

PRESS CONFERENCE:

Lieutenant General Lloyd J. Austin III, Commanding General, Multi-National Corps – Iraq

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PARTICIPANT:

Lieutenant General Lloyd Austin

REPORTERS:

Mahmoud[ph] [Unintelligible] from NINA Agency

Ayad[ph] from Independent Newspaper

Gina Chon from the Wall Street Journal

Michael Ware from CNN

Larry Kaplow from Newsweek

Tina Susman from the Los Angeles Times

Other reporters not identified by name or press affiliation.

REPORTERS 1-11

***REP1 = REPORTER 1**

***INT = INTERPRETER**

LG AUSTIN: ...for the Government of Iraq to extend much needed essential services such as electricity and water to its people. I'm also encouraged that the security situation has led to increased interest in foreign investment in Iraq.

And last, we are partnering to do everything that we can to ensure the conditions are established for free and fair provincial elections. The security for these elections is Iraqi planned and Iraqi executed. The Government of Iraq has made tremendous strides in furthering democracy in this country and provincial elections are the next major step.

And so in my view, Iraq is headed in a positive direction. We have confidence in the strength of our strategic partnership and the ever increasing capability of the Iraqi Security Forces and the resolve of the Iraqi people. Now, this confidence was validated when the Council of Representatives passed the Strategic Framework Agreement and a security agreement by an overwhelming majority. And we look forward to the agreements' final approval by the Government of Iraq so that we can solidify the significant security gains that we have achieved together and deter aggression in the future. And so I look forward to our continued partnership and progress in the months ahead.

And now I'll welcome your questions. Yes, sir.

REP1: [Asks question in Arabic.]

INT: Mahmoud[ph] [Unintelligible] from NINA Agency. After executing the security agreement or starting to implement the security agreement, will the Iraqi...will the American Army turn over the detainees and the symbols of the former regime, the Ba'athists, especially that some of them have been sentenced such as Ali Hassan al-Majeed, they've been sentenced to death? In the past it was the American Army that stood between executing the sentence. And so after implementing the agreement, will the American Army turn these criminals over? Thank you.

LG AUSTIN: If the interpreter is talking, I can't hear the translation there.

INT: He's asking after the....

UNKNOWN: The question is that...is the American Army plan to turn in the detainees, especially from the previous regime, after the implementation [unintelligible]. Some of the detainees have already been sentenced to execution.

LG AUSTIN: Yes. The return of detainees is a part of the agreement. And so we

do intend to do that in the future. It will be a controlled and measured process. And, of course, you know, the welfare of the detainees is first and foremost in our minds as we conduct this turnover. But we'll work with the Government of Iraq to ensure that as we return detainees to the government's control, it's done in a safe and orderly fashion.

REP1: [Asks question in Arabic.]

INT: Now, my question was about the symbols of the former regime, those detainees. How are you going to handle them?

LG AUSTIN: Okay. Once again, I can't hear the interpreter so we need to make a technical adjustment there.

INT: He can't hear me.

UNKNOWN: He's talking about detainees from the previous regime; the symbols of the previous regime, from the ex-regime, Saddam Hussein. Those detainees.

LG AUSTIN: We...again, all of the detainees that we have in our control, we'll work with the Government of Iraq to return those detainees in a safe and orderly fashion. That includes all of them. Thanks.

Yes, sir.

REP2: [Asks question in Arabic.]

INT: From [Unintelligible] Newspaper. Lieutenant General, how do you see to the threats from the Sadrist leader, Muqtada al-Sadr, to form a brigade, the Brigade of the Promised Day, to fight the forces—the American forces in particular—in the event that the Iraqi government proceeds with signing the agreement which they have done? So how do you look at those threats?

UNKNOWN: The question is how do you look at the threats of Muqtada al-Sadr to form a brigade to fight American forces in case the [unintelligible]?

