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Presenter: General George W. Casey, Jr., Commander, Multi-National Force Iraq

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DoD News Briefing

GEN. CASEY: Hello, everybody. I think I'm self-introducing. (Laughter.)

Nice to see you back in Washington here. For those of you I don't know, I'm George Casey, the commander of the Multinational Force in Iraq.

I'd like to just talk to you a little about the situation on the ground in Iraq. I've been there almost six months now, and we've just completed a review of the first five months. As I think some of you know, we developed a campaign plan in the July time period, John Negroponte and I, with both the embassy staff and my staff, and we've been working toward that ever since. And so we did our first major assessment here at the five-month point.

I can tell you that I feel that we're broadly on track in helping the Iraqi people complete their transition to a constitutionally elected government at the end of next year. We also believe that this objective is both realistic and achievable.

Now I recognize that that may not be an impression that we all share here, and I by no means want to give you the impression that this process is going to be uncontested or violence-free. That's not going to be the case.

But as we have seen in Najaf, in Tall Afar, in Samarra and in Sadr City, the Iraqi people are fighting to throw off the mantle of terror and intimidation, so that they can elect their own government and build a better life for the Iraqi people.

There is progress across Iraq every day, and every day we and our Iraqi partners are a step closer to accomplishing our objectives.

Now let me just make a couple of points with you. First of all, the insurgency that we're fighting is not 10 feet tall. They're a tough, aggressive enemy, but they're not 10 feet tall. They're the same people who have oppressed the Iraqi people for the last 30 years. They're the reason that over a million Iraqis are missing and why probably several hundred thousand of those missing Iraqis are likely in mass graves around Iraq. They're focused on their return to dominance, so that they can continue to plunder the great natural resources of Iraq. They offer no alternative vision. They offer only intimidation and subjugation.

With the win in Fallujah, with the liberation of Fallujah, they no longer have any safe havens anywhere in Iraq. And also, as a result of the success in Fallujah, it was driven home to them that they cannot defeat the coalition forces.

So they're attacking our will and the will of the Iraqi people, and I personally do not believe that they will defeat the indomitable spirit of 25 million free people who want to build a better life for themselves and for their families.

Second point: The Iraqi security forces are getting stronger every day. Our plan to build the Iraqi military and police forces is broadly on track. By February there will be 70 trained and equipped battalions in the Iraqi army; one of those will be a mechanized infantry battalion.

Progress has also been made in the police and special police forces. By February there will be six public order battalions, a special police regiment, four police commando battalions and some nine regional SWAT teams -- special weapons and tactics teams -- all of them contributing to the fight against the insurgents and the terrorists on a day-to-day basis. As most of you know, we still have a way to go in this area, but as I said, we're broadly on track and generally very pleased with the performance of the Iraqi security forces.

Third point: Reconstruction momentum is building. In June there were only around 230 projects actually what we call turning dirt, actually started, on the ground. By the end of November there were over 1,000, with a value of over \$3 billion. All of this in spite of insurgents' efforts to disrupt the reconstruction process. This is a great tribute to the folks that work on those projects, particularly in the embassy and the coalition businessmen and women who are over there working to build a better Iraq.

Fourth point: The interim government and their security forces are broadly accepted by the Iraqi people. Some poll ratings for the government are as high as 70 percent approval rating. The Iraqi people express a generally favorable opinion about their new army and about their police, and more than 60 percent of Iraqis believe that the country is headed in the right direction and they are optimistic about their future.

We're also broadly on track for the elections. Fourteen of the 18 provinces have less than -- four or less incidents of violence a day, and the registration process in most of the country was executed. The Iraqi election committee is working on some alternative solutions for the two areas of the country in which it was disrupted.

I want to be clear: The insurgents and the terrorists will continue to attack and attempt to disrupt the election process. And we see that daily. They won't succeed. And the elections in January will then be but another step forward in our relentless progress toward a new Iraq.

Now if I could just say a word to the home audience here in the United States. As a nation you can take great pride in the role that our soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines are playing in helping build a new, and better Iraq. Each and every one of them recognizes the importance that successfully accomplishing this mission holds for our own security, and each and every one of them makes a difference every day. Wherever I go I see their acts of bravery, compassion and selflessness, and I couldn't be prouder of these wonderful men and women.

