Abu Graib - we're hearing about Nasiriya, we're hearing about Qaim and about other places - and most of us Iraqis were more than happy when Saddam was taken out by the US military and we were willing to tolerate the US presence because we are grateful for them removing Saddam. However, these scandals have done irreparable damage to the reputation of the US military in Iraq.

General Kimmitt: Well look, sure let me address those first of all and it's important to understand the background of the wedding party or whatever it was.

The fact remains we have seen video that talks about a wedding, it was during the daylight hours and it looked like there was a wedding going on at some location.

The operation that we ran was 75 kilometres south of al-Qaim, about five miles from the Syrian border. We conducted that operation at one o'clock in the morning. We suspect there might have been some sort of celebration going on but the ground forces that we had at that location said they didn't find any indications that there was a wedding going on. There were no wedding presents, there was no nuptial tent, there was no food - there were no indications that there had been a wedding there in the previous hours.

It could have happened there could have been some sort of celebration six hours prior, there could have been a wedding that went on during the daylight hours, as we saw in those videos. But at the time we conducted the operation, the time we'd sent our soldiers through that, the casualties were military aged men and a handful of women, none of the men had any kind of identification on them, there was a significant amount of property inside the location that indicated that what we had was in fact a foreign fighters safe house.

There were about 350 different sets of clothes, pre-packaged, that it would appear to us that the foreign fighters would come from out of the country, trade their clothes there for Iraqi clothing and move on. A significant amount of weapons, satellite communications, what may be drugs, there was a complete miniature hospital at that location.

So it may have been that at the time of the attack there was a celebration going on but we certainly don't think it was a wedding. We observed no children killed, there were six women killed and we acknowledge that.

But all the indications that we had, the intelligence that brought us to that location, the intelligence we found at that location and frankly subsequent intelligence that we continue to pick up, would lead us to believe that there was not a wedding going on at that location at one o'clock in the morning in the middle of the desert but there may have been some sort of meeting of foreign fighters and smugglers that were at work in that area.

Bridget Kendall: Can I just come back to Haider on that? Haider that's a pretty detailed explanation.

Haider Al-Najjar: Well the thing is the Associated Press - it's contradicted totally by the Associated Press because they had individuals who were in the wedding video who were - and their corpses were shown afterwards and they were in the wedding video wearing the same clothes and this is detailed on - and the BBC have reported this indeed.

I would just like to quickly move on to another point about the Abu Ghraib scandal as well which Brigadier Kimmitt has not answered. I mean it's either one of two things - either there's no discipline in the US military which is leading individuals to commit these acts, which is a big problem because you have to have discipline in the military. Or it's approved, if not at least tolerated, by senior people in the military.

Bridget Kendall: Okay, let's just stop there and give the General a chance to reply.

General Kimmitt: Well on the issue the Associated Press video that you saw was taken during daylight hours. The attack was conducted at night time. We think there might have been some sort of celebration going on at one o'clock in the morning, it may have been that the singers were in fact entertaining this group - so we're not disputing that.

I think it's important to finish up this by saying we were concerned about those videos as well. We were concerned about what we saw. And because of our concern, because of the discrepancies and the similarities we've launched a full investigation.

We are conducting that investigation right now. We're going to find out what happened, we're going to be very open and honest about it and we're going to find out if in fact there were some discrepancies between the reports we got and what we saw in those videos. So let's see how that investigation turns out.

The gentleman then talked about Abu Graib and ...

Bridget Kendall: General, we've got a whole spate of e-mails and questions to you on that a little later on and Haider we won't forget your point. But I just want to put to General Kimmitt another e-mail we had which is about the whole public relations side to this incident - the wedding party - which you've had to deal with on a daily basis at the press conferences.

And we've had several e-mails from people who've taken exception to the statement you made "bad people have parties too". This is Ameer in Dubai: How can you defend your statement like "bad people have parties too", it seems to have gone down very badly?"