LG AUSTIN: Yeah. The question was on the concept of brigades that are being formed by Muqtada al-Sadr to fight coalition forces. While certainly we've heard talk of this issue, we've not seen any tangible evidence of these brigades operating in and around the countryside. If and when we do find that and if there is an armed element that conducts operations against the Iraqi Security Forces, the Government of Iraq, or the coalition forces, we'll deal with those forces just as we've done with any criminal element that we've

faced in the past. And I'm confident that with the help of the Iraqi Security Forces, we'll be successful in our efforts.

Sir.

REP3: [Asks question in Arabic.]

INT: You mentioned that this force is against counterinsurgency. And how about coups? How can America guarantee or prevent the return of the coups? Also....

UNKNOWN: And so the question is that the agreement states that you should help the Iraqi government maintaining the borders and prevent coups and maintain the constitutional system of the Iraqi government. How do you intend to help the Iraqi government against coup attempts and also in the border issue?

LG AUSTIN: Well, certainly we are here to support the legitimate government of Iraq in any and all endeavors in terms of security. And whether it's a coup or whe-...a coup attempt or any other type of criminal activity, we stand ready to support the legitimate government of Iraq.

In terms of supporting the Government of Iraq to...and helping it to

secure its borders, we have already been doing that for quite some time and we intend to continue to do that in the future. We have border training teams that are out helping the border...the Iraqi border forces to train and to refine their procedures. And I think we're making progress. And as I mentioned earlier, the government has committed to allocating additional funds to help the border forces improve its infrastructure and buy additional equipment. And I'm confident that, over time, we'll have a much more professionalized border force that will be able to better help secure the Iraqi borders here.

Yes, sir.

REP4: [Asks question in Arabic.]

INT: Ayad[ph] from Independent Newspaper. Regarding the security agreement, there were demands by some of the parliamentarians to...for exchange for the agreement to release the detainees in the American detention centers. So are there American preparations or willingness to do that?

UNKNOWN: When they signed the agreement, there were some requests by some of the Parliament members to release the detainees that are in U.S. custodies. Is there any preparations to do that right now?

LG AUSTIN: Well, you should know that we have been releasing detainees throughout. You know over the last several months, we've released hundreds of detainees. And that's gone on over the last couple of years. And we have a orderly and well-rehearsed process to...that helps us to ensure that detainees are released in a safe and orderly fashion. But, yes, we have well-developed processes to enable the release of detainees.

REP5: Gina Chon, Wall Street Journal. I had two questions. One regarding the elections, several of which are supposed to take place next year in addition to the provincial elections; the national elections and now there's supposed to be this referendum on the security agreement in July. People are expecting spikes of violence in each of those cases. But it also comes at a time when the U.S. is going to be drawing down its forces as part of the security agreement. So what is the plan to assure that security will be maintained even in those crucial timing points for next year?

And then my other question was, there is these committees that are being formed to implement what the security agreement outlines. And I was wondering, from the U.S. military standpoint, when we can begin to see some of those implementations actually happening

on the ground and what we can expect to see, like with the June 30th date of moving out of population centers? Like, is that dismantling JSSs? You know, just sort of what we can expect to actually see taking place on the ground. Thank you.

LG AUSTIN: Well, to answer your...the first part of your question in terms of how we intend to provide...help the Iraqis provide security for the elections despite the fact that our footprint may get smaller, I'm very confident that we'll be able to do that in an efficient manner. You know one thing that we have to consider—we have to consider a number of things. First of all, the Iraqi Security Forces are at least twice as large as they were when we had...we conducted the last set of elections. And so there's a lot more capability and a lot more experience in the ranks than there was in 2005. The Iraqis have the...have a much improved capability to plan, and we've seen evidence of that in the way that they planned for and conducted security for the Haj and during a number of other religious celebrations or religious observances that have been...have taken place in the last year. So their ability to plan is greatly increased. They have a much larger force. They're a much more experienced force. And they have a lot more confidence in their ability to get things done. So we'll have to depend on the Iraqi Security Forces to do more. And based upon what we've seen, I'm confident that they

will rise to the occasion.

