

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH COLONEL MICHAEL MCBRIDE, 1ST BRIGADE COMBAT TEAM, 101ST AIRBORNE DIVISION VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM IRAQ TIME: 9:00 A.M. EDT DATE: FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 12, 2008

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SEAMAN WILLIAM SELBY (Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Okay, sir, you still there? We can go ahead and get started now.

COL. MCBRIDE: Yeah, I'm here.

SEAMAN SELBY: Okay, it's Colonel McBride right now? Is that who I'm speaking with?

COL. MCBRIDE: Yeah -- (audio break) -- McBride speaking.

SEAMAN SELBY: Okay, sorry about that, sir. My name is Seaman William Selby, and I'm going to be hosting the call today.

COL. MCBRIDE: Great. SEAMAN SELBY: So we're going to go ahead and get started. And if anybody else joins us, we'll just -- we'll just keep moving ahead.

Okay, hello. I'd like to welcome you all to Department of Defense's Bloggers Roundtable for Friday, September 12, 2008. My name is Seaman William Selby with the Office of the Secretary of Defense Public Affairs and I'll be moderating the call today.

A note to the bloggers on the line today: Please remember to clearly state your name and blog or organization in advance of your question; respect our guest's time, keeping questions succinct and to the point.

Today our guest is from Iraq. It is Colonel Michael McBride, who will discuss the nearly 70 reconstruction projects that have been made in the Salahuddin Province, which Iraq has paid for and approved of.

And sir, if you have an opening statement, go ahead with that.

COL. MCBRIDE: Just real quick, just a little bit about the province -- we've been here in Salahuddin now -- our brigade combat team's been here for just about a year now. For those of you who don't know, Salahuddin lies just north of Baghdad Province, south of Nineveh and Mosul Province and then to the west of Kirkuk Province and to the east -- just to the east of Anbar Province.

What we've seen over the past year is a marked increase in security. From this time last year to today our attack levels are down approximately 75 percent. The security continues to get better across the board, with very notable improvements in the city of Samarra -- I would highlight that as a success story --- and similar improvements in the -- (audio break) -- major cities of Tikrit, which as you know, is Saddam's old hometown, and the city of Baiji.

Those are really our three big population centers. The province is about 2 million people, predominantly Sunni, with the exception of cities of Balad and Dujail, which both lie in the southern portion of our province.

And we've come to a point here now, with the security level as it is, it's where we are being able to now to focus more on reconstruction than we were, for example, five or six months ago. Our focus was -- five or six months ago was predominantly security. Now if you asked me, I would tell you that, you know, reconstruction and governance is probably running about neck and neck with our security efforts.

Essential services across the province are beginning to improve. We've still got a long way to go. And our Iraqi security forces, most notably our army, Iraqi army forces, and to a lesser degree our Iraqi police forces, have made pretty dramatic improvements over the past year. That development with our ISF, though, which is dependent on the unit, is uneven, but we have some units who are now operating almost totally independently and some that need some more work.

So -- but across the board, things are continuing to get better in this province. But the point I would make up front is that we have not, in my opinion, held the security gains that we've worked hard to achieve with our Iraqi partners to begin any kind of a drawdown here. We are still in a pretty -- in some places a pretty active fight. We've seen some reorganization efforts on the part of the enemy. I think we're seeing some residual enemy movement from both Diyala and Mosul as we conduct major operations in both those places, and in Salahuddin. It's really a crossroads for all those provinces.

So with that opening statement, I'm willing to take or happy to take any questions.

SEAMAN SELBY: Thank you, sir.

And Grim, you were on the line first, so if you want to go ahead --

Q Yes, sir. This is Grim, Blackfive.net. I'd like to ask you to what degree you can tell us about reconstruction projects that have to do with improving and capitalizing Iraq's agriculture.

COL. MCBRIDE: Sir, I'll be honest with you. Agriculture is something that we're lagging behind on. Our efforts have not been focused on agriculture, for two reasons. One is that -- is the breadth of the challenge in terms of agriculture, and two is the -- both the provincial government and the central government, I think, have to decide which direction we're going to head with agriculture for the long term.

And the question becomes, for agriculture, whether they're going to continue to subsidize framers as they did under the old regime or whether that program's going to go away.

The success of our framers in this province is mixed. If you divide it east and west, in the east they're doing fairly well because there's fairly abundant water sources and a good canal system, and in the west -- the farmers in the western desert, since there's no canal system that ties them in, they're struggling more.