General Kimmitt: Well again the comment was very simple and what it meant was that there were some people that may have been entertaining a group of smugglers, it may have been a large celebration of the foreign fighters before they moved on.

Nobody's disputing the fact that there may have been a celebration of some kind going on at one or two o'clock in the morning. And very simply meant that there could have been two things going on - there could have been a foreign fighters safe house preparing for their missions as they went to terrorise the people of Iraq and there might have been some entertainment to go along with that as well.

That is not inconsistent and that's one of the things we're going to look at. But to suggest that somehow we had a wedding party going on there, it is not borne out by the facts on the ground.

Bridget Kendall: Thank you. And General Kimmitt we had a caller just a minute ago who wanted to talk about Abu Ghraib and the prison abuse scandals there. Let me put to you this e-mail that we've had from Iran from July in Shiraz: I always thought that the US army had discipline and respect, however, the recent scandal in Baghdad's prison showed the lack of such discipline and any kind of respect for human rights. Do you think the US army can recover?

General Kimmitt: Well first of all I think you're absolutely right and we've said numerous times what we saw in those photos was abhorable , was wrong, was absolutely inconsistent with what we stand for as an army.

They're absolutely right. Those are not the values of the US army. What you saw in those photos was wrong. And we've taken swift action against those responsible, for those people that you see inside those photos, for the actions that they committed. There is no excuse for that.

We conducted a thorough investigation - seven people are facing courts martial charges, one has already been through the court martial and a number of supervisors have had administrative actions taken against them as well.

So I'm not going to try to defend what I saw and what you saw in those photos. It was wrong and it was important for the US army to conduct those investigations and admit that those actions happened

and you're right - it was a failure of leadership.

Bridget Kendall: I would say that perhaps half the people who've been in touch with us have wanted to talk about this, perhaps not surprising given the material that's been made public. This is from Sahar in Amman in Jordan who asks: Do you think the Iraqis are going to forgive you Americans for what you've done? You've treaded on men's dignity.

General Kimmitt: And he's right. That has been one of our major concerns and we have a 135,000 American soldiers here that feel just absolutely down in the deep pit of their stomach, they're twisted, because they know every time they go out on the streets people are looking at them and wondering if those soldiers are capable of doing what the soldiers we saw in those photos did.

And what we've just got to do is demonstrate everyday forward that those pictures are not representative of the other 135,000 American soldiers that are doing their job proudly and treating the people of Iraq with dignity and respect.

Bridget Kendall: But do you think, given the scale of this - of what we've seen, that the Iraqis are going to forgive you, as Sahar asks?

General Kimmitt: Well I think it's precisely because the scale of this was so small that the people of Iraq will forgive us. This was only six or seven soldiers. It may get wider, it may get up to 20 soldiers but 20 soldiers out of 135,000, about 10 or 12 detainees out of the thousands that we've detained.

I think most of the people in Iraq recognise that that was an isolated incident, pray that was an isolated incident and our investigations continue to demonstrate that it was fairly isolated and not representative of the 135,000 soldiers out there doing the right thing under very tough circumstances every day.

Bridget Kendall: But can you say categorically General then, before these investigations are over, that it won't go beyond 20, that it doesn't go up a chain of command through military intelligence, civilian contractors who might have been involved for example?

General Kimmitt: Well first of all we have said it does go up the chain of command, it went all the way up to the Brigadier General who was commanding the 800th MP Brigade. And yes it went into the military intelligence and that's why we're conducting another investigation to determine how much of the military intelligence was involved.

And yes it could involve civilian contractors and that's why we're continuing the investigation to explore - we're going to go wide, we're going to go deep, we're going to look under every rock and find out just how far this went.

But all indications thus far is that this was limited, localised and again not representative of the

vast majority of, for example, military police who are doing their job proudly and the vast majority of military intelligence professionals that are doing their job proudly as well.

Bridget Kendall: We've got a caller on the line who'd like to ask about this. It's Eliceu Maximo Filho from San Paulo in Brazil. You're on the line, what would you like to say to the General?