In terms of...what was the second part of your question there?

REP5: The implementation of the...

LG AUSTIN: Yeah.

REP5: ...security agreement. [Unintelligible]...

LG AUSTIN: Yeah.

REP5: ...expect to see.

LG AUSTIN: Okay. Well, if you look at our...how we're deployed currently, we're...we don't have large bases in many of the cities throughout the country as we speak. We have a number of bases in the City of Baghdad, we have some in Mosul. But for the most part, we are out of the cities already. Now we intend to continue to help the Iraqi Security Forces. We are partnered with them. We will provide enablers as required, and those enablers are those things I talked about earlier in terms of combat engineers, intelligence, logistics, where required. And so this transition in the future, I think, will not

be that difficult of a transition.

In terms of the implementing...the way that we'll implement the transition, we'll work with the Iraqis and really kind of work through...develop a plan for the way ahead and how we're going to conduct this. And we're starting that process now. But I've got to tell you that throughout the country, for the most part, we have...we have been partnered with the Iraqi Security Forces. We conduct operations with them on a daily basis. And there are very few independent operations conducted throughout the country as we speak. So I don't think that there will be a significant shift when...you know, at the beginning of the year. There will be a shift. There will be a change in...some change in how we're doing business. But I think we'll be able to adapt fairly easily.

Yes, sir.

REP6:

Yeah, General. Michael Ware, CNN. Just on this precise point that you're dealing with. When, for example, you said earlier in regards to the special groups that we'll deal with criminal elements as we have anyway in the past, given the binding restrictions of the Status of Forces Agreement, to what degree or to...could you paint a picture of to what degree or how coalition forces will be able to

conduct unilateral operations, if at all? How you'll be able to operate on intelligence-driven targets? And how you'll be able to...how you envisage being able to deal with a situation where some of your targets are...they might not be agreed targets by the Iraqi government and they might be linked to the Iraqi government? Will you retain your ability to wage your war or your operations?

LG AUSTIN: Well, as you know, Michael, one of the issues is that we won't...we don't plan on conducting unilateral operations in the future.

REP6: Not at all?

LG AUSTIN: That's correct. And so the operations that we conduct will be planned and coordinated with the Iraqi Security Forces. We remain...we maintain the right to protect ourselves as we always have. And so that goes without saying.

But, you know, if you look at the way that we're doing business right now and conducting operations right now, we're really sharing intelligence with the Iraqi Security Forces in a major way. We're developing...you know we're refining intelligence. We're developing operations. We're planning together. And so, you know, I think we've made great strides that will enable us to make the

transition fairly smoothly.

REP6: Do you foresee any kind of friction there, particularly with target packeting and that kind of thing?

LG AUSTIN: There will always be friction. There's friction there, Michael, as you well know, when we're doing it by ourselves. It's combat and, you know, there will be friction from day to day—and we hope that those friction points will be minor. But I have great confidence in our leadership and the leadership of the Iraqi Security Forces. We really consider ourselves to be strategic partners. And, you know, every day that we operate together, I think we grow stronger and stronger and that we get...we develop better techniques in doing what we're talking about, in conducting combined and joint operations.

REP6: Just one nitpicking point perhaps. How far do you think the definition of self defense will stretch for coalition forces? Will that be restricted to merely occasions where you're directly attacked or American...coalition facilities are attacked? Or will you be able to broaden that definition to include already existing targets or organizations and to be able to conduct operations on that basis?

LG AUSTIN: Well, you know, I think...obviously, I don't think you can generalize, you know, about that particular point. I think you have to examine each instance separately. But again, our forces need to feel comfortable that we will be able to do what we need to do to protect our forces.

Okay. Next question, please. Yes, sir.

REP7: Thank you. Larry Kaplow with Newsweek. I just wondered if you could talk about the activity we've seen in the last two weeks to a month. You said November was the lowest level of violence since 2003. Could you amplify on that and is it by a certain month in '03? And is it based on....? Because it does seem to people that there's been more violence in the last couple of weeks, or at least more civilian deaths, but we don't have...that's not a statistical outlook.