Our success to date is also a tribute to the great men and women of the Iraqi security forces and the coalition who have given their lives to defeat terrorism and to help the Iraqis to help build a new Iraq. We grieve with the loved ones of all our service members and with those of Iraqi service members who have died. We are humbled by their sacrifice and their contribution in bringing freedom to Iraq, and we are humbled by their sacrifice in enhancing the security of the United States and the coalition.

Lastly, we are, especially during the holiday season, also deeply thankful for the love and support of our families and loved ones, whose sacrifices and strength underpin everything that we do.

Progress towards a constitutionally elected government will not be easy. Nothing worthwhile ever is. But the challenge of helping the people of Iraq build a better future is one that the Iraqi people in the armed forces of 30 freedom-loving countries can take on.

So thank you very much, and I'll take your questions.

Q: General, based at least partly on the candidates the Shi'a are offering, are you concerned on what influence Iran may have over the Iraqi government after the January election?

GEN. CASEY: I missed the very first part of your question.

Q: Based at least in part on what candidates the Shi'a are offering, are you concerned about the possible influence that Iran might have on the Iraqi government after the election?

GEN. CASEY: My personal view -- and this is political, but I'm here every day and I'll give you just my personal view. I don't see substantial Iranian influence on this particular government that will be elected in January. I see Iran as more of a longer-term threat to Iraqi security. But that's just -- that's my view, and from -- I'm a military person who's just -- who's there.

Q: You mean -- from a longer view, are you talking about a possible military attack as opposed to political?

GEN. CASEY: No, I don't -- I'm not talking about that. I'm just saying from a strategic perspective, Iraq is a long-term threat to stability -- I'm sorry, Iran is a long-term threat to stability in Iraq. If you look on the other side, I think Syria is a short-term threat because of the support they provide to the former Ba'athist leaders that we see operating in and out of Syria.

Q: Thank you, General.

Q: General, you talked about how the government is considering alternative solutions in some of those Sunni Triangle areas where registration is a problem. As I understand it, one of those is holding elections over a longer period of time; more than one day, in other words. What's your assessment of the security situation in doing them? Doesn't that just give a longer period of time for potential attacks by insurgents? And also could you tell us what the American role is in security of those election sites?

GEN. CASEY: I do not think the extended election period is still on the table. I know that was discussed, but I've discussed it with some of the leadership in the Iraqi government. I don't believe it's on the table anymore, at least it wasn't when I left.

We are working closely with the Ministry of Interior and the Iraqi election committee (sic/commission) in building the security plan for the elections. It's not finally formed yet. It will be probably by the end of this month. In general the role of the coalition forces will be one of broad-area security, and it will be the Iraqi security forces that will work the specifics of the polling areas and places like that.

Q: General, how concerned are you that the Sunnis will not participate or not turn out in numbers sufficient in this election, not only because of the security situation, but simply because of disaffection? And if they do, what does that mean?

GEN. CASEY: Again, I wish -- my political consultant, John Negroponte, could probably do a better job on this one. My view is -- I'll give you my opinion. My opinion is that there will be Sunni participation in this in a reasonable amount. I believe that the insurgents are pursuing a strategy I call purposeful disenfranchisement by intimidating Sunnis away from the election process so they can say, "Well, the Sunnis didn't vote, so therefore the election is invalid." I don't think that's going to be a successful strategy, but it's one that they're trying to implement. So I think there will be sufficient Sunni participation in this for people to accept the fact that it is a reasonably free and fair election.

Q: You talked about at the polling places it would largely be Iraqi security forces. There's what, 9,000 polling places?

GEN. CASEY: It's undetermined. Somewhere between 6,(000) and 9,(000); 9,(000) is the high end.

Q: And when you look at the number of Iraqi security forces, it seems like there wouldn't be very many Iraqi security forces. If you could talk about that, the numbers at those polling places. And I know you don't want to be too specific on that, but if you'll give us more detail about what the Americans will do. Maybe sort of rapid reaction? What?