Eliceu Maximo Filho: General, I would like to know if those soldiers who have committed crimes against Iraqi people in the prisons, if they had committed the same crimes against American citizens if they would have the same punishment like one year in prison like they have?

Bridget Kendall: I don't know if you heard that General. If American soldiers were accused - had done the same thing to US citizens would they have the same punishment?

General Kimmitt: Exactly the same. We are not making a difference in the uniform code of military justice, whether these were Iraqi prisoners or if they'd been guarding American prisoners at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. They're exactly the same charges, exactly the same procedure. We're not making an exception just because these were foreign citizens.

In fact my guess is that we're probably - well I won't even say that but we are - we are looking very hard at this. We're very, very determined to make sure this never happens again. But no we treat the court cases exactly the same whether these are Iraqi detainees or whether these are American detainees.

Bridget Kendall: Eliceu, you're in Brazil, what's been your impression of this whole abuse scandal?

Eliceu Maximo Filho: Well it was a very bad incident because it was completely against the treatment of prisoners and also the Red Cross who were the only organisation who had access to the prison itself didn't do anything about that. So it was like no one to take care of it, it's this type of feeling I would say.

Bridget Kendall: We've had an e-mail General from - this is from Christine Fortier, she's in Canada in Montreal. And she says: My friend's father died while in US army custody in Iraq and without disclosing any more details to protect his family's identity I will say the circumstances surrounding his death were suspicious to say the least. So how soon, if ever, will we have details regarding the fate of specific prisoners?

General Kimmitt: Well again we've given background briefings on the number of detainee deaths that we have had under custody. Over the past - since the beginning of operations there have been 37 deaths while in detention. Of those seven were in Afghanistan, 30 were in Iraq. Of the 30 that were in Iraq 19 were considered justifiable homicide - a prisoner attempting to take a weapon from a guard and turn it on the guard and so on and so forth.

So we're talking only about nine that are under investigation and you can be sure that those nine deaths while in detention will be thoroughly investigated and if any wrongdoing was involved it will be prosecuted and it will be taken in front of a court.

Bridget Kendall: Well this is a question, of course, which has concerned people, not just around the world, but in the United States too and we've also been out and about in Washington DC in the United States to see if people had questions they wanted to put to General Kimmitt and here's a question from Washington.

Clara Anamo: My name is Clara Anamo and I live in Washington DC. I would like to ask the General about how the military is going to handle compensation to the victims of the systematic abuse that we now have going on in American detention centres in Iraq.

Bridget Kendall: General Kimmitt.

General Kimmitt: Yeah, that's an interesting question because one of the things that we have learned this whole cultural norm of compensation. I know that these discussions are going on, back in Washington DC, regarding the compensation of victims of the abuse and as soon as those decisions are made in Washington DC we will execute those decisions quickly.

Bridget Kendall: This whole area though, of compensation and finding out what happened to prisoners, it comes back to this first question which was raised which is about the number of Iraqis who died, doesn't it? There's still not a clear estimate of how many there are - how can the Americans and the coalition partners possibly know specifically who has suffered what fate and therefore take appropriate action for it?

General Kimmitt: Well I know that Ambassador Bremer has taken the first step - he has set up a special compensation trust fund for the people of Iraq for the atrocities that were committed during the time of Saddam. I believe he's put already 25 million from the developmental fund for Iraq into this trust and I would expect that they will be considering compensation for post-Saddam period sometime in the future as well.

Bridget Kendall: But let's go now to a caller who's on the line from Norway. It's Steiner Almelid in Oslo and I understand that you are yourself a military man, is that right?

Steiner Almelid: Yes ma'am, I'm a former lieutenant colonel in the air force and I have worked extensively with intelligence and also with strategy at the top level in the Norwegian military.

I would first like to comment that I really appreciate General Kimmitt's comments because they're reflecting the ability to think about things before saying or giving a conclusion. This ability has been lacking from the political level, as I see it, and that's the sad part.