The farmers in the east will tell you that this year, because of the improvements in security and the way that they are able to take their produce to market -- for example, last year, if you lived in Balad or you lived in Samarra, you didn't think about taking your stuff to market. I've talked to farmers that -- just a week or so ago that live in the southern portion of the province who'd taken their stuff to Kirkuk. I talked to farmers yesterday from Erbil that had drove -- that had driven down and were selling their tomatoes, which are now in season in Erbil in Tikrit. They would not have thought about doing that a year ago.

So just the mere fact that we have lines of communication and lines of commerce have opened back up and became more available to farmers has helped -- has helped their situation tremendously, because it's opened up markets and allowed them to make a profit.

The price of fertilizer's gone up, but the price of fertilizer's gone up worldwide, because of the rising fuel prices. They're struggling with that. The price of diesel, which they run on, has gone up because as the economy gets better, that price goes up for them. The government subsidizes part of that.

The PRT has programs in place -- our Provincial Reconstruction Team -- some initiatives in place to build greenhouses and stuff so they can extend their growing season. But it's -- we've had some effort here, but -- (audio break) -- and then the drought -- the drought we've had this spring and not having as much rain has also had somewhat of an impact -- (inaudible) -- we haven't focused on as much, but I will tell you that farmers, they're doing a lot of heck of a lot better than they were last year.

But in terms of having a comprehensive program, no. But I would argue that the security gains have made their ability to make a profit a lot greater than they were last year. Q Thank you.

SEAMAN SELBY: Thank you. And Claire, you're on the line next, so if you want to go ahead.

Q All right. Sir, this is Claire Russo from the Institute for the Study of War. And I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about the Sons of Iraq program in your province and how much that's contributed to the security, but also what their sort of stability is, their commitment to remaining on the good side of things and whether you see sort of transfer back and forth between fighting with the enemy and working for Sons of Iraq.

COL. MCBRIDE: Okay, Claire. Here's our program.

We've got 7,000 Sons of Iraq spread throughout the province. Without the Sons of Iraq, we would not be where we are today. There's no doubt in my mind about that particularly in the city of Samarra. Back in November, if you were on a patrol in Samarra, whether you were Iraqi army or a U.S. Army soldier, you were running from house to house, in the eastern part of the city, because you were going to get shot at.

About that time, some Iraqi leaders, sheikhs and tribal leaders, started to come forward and expressed a desire to start Awakening program, which we were calling at the time, which eventually emerged into the Sons of Iraq. And almost immediately the security situation there started to change. And similar things happened across the province, in the different cities in the province.

I'll use one small example. In the city of Suniyah, which lies in the northern part of the province, they were the last city to have a Sons of Iraq program. They refused to have it and did not want to cooperate. And it remained a safe haven, not a safe haven but a place where the enemy really, freely operated because the population has not rejected them.

Once that program came into place, that city had a radical transformation. So it's a long answer to saying, they have been tremendously effective.

Having said that now, as these programs begin to mature, we have seen the enemy try to take advantage of this program. We've seen infiltration, small amounts of infiltration in the Sons of Iraq. And that's going to be a continuing challenge for us.

They make, as you know, about \$250 a month. And if someone offers them an extra \$100 a month or 150, there are going to be those who accept that and are willing to do things that aren't in the best interest of their government.

So that's going to be a continuing challenge. And the enemy is taking advantage of that fact. So it's, I think, it's an overall success. But we have seen some of the infiltration and some of the going back and forth that you're talking about.

Q Thank you, sir. SEAMAN SELBY: And Jarred.

Q Yes, sir. Thank you for your service.

Could you talk a little bit about the interaction in Salahuddin, in the province, with the federal authorities, with the national Baghdad government in all the spheres, in economics, security, in the reconstruction efforts?

Just spend a little bit of time, I think, that we have to explain really, is life pretty much on your own out there, with just the U.S. Army supporting? Or what's really the tie-in with the national government?

COL. MCBRIDE: Okay, sir.

I think the ties between the provincial government and the central government are getting better, but they're not where they need to be.

For example, I still think there's a fair amount of mistrust between the provincial and the -- our provincial government here in Salahuddin and the central government. I will tell you that's gotten better. Our governor's had a couple of meetings now with the prime minister, and our provincial leaders are starting to routinely make trips to Baghdad. So I think that's improving, but it's not where it needs to be yet.

