

Transcript – Military Analyst Call

Tuesday, Dec. 20, 2005, 0930

OSD – Public Affairs, Room 2E556, The Pentagon

Host: Tara Jones, OSD Public Affairs

On background – quote as senior DoD official

Duration approximately 20 minutes

Transcriber: Murphy

Ms. Jones: This is Tara Jones at the Pentagon. Welcome to the conference call. Thanks for joining us this morning. I want to remind you that today's call is on background, so you may quote a senior DoD official.

I have with me [redacted] from the Army and [redacted] from the Joint Staff. They will be briefing you on troop adjustments in Afghanistan, and we look forward to your questions at the end. With that, I will turn it over to [redacted]

[redacted] Okay, thanks Tara. Good morning. We – as you've seen in some press reports, there will be an announcement that will be out shortly within the hour here in the Pentagon that will outline an adjustment of troops for our forces in OEF in Afghanistan.

It will outline the fact that 4th Brigade, 10th Mountain Division will not deploy as a brigade unit; rather, one battalion task force pulled from that brigade will go forward to provide support to the NATO transformation in the south – what will be called Regional Command South, and they will be partnering with UK, Canadian and others in the south to create a multi-national force under the NATO ISAF flag as it makes its transition.

The end result of this will mean a decrease in overall U.S. presence in Afghanistan by something on the order of about 2,500 folks. Number's a little bit soft, but it will be pretty close in that category.

It signals kind of a beginning of an expansion of NATO's mission. This is based on an assessment that General Eikenberry – Karl Eikenberry – has made in the theater, with recommendations to General Abizaid that the security conditions, the progress on the ground has been such that we can begin to transition from direct combat operations in the southern part of the country to stability operations that are more closely aligned with the NATO ISAF mission. And NATO has stood up to that.

So this is another step in a success story in Afghanistan. It comes on the heels of parliament being seated; it comes on the heels of some progress being made in reconstruction in the south; it comes on the heels of some improvement in the stability in the number of provinces; and it allows for NATO to continue to take on an expanded role in Afghanistan.

So, good news story. Good news in that we can reduce the number of folks that are deploying; good news in that NATO is able to begin an expansion of its ISAF mission; and good news because all that signals some success on the ground in Afghanistan.

So that's kind of a quick overview. We are probably best suited to let you all fire away at questions, so I'll stop there and let you jump in, and we can go from questions. And I've got folks from the Army as well who can be the experts better than I.

Q: General, Bob Maginnis. Question with regard to ISAF and the Dutch. I understand they're not going to turn over prisoners perhaps to us because of their restrictions on capital punishment. Is that going to at all harm our intelligence gathering operations in Afghanistan?

Bob, I think first it's important to understand that as NATO assumes this new mission, they will come with a set of rules of engagement that will deal with detainees as they take them. There is, for example, in RC-West and RC-North, where they are today, they have an agreement with the government of Afghanistan on turning those over. We work closely with Afghanistan on intelligence gathering, and we are comfortable with that relationship.

So I really don't think this will have any substantial effect at all. I think we are very comfortable with the way NATO approaches detainees in the other parts of the country; we see that continuing as they move into the south; and we feel like we'll have more than adequate ability to share in that intelligence information with the Afghan government.

Q: Thank you.

Ms. Jones: Gentlemen, any other questions for the general?

Q: This is Gordon Cucullu, general. Do we see this as likely to accelerate over the course of 2006, or would it be safe to say we're trying this on a trial basis to assess it after a couple of months?

Gordon that's a good question, and I think you want to be a little careful to signal, you know, this being the bow wave of large-scale changes. But I think it is important to characterize it in that we see this as the beginning of further expansion of the NATO mission, which generally is a stabilization, reconstruction, governance role, with certainly capable security forces should they be needed.

So what I see accelerating is the progress that we've made in Afghanistan with respect to governance and restoration of a reasonable quality of life for the Afghan people.

As to how that will affect U.S. troops, I think it's also fair to say that this reduction could continue based on the conditions we see further on down the road. You don't want to overuse – I mean, we beat up the conditions-based approach, but truly this is the beginning of a routine assessment, a routine update, a reevaluation by CFC-Alpha and General Abizaid and the secretary on conditions as they continue to improve, and it gives us the ability to further transition forces to a broader NATO mission in the country.

It's also important to note that it does not in any way reduce our commitment to the counter-terrorism mission in the country. We will retain all of the very highly trained and well-equipped Special Forces units that we have in the country that can continue to press the fight against al Qaeda and those Taliban elements that want to continue to fight.