The Bush administration and Bush himself said about certain Iraqis should be taken dead or alive and I think it's this intent itself to not distinguish between Iraqi persons being dead or alive that is the problem here. Is it not so, sir, that to act in tune with the intention of the supreme commander is every officer's responsibility - is that not so?

Bridget Kendall: General Kimmitt.

General Kimmitt: Yeah, I'm afraid I didn't hear the question that well would you please repeat it?

Steiner Almelid: Yes. My point is that an officer has to conduct his business in line with the intention of his commander and also in line with the intention of the supreme commander. And the supreme commander in this case being the political leadership in Washington. So is that not so?

General Kimmitt: Oh it's absolutely so. We have a clear chain of command, for example, in the American military - General Sanchez answers to General Abizaid, General Abizaid to the Secretary of Defence and the Secretary of Defence to the President. Our orders come directly from the President down to the individual soldier. Everything we do here has a military component but it also has political intent behind it.

Steiner Almelid: Indeed, and that's what I have perceived and I'm not saying I have perceived an intention from the political level that is highly unfortunate for the US military and the Iraqi people - the intent coming out publicly - and I don't know what has come out through your line of command - but what has come out publicly is clearly in disrespect with human life, the Iraqi life, American life as well because response from Iraq as we see now is that when the Americans conduct a war that it's in itself is the disrespect of Iraqi life then you get some feedback, and you claim every feedback, every action back to you is like a terrorist act that should be condemned to the strongest while your actions are correct.

Well I say that you went into this war citing specific reason for waging the war and then you have changed the arguments when the declared Iraqi threat did not exist. And this is lack of responsibility that the US now, as the only supreme power or superpower, should have. I mean you should have more international awareness.

Before the war there were polls conducted in more countries than ever. Eighty six countries were polled outside the US and in 84 of them there was a majority against this war. I personally did not want to see any Iraqi or any American dead unnecessarily and it seems to have been the majority view in 84 countries of 86 polled.

Bridget Kendall: Let's give General Kimmitt a chance to respond to that.

General Kimmitt: Well I think it's probably important not to ask the question - how did we get here - but what are we doing now that we're here. Right now the military has a very simple purpose - to provide a safe and secure environment for the people of Iraq, so that the passing of governance to the

people of Iraq, so the rebuilding of the infrastructure and the stimulation of the economy can occur.

We don't go out looking for fights, we don't go out looking to kill Iraqis. What we're trying to do is establish a secure environment so the people of Iraq don't have to live under terror, they don't have to live under the threat of former Saddamists who want to bring this country back to an authoritarian regime. And we try to protect the people of this country from extremism that we've seen throughout, not only this regime but throughout the world.

We aren't looking for a fight, we're looking to protect the people of Iraq so they can live that normal life that we talked about earlier, so they can get on with their lives, so their country can come to one that is democratic - can become one that is democratic, enjoys freedom of religion, freedom of expression, freedom of the press.

Bridget Kendall: But if I understood our caller from Norway right he's saying that if you say to everyone who's opposing you in Iraq is a terrorist then you don't leave much room for anyone to be wrong - anyone to have the right answers except yourselves.

General Kimmitt Well all I would suggest is we're having a difficult time understanding what the people who are putting roadside bombs are trying to achieve. We're having a hard time understanding those who would drive cars full of explosives into the middle of a celebration, during Asura, what they're trying to accomplish.

This is not a revolution; this is not an insurgency that is trying to pit one political system against another. These people have chosen - the people of Iraq, in the main, in the vast majority, have said we want to move on to democracy, freedom and sovereignty.

The guys who are tossing the bombs, killing the coalition forces, murdering innocent civilians here, all they're trying to do is the old axiom of the terrorist - kill one, terrorise a thousand. They don't offer anything constructive, they don't offer any different solution, they don't offer an alternative. There are no political parties that are coming up, there are no opposition theories, there are no opposition democratic systems or political systems.