GEN. CASEY: Again, we're still working through the process, but it's like any type of security situation. If you want to guard, you don't guard every place just at the point. You guard it away from the point. You restrict access to it. You keep vehicles from moving in the direction of the polling places around it. I mean, there's a range of options that you do to reduce exposure of these particular sites, rather than just taking 20 to 30 people and huddling around the site itself. That's being worked out.

My experience with elections in the past, in Bosnia and Kosovo, again the forces of the coalition, the security forces normally operate away from the polling sites in an area security role and do provide reaction force if there's problems.

And the other thing we do and we will do and are doing is to continue to conduct operations prior to the elections to disrupt the insurgents and to keep them from disrupting the election process. So there's an offensive component to this as well.

Q: General, you talk about the progress in security across Iraq. It seems that that airport road is a symbol of what many people say is a growing insurgency. What is the story with that road? And why can't U.S. and Iraqi forces patrol it effectively to stop the attacks that are happening on it?

GEN. CASEY: I wouldn't necessarily see it as a symbol of a growing insurgency. I would see it as a symbol of the growing use of car bombs in the insurgency. And that really is the question of the airport road. It's a tactic that's been adopted by the insurgents. They don't have to do much. A car bomb a day in Baghdad or on the airport road sends a symbol that the insurgency is very powerful, when in actuality I don't believe that they are. It's a classic technique of the urban insurgent. They are trying to provoke us to do something that will make us look like we're overreacting to them. I mean, you could tie up traffic -- I mean, if you searched every car getting on the airport road, you'd put that part of Baghdad in knots. So it really is the issue of dealing with car bombs. We continually work on that. And we will get -- we will get to a point where the airport road is secure and our people and the people in the embassy are protected against car bombs. But as with any battle, it's an action-reaction-counteraction cycle that we go through with the enemy and the enemy does to us.

Q: So is there a plan for that road or just a broader plan for attacking the terrorists and their ability to make car bombs?

GEN. CASEY: It's a little bit of each, but we're actively working with the minister of interior and his traffic

forces on ways to reduce the threats to our forces on the airport road.

Q: Sir?

GEN. CASEY: Behind you, and I'll come back.

Q: Yes, General. This is Drew Brown with Knight Ridder. I know you addressed this in your opening remarks, but in your view, are we winning in Iraq? And how do you define winning? And as a follow-up, do you believe, given the current situation there, that credible national elections will be held or could be held or are possible to be held by January 30th?

GEN. CASEY: My view of winning is that we are broadly on track to accomplishing our objectives, which is a constitutionally elected government that is representative of all the Iraqi people and with Iraqi security forces that are capable of maintaining domestic order and denying Iraq as a safe haven for terror. And I believe we will get there by the end of December '05, and I believe we are on track to get there by December of '05.

Q: What was the second part?

Q: About the elections, do you think that --

GEN. CASEY: I do.

Q: -- given the situation, it's -- that credible elections will be held on January 30th?

GEN. CASEY: I do. I mean, it is going to be hard. They will fight us every step of the way. But I do believe elections are -- credible elections can be held. I mean, again, in the south and in the north, 14 of those 18 provinces, my -- what I believe is that they will be uneventful. They will be contested in the center area of the country, but I believe that we will succeed in that.

Q: As a final -- final question, how do you -- how do you -- what do you tell the families of servicemen who have been killed and maimed over there? How do you define victory in Iraq, ultimate victory to these people who are losing their loved ones?

GEN. CASEY: I think I just did. But what I'd say to the families is what I said in my opening statement. These soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines that have died over there have given their lives to help 25 million Iraqis build a better life and to improve the security of the United States and the coalition. And these young men and women went over there knowing that would be a possibility, and God bless them. That's what makes this country great.

Q: On Syria. Could you elaborate a little bit more on the situation up along that border? There was supposed to be a joint border committee that was meeting to work out the cross-border traffic. Has that fallen apart?

And would you also address down in the south, it's my understand you all are still holding some number of Mujahideen-e-khalq at a camp down near Kuwait. What's their status? How many are there? And what's going to finally happen to them? And when?