We have had, as other provinces have had, as we -- as the government of Iraq continues to develop its capabilities, we still have not received the remaining installments for either the 2007 capital project budget or the 2008 capital project budget. That hinders progress here. And we face the same challenges between the -- at the provincial level, from -- with ties from the province to our qadhas or, if you will, counties, and then so on down the line from the counties to the cities. I mean, there is an element of distrust at all levels with the higher levels of government, which is -- as you know, is not uncommon. But that's continuing to get better.

We have challenges with the ministry of the Interior. We've submitted many, many -- several hundred police packets to try to transition some of these Sons of Iraq into allocated slots that we have for Iraqi police. But you know, we're still waiting and have been waiting now for quite some time to get results of those packets back. And when it takes that long, you know, it's natural that there's some distrust that develops between provincial leadership and leadership in the central government.

So while I think it's getting better, it's still -- it still has a way to go. And it is hindering our ability and it's hindering the province's ability to more effectively govern and to rebuild.

Now having said that, they have several -- I've been in Baiji very recently, Samarra very recently, and spent an entire day in both those cities with representatives from the provincial government, looking at government projects -- roads, schools, water plants and electrical projects. So those are happening across the province. But with greater support, at least from the view of the provincial government, from the central government, we could be moving at a much more rapid pace. Does that answer your question, sir?

Q Great. Thank you, sir.

SEAMAN SELBY: And did anybody else join us?

Okay. If anybody -- does anybody have any follow-ups?

Q I do.

SEAMAN SELBY: Sure.

Q I -- sir, I just wonder if you could -- I have some particular interest in Baiji just because that's been a hot spot.

When I was in Al Anbar, it was something that we worried about a lot. And certainly now -- I sort of covered Diyala, Salahuddin and Anbar, and Baiji is the one place we don't hear much about. And I wonder what sort of -- what's the constitution of the enemy and where -- are you seeing them projecting into Baiji? Are you seeing -- just sort of if you could give me a rundown of the enemy situation in and around Baiji.

COL. MCBRIDE: Okay. Baiji, in my opinion, the population has not rejected the enemy. As I go from place to place in the province -- in December of 2007, Baiji and Samarra both were what I would consider the "heart of darkness." Samarra now is a city with hope. Baiji is not.

I was on a patrol about a week ago. I walk Market Street frequently just to gauge the population and to talk to the people in Baiji. I had -- I

have without exception -- I think one time out of the seven or eight times that I've walked Market Street -- been shot at.

As we walked the other night, we walked from east to west down Market Street in Baiji and it felt better. People were more open. But I still felt a sense of we're not quite there yet. As we reached the end of the Market Street and got ready to turn around, I ducked into a shop and was talking to a shop owner and we heard some gunfire to the south -- didn't pay much attention to it -- and then I see my guys scramble and one of my lieutenants had been shot on Market Street.

So that's just an illustration that we're not there yet in Baiji. And the enemy activity has picked up in Baiji. It's always been a crossroads, as you described, for people coming out of Haditha, Ramadi, Fallujah to the north and then a transit point for fighters coming south from Mosul and fighters coming out of Diyala. We've got indicators of all that right now.

Interestingly enough, three or four nights ago we had a vehicle bomb go off in Baiji. And I was talking to one of the SOI leaders in a neighboring city. He said that he had seen on Al-Jazeera TV -- and I didn't see it -- a caption at the bottom of the screen which proclaimed a movement called the "boys of heaven" which I think is a splinter of AQI recruiting younger males. They gave an ultimatum to the Sons of Iraq in Baiji that if they did not lay down their arms in 24 hours, that they were going to attack them. And about 36 hours later, this vehicle bomb went off near a Sons of Iraq checkpoint in Baiji.

So that's a long way of telling you that Baiji's not where it needs to be. Because of the refinery, it will always be a magnet for insurgents and a way to extort tankers and the stuff that's coming out of the refinery.

So I would tell you that as you were here, it is probably the most stubborn. And it will probably be the most stubborn place, for us to go and to stabilize, both for the government of Iraq and for us.

So we've got some ways to go in Baiji. But until the population rejects the enemy, as they have in other places, it's going to continue to be a challenge.

Q Thank you, sir.

(Off mike) -- anybody else's time. But I do actually have another question. Is that all right?

(Cross talk.)