So we don't understand, other than killing innocent Iraqis and trying to derail the process to democracy, what the former regime elements, what Zarqawi and his network are asking for, what answer all Islam is trying to do here in Iraq. What we think they want, more than anything else, is to thrive in the chaos that would come from sectarian warfare, from a country that is unable to protect itself.

Bridget Kendall: What about the impact of all this on American soldiers? We've had this e-mail from Cheryl Apparelby, who's in Austin, Texas, and she quite simply asks: How is morale being kept up?

General Kimmitt: I think morale is being kept up very simply by a number of ways. These

soldiers understand what their mission is. They look around everyday and they see the people of Iraq and they understand what Iraq would look like if they didn't have the coalition soldiers - the 135,000 American and the 20,000 from 30 other nations here. They know what could happen - it could be like Bosnia, it could be like Kosovo - all the sectarian violence could emerge.

So they understand the clear focus mission and they understand their purpose for being here. They also know they have the support of their friends and family back home, they have the support of the American people, they have the support of the American Congress and they have the support of the President of the United States. And when you have that great amount of public support and a clear focused mission and you understand your purpose for being over here that's what keeps morale high.

Bridget Kendall: General Kimmitt thank you. Well our next question for General Kimmitt is about the military operations there have been recently in Falluja and Najaf. And the first one, General Kimmitt, is from Abu in Arusha in Tanzania who asks: Why did American soldiers pull out of Falluja after a stand off, only later on to put a former Saddam Hussein general in control?

General Kimmitt: Well first of all we didn't pull out of Falluja, we had a cordon around Falluja, we were going to complete the operation to come back into the city of Falluja to rid it of the foreign fighters, to rid it of the people who had attacked and killed so many Iraqi policemen on the 14th February, to bring to justice those that had killed the contractors on March 31st.

But then the Iraqi governing council came forward and said - Look, we know you can do this militarily but let's see if we can do this peacefully. Perhaps the answer to this question does not rest with force of arms but perhaps we can find a peaceful solution. We said we'd be willing to listen . There was significant discussion between the people of Falluja and the governing council and local dignitaries. At that point the decision was made to allow a Falluja brigade of former regular army soldiers to come back on duty in an interim auxiliary brigade, occupy Falluja, become responsible for public security and slowly move to our other objectives of ridding that city of weapons, foreign fighters Iraqi control and bring in justice. Since May 3rd we've had no ceasefire violations during that time when the coalition announced a unilateral suspension of offensive operations.

So if you take a look at Falluja now what do you have? They have it placid, fairly peaceful, it's quiet. People aren't firing at each other. The Falluja brigade is inside. We also have the Iraqi police inside, we also have the Iraqi civil defence inside. Soon we will have soldiers inside conducting able to deploy large amount of reconstruction money into the city of Falluja. So the military option always remains. But this seems to use all the efforts, all of our capabilities, not only military but diplomatic and economic to try to bring Falluja back in line with the rest of Iraq and moving towards freedom and democracy.

Bridget Kendall: But General Kimmitt for all those watching and particularly Iraqis who had homes in Falluja who either lost their homes or some of them lost their lives, the lives of their relatives, they must ask - was the raid justified in the first place, why didn't you go for a peaceful solution in the

first place?

General Kimmitt: Well the peaceful solution wasn't being offered.

Bridget Kendall: Well I'm afraid we're having a little bit of trouble with the line there from Baghdad. Well let's go back to the questions that we were seeking from people in Baghdad. Here's another question from the streets of Baghdad.

Mustafa Hasan: Hi I'm Mustafa Hasan, I'm from Baghdad. I came back here from Najaf yesterday. So I would just like to ask General Kimmitt a simple question. Do you know where is Moqtada al-Sadr for the time and I hope you can answer that? Thanks.

Bridget Kendall: Well General Kimmitt, I hope we've got you back, we were having a few flash frames there but I hope you could hear that question. It was asking about what's going on in Najaf and whether you know the whereabouts of Moqtada al-Sadr.