GEN. CASEY: Last part first. That's more up north. There are -- my last recollection is that there was about 3,000 MEK folks still there at a camp, that we are working their process with the Red Cross. I do not have a timeline of when that process will be completed.

Q: So what will happen to them?

GEN. CASEY: Their ultimate disposition, where they --

Q: Where are they going to go?

GEN. CASEY: Almost every one of them has a different story, so it's a variety of different places.

I'm sorry, what was your first?

Q: And the first one is, what's going on at the Syrian border? You had a committee that was looking at that.

GEN. CASEY: Oh. There was a meeting. That process is continuing. I will tell you, my personal view is the Syrians are making some efforts on the border, but they're not going after the big fish, which is really the people that we're interested in. And we're really interested in them going after the senior Ba'athists that are providing the direction and financing for the insurgency inside Iraq. That's what we're really like to see them do.

Q: Because you guys obviously can't cross the border to go after them.

GEN. CASEY: Right.

Q: Yeah, your emphasis on the elections is making them shape into a fairly decisive element of the entire campaign. What would be the consequences if they are successfully disrupted by the insurgents? What's at stake here?

GEN. CASEY: It has been an important intermediate step in our campaign plan since we started this. But it is a step in the process. You're asking me a hypothetical. I don't really know the answer to that.

Q: Well, you plan for failure.

GEN. CASEY: Well, you also -- you plan for success. I really don't have a good answer to that, and I'd rather not get into a hypothetical situation.

Q: All right, you had said that with the fall of Fallujah for the insurgents, they don't have a safe house inside the country anymore. Mosul, since Fallujah has seen a lot of trouble up there, what is the status of Mosul now? And do you think that is becoming a safe haven for insurgents? And what are you doing to try to alleviate the ongoing problem up there?

GEN. CASEY: Let me talk about safe haven for a minute, what I mean when I say safe haven. For me, a safe haven is a place where insurgents and terrorists can go and plan, and build improvised explosive devices, and bring in recruits and receive them in, give them training, link them up with operations, stage for operations, rehearse operations, with impunity. And that's what they had in Fallujah, and that's what they don't have anymore. That's what they had in Samarra for a while. They don't have that -- (inaudible). That's what the Muqtada militia had in Najaf. They don't have that anymore.

So they've lost the ability to operate any place with impunity. So what's going on in Mosul, in my view, is not a safe haven. It's an area where insurgents have gone and have had some success against the local security forces.

Now our folks, operating with additional Iraqi security forces, have restored the status quo. But I will tell

you more work needs to be done there to improve the security situation prior to elections, and it will be done.

Q: General Casey --

Q: I'm sorry. Could I just follow up? Do you see at all that Mosul is becoming a safe haven? Is there an effort at all, any intelligence that shows that these folks have actually started moving into Mosul and they'll make that kind of their Fallujah?

GEN. CASEY: I see no evidence that the terrorists are trying to make Mosul a safe haven as I define "safe haven." It is certainly an area where they are operating and attempting to disrupt the election process and the coalition and Iraqi security force operations, but not a safe haven.

Q: General Casey, if you -- if indeed, as you say, the terrorists and insurgents have lost the ability to operate with impunity, they've lost their safe havens, then how do you explain the fact that they continue to take such a toll, to be so effective against the Multinational Forces?

And what -- a second question -- what, if anything, will the Multinational Force be doing differently between now and January 30th to improve the situation and instill confidence in the Iraqi people that they can safely go to the polls and vote?

GEN. CASEY: To be clear, I said that they could operate with impunity inside the safe haven. They are clearly operating elsewhere around Iraq.

Now these levels of violence since Fallujah have dropped dramatically. And they are actually now down at the levels prior to Ramadan and really right where -- back where we were at transfer of sovereignty. So the levels of violence have come way down.

I do not -- they are not necessarily operating effectively against coalition forces. In fact, when we look back, the numbers of attacks don't necessarily produce a very high volume of casualties. In fact, a lot of the attacks are in fact ineffective against coalition forces. They are frankly more successful against civilians and in some cases against Iraqi security forces.