LG AUSTIN: Yeah. You know I think it's relative, it's all relative. And the question is...the question would be more than when. And certainly if you reflect back to the month of March when there was a lot of violence in the City of Baghdad, for example, we are nowhere near those types of...those levels of attacks anywhere in the country. We've seen attacks subside here in Baghdad, in Mosul, in Basra, and throughout the country. And so if you just look at the levels of

attacks, clearly they are much, much lower.

Now, what you've seen in our recent past...recent...last several days is an attempt by al-Qaida and others to conduct high-profile attacks that are really aimed at intimidating the civilian population. Because of some of the things that have happened here in the country, some good news things like, you know, the passing of the security agreement you know, clear signs that security is improving across the country, that is a threat to those who would...who want to see things go in another direction. And so they are conducting these high-profile attacks, again, aimed at the civilians. And their intent is to erode the confidence of civilians and the Iraqi Security Forces, to create a picture that things are going in the wrong direction. But if you look at the numbers of attacks overall, they are much, much lower than they have ever been since...really since 2003. So....

Next question, please.

REP8: [Inaudible].

LG AUSTIN: Okay. Go ahead.

REP8: Thank you. And this is in the same vein as the questions Michael

and Gina were asking. After the SOFA takes effect, there's some concern that U.S. forces won't be on hand to keep an eye on human rights – the treatment of detainees and just in the community, how the Iraqi Security Forces are handling those things. In the past we've seen soldiers do everything from step in immediately on the scene to stop a situation that was occurring to just going back and reporting it up the chain of command. What will you be able to do in the future when your soldiers come across human rights abuses?

LG AUSTIN:

Well, you know, I think when our soldiers come across things that are clearly out of bounds and illegal and are questionable, we will do what we've always done: report those to the appropriate authorities, take actions to investigate, and ensure that, you know, we minimize human suffering where appropriate. But I'm also confident that the Iraqi government and the Iraqi Security Forces will continue to do things to police their own ranks.

And we'll continue to work with them as partners to help them be able to see themselves and help them develop techniques to...that we've learned over time that work well in terms of the control of detainees. And also develop those professional techniques to ensure that their employees and their troops are focused on the right things.

Any more questions? Tina.

REP9:

Hi. Tina Susman from the Los Angeles Times. Lately we've just...we've seen an ongoing list of the various countries that have been in the coalition that are pulling out at the end of the year. And, you know, while individually they're quite small, collectively they add up to a sizable number. I'm just wondering how much of an effect is that going to have on U.S. forces who have to basically take over some of these duties that, say, the Tongans have been doing or the Macedonians or, for instance, when the Georgians left rather abruptly. How much is that requiring you to re-jigger forces and spread yourselves a bit thinner?

LG AUSTIN:

Well, thanks, Tina. That's a great question. And let me say up front that we are grateful for the tremendous contributions that all of our coalition partners have made over the...throughout the conduct of this operation. They have provided significant capability and their presence will be missed.

You know the fact that we have the ability to redeploy some of those elements is actually a good news story. It's a good news story because it means that security has improved in a lot of cases to the point where we can actually operate effectively despite the loss of

some of that great capability. And you're right, when we lose many of these soldiers and airmen and sailors, we'll have to expand our footprint to account for that loss.

Fortunately, as I mentioned earlier, the Iraqi Security Forces have increased significantly in terms of numbers and capability. They've gained great experience, and they are very, very confident in their abilities. And so we'll have to ask them to step up to the plate a little bit more, and they are doing that every day. And quite frankly, it's impressive to see some of what we've seen here recently. And you are witnessing some of that as you go around the City of Baghdad on a daily basis. You're seeing some soldiers, you know, and national policemen on the street, you know, behaving in a professional manner, looking good in their uniforms, and being very confident about performing their duties. So I think that, based upon the help of the Iraqi Security Forces, we'll be just fine.