General Kimmitt: Well right now we don't know where Moqtada al-Sadr is, however, things are quite quiet at the time.

Bridget Kendall: I'm afraid we're still having problems with our line to Baghdad but joining me in the studio is Middle East expert Adel Darwish, who's been listening to General Kimmitt. Adel Darwish what's your assessment of where we are in Najaf? This is an American attack which is still going on, unlike the one we were discussing in Falluja, with quite a lot of violence today.

Adel Darwish: Yes I think what actually makes it different from what went on in Falluja is Najaf is an area of the heartland of the Shia. Where the Shia are on the same side as the Americans and on the same side of the largest of the forces who wanted to see the back of Saddam, they suffered a lot under Saddam and there must have been some questions to be raised and the Americans would need to ask themselves, what went wrong to alienate the Shia.

The second point of course is Moqtada al-Sadr himself - a young man who is playing a power game. His motives are not sort of entirely kosher. He's got his own sort of way of wanting to be included in through the means of violence and he does not enjoy the support of people like Ayatollah Ali Sistani, for example, and people who matter.

Again another question - why was he actually allowed to go that far? We know that he was implicated in the assassination of Ayatollah Khomeini over - about 15 months ago, now so why has he not been arrested earlier rather than actually growing into power. So again this question of the political judgement of the CPA - that's the coalition occupying force there?

Bridget Kendall: We heard General Kimmitt say that in Falluja after a certain point they were approached by the Iraqi governing council to try a peaceful solution which they went to, quite a corner

turn, do you see this as a change of strategy in Iraq that will be mirrored in Najaf? There have been attempts to establish a truce there.

Adel Darwish: Well I think what I have seen in the last recent trip to Southern Iraq - to Basra - and speaking to people there certainly there is a direction now that the areas which are trouble spots, isolate these areas. While isolating these areas put military pressure on the people who are creating trouble, try to reach some kind of political fusion - ceasefire - bring back, as the General said, people from the regular army who were working under Saddam, but not necessarily politically and ideologically motivated as the Baath party were.

While at the same time the areas being pacified and has been under control you throw a lot of money and investment into this area as some kind of an incentive, showing people that once the area's been pacified they can move forward and that would mean the population themselves turn against either foreign fighters or the remnants of the old regime or anybody carrying arms and causing trouble. But again this is a new tactic and it remains to be seen how successful it's going to be.

Bridget Kendall: Let's go to another caller now, we've got on the phone waiting to talk us Susie Ousanmas, who's in Ankara in Turkey. Susie, what would you like to say?

Susie Ousanmas: Well what I'd like to say is I'm trying to figure out of all the detainees that the Americans have how many of them are really terrorists and not victims of some sort of jealous or some tribal dispute, you know you want to get someone out of the way, you want to be jealous of somebody and you just tell them - this person has links with al-Qaeda and get them away for a couple of years. And I'm just wondering of all the number of people that the Americans have do they really investigate or are they just arresting these people on the word of a few neighbours that might not be so honest themselves about these things.

Bridget Kendall: This is always a problem isn't it Adel.

Susie Ousanmas: I think the Middle East is a big problem, I've been living here for 30 years and if you just want to make trouble for someone you just try to...

Bridget Kendall: Susie, let's put that point to Adel Darwish who's here in the studio, who has long experience of the Middle East.

Adel Darwish: Yes I think this is one of the questions which probably we'll not find the answer to maybe in my generation or so. As we have seen actually with the Guantanamo Bay, we have seen the British detainees who have been actually released recently and they've written a letter to President Bush and they're asking for an investigation and compensation.

And again that's one of the errors that has been committed - that the standing of the Iraqi army, the standing of the infrastructure of the tools and organisations of the Iraqi state which would have

helped to carry out this kind of investigation.

The silver sort of lining of this particular cloud is that the occupation forces - the coalition forces - Britain and the United States - are democracies, free press. It was the American press, it was the British press that actually exposed what was going on in Abu Ghraib and there are mechanisms through which people can seek compensation, can take people to court, can ask investigation going on. So at least there is some positive sides to the story.