Q: And the second part of the question. What, if anything, will you be doing differently between now and the end of January to do --

GEN. CASEY: Oh, yeah.

Q: -- in spite of all this, instill the confidence to the Iraqi people that they can safely go to the polls and vote?

GEN. CASEY: That's a great question. We -- I think you know a few weeks ago I asked for some additional forces before the election period. We felt we needed to keep up the momentum, to keep the pressure on the insurgents that moved away from Fallujah after the Fallujah operation took place. And those forces are going to help us both keep the pressure on them and then get a more secure environment prior to the elections.

The other thing that's happening now is, as I mentioned, the Iraqi security forces are graduating. They're coming out of their training. And we're -- 18 of those 27 battalions are on line, and I think 12 of them have come on line in about the last 45 days. And so they are now available to enhance security across Iraq.

Police continue to graduate. We continue to crank out the police commando battalion. So there will be a concerted effort across Iraq, particularly in the greater Baghdad area and the Mosul area and in the Al Anbar province, all the way up to January 30th.

Q: You said in your opening statement you were generally pleased with their performance. That doesn't sound like a ringing endorsement.

GEN. CASEY: I said we are generally pleased with their performance. Everybody knows there have been instances -- Mosul is a good example -- where the police collapsed. But there are 12 provinces where the police are doing very well every day. So it's a mixed bag, but we're generally pleased.

The forces in Fallujah -- the Iraqi battalions that fought in Fallujah did very well. And they'll become the center, really, I think, of what the Iraqi Army becomes.

Eric?

Q: General, the Army Reserve and the Army National Guard have missed their recruiting goals the last two months. The National Guard is announcing new incentives for that. Given the fact that the Guard and Reserve represent about 40 percent of your forces over there and will continue to remain an important part -- a source of your troops in the immediate future, how concerned are you that many of these active duty forces who would normally flow into the Reserve and Guard are not doing so because they don't want to have to go back to places like Iraq and Afghanistan? How big a concern is that to you as the commander of forces on the ground there?

GEN. CASEY: Frankly, it's not something I've thought about deeply in about six months -- when I was the vice chief. But clearly a good flow of active forces into the Guard and Reserve is something that will benefit the Army, the Guard and Reserve over the long haul. And again, I haven't thought about it in a while there, but it's something I think we need to pay attention to and continue to encourage and maybe incentivize active forces to continue to move into the Guard and Reserve.

Q: General Casey, could I ask you a question about the level of sectarian violence? Do you think it's on the rise? There have been several incidents recently -- the bombing yesterday against the Shi'a and bombing of a bus load of Kurdish militiamen up in Mosul. How do you assess that aspect of the insurgency?

GEN. CASEY: I would not assess that there is a high or seriously increasingly level of sectarian violence at this time. There are clearly incidents. It is a troublesome trend, and it is one that we will continue to watch closely.

Q: What do you think the source of it is? Is this -- I mean, Zarqawi in his famous letter talked about trying to foment just this sort of thing. Do you think that's where these things are --

GEN. CASEY: I wouldn't want to guess on that. But you've quoted a potential source.

Go ahead.

Q: General, you said a few times that things are broadly on track. But now that you've been there six months, can you give us any specific areas where you had hoped to be further along than you are at this point?

GEN. CASEY: Fair question, because the analysis that we did look at that. I'll tell you, I would have hoped we had been further along on the Iraqi -- helping the Iraqi -- particularly the ministries I'm concerned with, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Defense -- in building their intelligence services up. We're working counterinsurgency. Intelligence is key to that. And what we've said, and what we've seen to some degree but not the extent that I think we can if we build these effective intelligence services, is that we benefit from what the Iraqis know about themselves. So that's going to be one of our main priorities for the next year.

The second major thing that we'll be working on for next year is the local police. We are continuing to train folks. We've adapted their training program to make them more able to operate in a counterinsurgency environment. You know, the cop on the beat doesn't normally necessarily think he's going to get attacked by a carload of guys. They need to have some paramilitary-type skills so they can defend and protect themselves and operate in a counterinsurgency environment. So that's the second point.