Do you, sir, how much, in terms of Baiji and, I know, troop numbers probably have something to do with this. But how much if at all do your ops link in with either Iraqi army or Marine forces in Al Anbar? And similarly how much do your ops, security operations tie in at all with Diyala, either army forces or U.S. Army or Iraqi army forces?

COL. MCBRIDE: I could answer both those.

In the west, we have tied in and worked hand in hand, with both Iraqi army elements, working with the Marines to the west. We've actually because of the expanse of this province -- it's so large -- as the security situation got better in Anbar, we actually had Marine units working in temporary operating

areas and still do in a big swath of the western desert, in the western part of the province.

So those operations are continuing. We also are tied in with them very closely and worked with the Marines and both the Iraqi army elements, working with the Marines, to open a major line of communication, which runs from just south of Samarra back to Fallujah, where nothing traveled six months ago, and now about 1,000 commercial vehicles travel on every day, which was really an al Qaeda safe haven where we did some pretty heavy fighting, to take that road back.

With respect to Diyala, as the Diyala operation kicked off, around the 1st of August, an Iraqi army brigade deployed to the border, of Diyala and Salahuddin, in support of that operation. Within the first few days, that brigade, which has operated almost completely on its own, for the last 40 days, and they're still out there, got in some pretty stiff fights in support of that operation. So we are supporting that operation by an Iraqi army brigade working in the eastern part of the province, tied in with the Iraqi army units working in the western part of the Diyala Province.

Q Thank you very much, sir.

Q I have a follow-up, then, sir. Could you talk a little bit about the thorny issue of provincial elections and where that would stand in Diyala Province? What's the -- what's the feeling on the street of the people that you talk about and talk with and the government people and -- at the qadha and the nahiya level? What's kind of the feeling that you're getting?

COL. MCBRIDE: Sir, in our province, in Salahuddin, the people want elections. I mean, that's the bottom line. They will not make the mistake of not voting again. People want elections. They're looking forward to elections. Political parties are forming and, you know, there's some election posturing going on. The people are very much forward to -- looking forward to voting and they're going to vote this time. I guarantee you, they will vote this time.

Q Thank you, sir.

SEAMAN SELBY: And does anybody else have any follow-ups?

Q I'll ask one more question if nobody else has a question. Sir, I just wonder, getting back to Baiji, if you could talk a little bit more in-depth. Like I said, again, my experience in Anbar was Baiji was really the financial -- was crucial to the financial center of the insurgency. And you mentioned, you know, sort of the refinery and there being some activity there. What -- who's controlling that? Like, what -- could you just give me a rundown of what's going on at the refinery and how much of that -- how much do you think that's still financially crucial to the insurgency?

COL. MCBRIDE: I think -- I think since you were here that that's been reduced significantly. We have a coalition -- (inaudible) -- the company that works -- that's living inside the refinery. We also have some other representatives of the U.S. government and the government of Iraq working hand-in-hand inside the refinery, targeting the corruption inside the refinery.

Q All right. COL. MCBRIDE: So it's -- the corruption inside refinery has been reduced. I'm not saying it's gone, but it's been greatly reduced. The challenge now is the distribution outside the refinery, which I

also think that -- that has been reduced. I still think there's avenues that the enemy can use to try to exploit it, but it's not nearly as lucrative for the enemy as it was, perhaps, 18 months or two years ago.

Q Okay. Thank you, sir.

SEAMAN SELBY: Anybody else have any follow-ups?

Okay. Well, thanks. We've had some very, very good questions today, and good comments. And Colonel McBride, I'd like to ask you: Do you have any final comments?

COL. MCBRIDE: The only comment I'd have is I'd like to thank our families and -- back home at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, which have made a tremendous sacrifice, will continue to do so here for the next couple -- three months, who I think have a job harder than we do, in many respects. And we'll leave you with the thought that things are getting better here, but it's not time to declare victory here in Salahuddin yet.

SEAMAN SELBY: Thank you very much, sir.

And today's program will be available online at the bloggers link on dod.mil, where you'll be able to access a story based on today's call, along with source documents, the audio file and print transcripts.

If there are any questions about this program, you can contact DOD New Media at 703-325-0001.

Again, thank you, sir, Colonel McBride, and all our blogger participants.

COL. MCBRIDE: Thank you.

SEAMAN SELBY: This concludes today's event. Feel free to disconnect.

COL. MCBRIDE: Thank you.

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