Bridget Kendall: Well I believe that we can now rejoin General Kimmitt on the phone, he's on the phone to us now from Baghdad. Are you there General Kimmitt?

General Kimmitt: I sure am.

Bridget Kendall: Good of you to rejoin us. We've got another caller on the line who'd like to put a question to you, it's Sher Yar in Singapore. Go ahead with your question.

Sher Yar: Thank you very much. Could I ask the General that I understand that the Secretary of State Colin Powell insists on American control of US army and UK Prime Minister indicates that the army will be under the control of new democratic government. My question is: What will be the position of coalition forces in new democratic set up in Iraq?

Bridget Kendall: A question about the handover General Kimmitt - what will be the state of the coalition forces after June 30th?

General Kimmitt: Well after June 30th we will stay here as invited guests of the people of Iraq. We certainly expect that they will recognise - and they've expressed to us time after time that they recognise that there will be some period of time before the Iraqi security forces are capable of handling both the internal security and external security of this nation and we'll work in a partnership with the people of Iraq, with the Iraqi security forces, to continue to train them, to equip them, to field them, to employ them until a day when we can slowly start reducing our forces and their capable forces can take over the security file.

Bridget Kendall: What about this question that's been troubling a lot of people - who will have final political control over any future operations - another Falluja for example - will the new Iraqi government be able to veto that?

General Kimmitt: Well as you certainly know when we pass over sovereignty it won't be at half measure - we are turning sovereignty to the people of Iraq. We're turning over sovereignty to the government that will be established in Iraq. And those status of forces arrangements we're doing some of those discussions now. There certainly will be the capability for us to conduct missions here but there will also be the capability for the government in Iraq to have a voice in that process.

Bridget Kendall: But does that mean you'll check it out with them beforehand or only tell them about it afterwards?

General Kimmitt: You know those discussions are ongoing now because we want to come up with practical modalities so that all the concerns can be met on both sides. They are concerns of a sovereign nation and of course the concerns of a multinational force operating inside of a sovereign nation.

Bridget Kendall: Let's go to a caller we have, who's on the line, from France, Mike Aderlie who's in Le Gavanne . Mike what would you like to ask the General?

Mike Aderle: Well my question I think has already been answered by the previous questioner because my question was: What is the situation after June 30th? Will the Americans give the authority for the Iraqi government to govern the American forces? It's badly phrased perhaps but I think it's already covered by the previous questioner.

Bridget Kendall: But this is actually a question that a lot of people have been in touch with us about, General Kimmitt. This is Nilesh from Antwerp in Belgium who says: How can a national be handed over power - full sovereignty - when its government has no control over the majority of the armed forces?

General Kimmitt: Well first of all the Iraqi security forces will act and work for the government of Iraq. And we have a precedent for this, one which the British enjoy as well and are involved in and that's what we do in Korea. Right now we have the UN forces in Korea, that nation's forces in Korea, working inside the sovereign nation of Korea. There have been modalities and practical measures established between the American forces, predominantly American forces in the US command and the sovereign nation of Korea. That may be one of the models that we look at.

We have people far smarter than me sitting down right now working out these modalities and we have all the confidence in the world that post-July 1st that we will be able to conduct missions to ensure the security of Iraq alongside the Iraqi security forces so that there's no security gap while we're trying to figure out the solution.

Bridget Kendall: Well General Kimmit thank you very much for joining us. I think that's all we have time for today. And my apologies to everyone for the difficulty in seeing General Kimmitt in vision the whole time. But my thanks to Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt, who spent an hour with us from Baghdad and to all of you who've been in touch.

You can still take part in our debates on Iraq via our website - bbcnews.com - where you can also send in questions and comments for next week's Talking Point where I'll be back hosting a discussion on the 60th anniversary of D-Day. But for now from all of us goodbye.

<http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/2004/tr20040530-0801.html>