Third point is I think we've got to do more work on the borders and on the border guards, and that will be another focus for the next year.

Q: General, I want to go back to one thing you said about the insurgency, that they're not 10 feet tall. That's a statement that's been used in the past to describe the Soviet Union soldier, the Viet Cong, and yet we had trouble in Vietnam and it was strung out a long time. What is your best intelligence about the resiliency of the insurgency, its ability to reconstitute? (Inaudible) -- you can cut off a lot of tails but you got to get at the head.

GEN. CASEY: Oh, absolutely.

Q: Should the American public and the Iraqi public expect this insurgency just to go on in some form for quite a while no matter what happens January 30th?

GEN. CASEY: I think we ought to be clear that when they have the elections on the 30th of January, the insurgency's not going to go away. I mean, you mentioned some other cases, but if you look at the history of insurgencies, these are protracted events. They go on for a long time. Now, they won't necessarily go on at the same level and they won't necessarily go on at a level where it will require 150,000 American troops, especially when we're creating Iraqi security forces that we'll work with over the next year to help them build independent counterinsurgency capability, but insurgencies generally go on for a long period of time, and I think you'd expect to see the insurgency in Iraq go on at some level for a long time.

Q: They seem to be more sophisticated. I heard that there was command and control sophistication or the attacks seemed to have picked up. It doesn't seem to be getting less sophisticated, but even more as you kill a lot of them.

GEN. CASEY: We are seeing military capabilities. I wouldn't say necessarily sophisticated, but we are seeing military capabilities in platoon-size attacks that we had not necessarily seen before. But for them to conduct an attack like that takes a lot of their time and their effort, and we're not seeing a lot of these.

Q: General, could you just clarify your statement on Syria, what your concerns are about their role in the insurgency or perhaps the going and coming of foreign terrorists across that border?

GEN. CASEY: I have two concerns with Syria. One, as you suggest, is foreign fighters. And we see a facilitation mode through Syria, foreign fighters coming into Iraq. I do not see direct Syrian government involvement in that facilitation, but it is coming through Syria. And I do believe that they have the capability to stop it if they had the will to stop it.

The second point is we have fairly good information that there are senior former Ba'athists, members of that they call the New Regional Command, operating out of Syria with impunity and providing direction and financing for the insurgency in Iraq. And that needs to stop.

Q: Is al-Douri one of them?

GEN. CASEY: He's back and -- he's a back and forther. He's not necessarily in there.

Q: General, could you -- just a quick --

STAFF: Let's make this -- let's make this the last one, General.

Q: Can I do a quick, you know, question on -- you said to Kathleen that the Iraqi security forces are performing well in 12 of the provinces in your own -- right? But one of the things you also say is that 14 of the provinces are in pretty good shape. So it would seem that in those 12 provinces they haven't really been tested. I presume before Mosul happened, before the most recent violence, you probably thought those Iraqi security forces were performing well. I mean, they're the retrained Iraqi security forces. So if they haven't been tested yet, aren't there still concerns about how they would do? I mean, I guess yesterday in Samarra a police station was attacked and not a shot was fired, and they also left the area.

GEN. CASEY: The 12 or 16 provinces, what I meant, those were police, not necessarily all Iraqi security forces. Just police. And whether or not they've been tested, some of them have. In the south, during the Muqtada militia attacks, there were several police stations that were attacked fairly heavily, particularly the one in Kut for example, and they did fight very well. But there is something to what you're saying about untested.

Now in Mosul, we have seen problems with the police in Mosul over a period of time. And so the fact that all of them collapsed at the same time was a surprise. The fact that they had a chief of police who was not very effective and who many believe was corrupt -- that problem up there had been going on for a longer period of time, so it wasn't a complete shock.

Listen, thank you all very much. Come over here and see us.

STAFF: Thank you all for attending.

Q: (Off mike) -- are they commanding, actually, the insurgency, this new regional command out of --

STAFF: No, that's their name.

Q: That's what they call themselves.

GEN. CASEY: Thank you.

Q: Thank you, General.

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