REP9:

Can I just ask one follow up? President-elect Obama yesterday indicated that he still sees his idea of a 16-month drawdown as a good thing. He indicated that that's still what his goal is going to be after he takes office. Based on what you're seeing right now, do you think that that's a reasonable goal?

LG AUSTIN:

Well, first of all, I...you know I'm sure that the president elect, once he has had the ability or the opportunity to assess the situation and confer with the secretary of defense, you know, he'll solidify what his goals will be with the advice of the secretary of defense. He was also clear I think in saying that he would listen to the commanders on the ground. And that...I think that is a very positive sign and...that, you know, the input from the commander on the ground will be heard. And we will certainly stand ready to provide that input to General Odierno and General Petraeus. And, you know, whatever the decisions that are made, we stand ready to execute. But I think that it will take a little time for the president elect to really solidify what his...what the way ahead is going to be.

Michael.

REP6:

I'm sorry, General. I'm just sitting here feeling like I've just been punched in the head [laughs]. It's quite stunning to think.

When you say there will be no unilateral operations and so forth, just example, in terms of—it's hard for me to say. Say, for example, you identify individuals whom you believe to be, say, Quds force officers as you've done in the past and you have intelligence that would drive an operation to intercept them, given the hearty

assistance you've received in the past from the Iraqi government and particularly the Iraqi president, how do you think you'll be able to...will you be able to conduct operations such as those against individuals you target?

LG AUSTIN: In short, Michael, I am confident that we'll be able to do what we need to do to go after the folks that we need to go after. And I base that upon some of the techniques that we've developed in terms of sharing intelligence and in terms of, you know, developing target packages and working with the Iraqi Security Forces. We've become a lot more adept at working together than most would imagine. And it is very encouraging. So, again, combat is a...combat operations are very, very difficult no matter what the circumstances. And certainly it's very difficult to...it's dangerous to generalize, to...when you're talking about combat operations. But as a commander who's been doing this for a long time, I can tell you that I am really confident that we'll be able to continue to be successful.

REP6: Just one last little point then. Given that the agreement outlines the broad groups of, you know, targets in terms of al-Qaida, militia, outlaw groups, given that the coalition forces now are a supporting strategic partner, and given that the Iraqi government will be

defining its own national interests as spelled out in the agreement, would you say now that the Iraqi government, under the agreement, will have the driving role, will have the whip hand in terms of operations and security arrangements from this point on...or from the implementation of the agreement on?

LG AUSTIN: It's a sovereign country, and certainly we respect the sovereignty of this great nation. And so given that, it stands to reason that that follows; it is their country and they have the ultimate call on how operations...the directions that we'll take in proceeding.

So...but given that, again, you know I think that they're...the Iraqis are great strategic partners. I think we've made tremendous strides over the last ten months that I've been here in terms of partnering with them and developing techniques, I think, that work well on the battlefield that...and, you know, and throughout the country. So because we've been doing this for awhile, working together for awhile, the troops on the ground really don't have a lot of angst in terms of our ability to continue to get things done.

You know if you look across the country right now, out of the 18 provinces, 13 of them have gone to provincial Iraqi control. And so in those 13 provinces, that is the way that we're doing business

right now. And we've been able to conduct operations and go after specific individuals that we were targeting. Had to do a little bit more work, but that's okay. That's what we need to be doing. Again, I'm confident that things will continue to work out and move in a positive direction.

And, ladies and gentlemen, let me thank you for joining us today. I really appreciate the questions that you had. I thank you for your interest. I thank the...all of the folks that have supported us throughout and will continue to support us, I'm sure.

I want to especially thank those families back at home who are supporting their loved ones and have been supporting them. This is a difficult time of year for...to be away from your loved ones because it's a holiday period. But rest assured that your troops are confident in what they're doing; they're committed to what they're doing. And so, again, thanks for your support.

And again, it's...it was good to see you today and I look forward to seeing you next time. Shukran jaziilan.