It also signals a, if you will, an expansion of our relationship with Afghanistan in the area of strategic partnership, because it becomes a more multi-national force that's there in the country. And then I think, finally, it is a measure of our confidence in the Iraqi – I'm sorry, Afghan – government beginning to stand up more and more on its own, and allows us to work closely with both the Afghan government and the international community on the future of Afghanistan.

Q: Can I ask a follow-up to that please?

Sure.

Q: The – I know we're going to be asked or that the question will come up and I don't want to lean too far forward in the foxhole on this, but is this then conceptually at least a working model for what we would hope to achieve in Iraqi Freedom?

You know, Gordon I think there -- while there are parallels between the two theaters, and certainly an assessment of situations on the ground will continue in both places. It's

important to also understand the differences. In Afghanistan, we are, we are, we have been obviously engaged there with a large multi-national presence for quite a while, and we've begun to really isolate the terrorist element, if you will, in a small portion of the south and predominantly the eastern border area in Afghanistan, and we'll continue to stay focused on that. But the process of assessing situations on the ground are parallel, and General Casey clearly will continue to make those assessments over time, and he, too, like General Eikenberry, will make some recommendations to the secretary in terms of how we adjust and shape in Iraq, as well. So, there are parallels, there are differences; I would be cautious about drawing too much into that just yet.

Q: Thanks very much.

Sure. Any other questions?

Q: Bob Maginnis again. On PRTs (provincial reconstruction teams), the distribution of PRTs, is that shifting at all more in NATO's favor, are we downsizing our presence there, or what is the distribution?

Well, Bob, as NATO assumes more and more of a role throughout the country, they will also take on more responsibility for the PRTs that are deployed. As an example, the PRT in Lashkar Gah (Helmand Province), which is right now a U.S. PRT will transition to UK as the UK moves into that region. The Canadians are taking over a PRT in the Kandahar region as they move in. So it is a transfer of PRT responsibility to NATO, and that really is a central element of NATO's mission in each of these regions as they move forces in.

The U.S. will still retain leadership on a number of the PRTs. The number I think that sticks in my head today is we'll still have somewhere around 12, but please don't quote me on that because my public math is usually wrong. But essentially we'll keep all of the PRTs – the vast majority of the PRTs in the east; we will work a couple of PRTs up in the Panjsher Valley (near Kabul), and then - but the intent being that we would encourage and welcome other nations picking up some of those responsibilities. And we'll still keep one or two of those PRTs as part of NATO as well, and that's important to mention, as well.

And one point I'd mention here that some might say, well, you're letting NATO take this on so you can go home. In fact, we'll continue to have more forces contributing to NATO than the other nations in the process, and so as we make this final transition – I mean, ultimately, as NATO might assume the entire country, the U.S. will still be the dominant partner there. So, in addition to ground forces of course we'll continue to provide all the air and the intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance, the supporting fires (?), a great deal of logistics support. So, the U.S. will still be present in the NATO mission for the foreseeable future. So it is not a – should not be characterized as handing this over to some other nations in NATO and the U.S. not participating.

Q: General, Tim Eads. Can you tell us how this is going to affect the rotation schedule in Iraq, or if it will affect the rotation schedule in Iraq, if you're (bringing?) up these troops?

Well, as you may know, Tim, the rotation – I mean, we work the yearly rotation schedules a good deal in advance. The forces earmarked to go to Afghanistan and the forces earmarked to go to Iraq are kind of done in separate bins.

What this will do obviously is ease the tempo of 4th Brigade, 10th Mountain, because they are not going to Afghanistan, and in theory, if you extrapolate that over time, that force could be available for some other mission sooner than they might normally be.

But there are some unknowns in this. One of the key elements here is this brigade will remain on a prepared to deploy order, which really means that if General Eikenberry found a crisis developed that he needed that additional force, we'd push that forward.

So they're not completely off the hook, but they'll be at home station in a PTDO status. So it may not necessarily free up that brigade as quickly as we'd hoped, but it does signal that we are beginning to change the size of the force in Afghanistan, and so there is some relationship to how the Army will view that in the, you know, longer term in terms of sustainability. Maybe [REDACTED] might have another comment here.

[REDACTED] No, sir, I really don't. I think generally that's a --

[REDACTED] That's a fair way to describe it?

[REDACTED] I think it's a good (description?) --

[REDACTED] I think with respect to Iraq, you know, we don't all know what we don't all know right now, and until we see how General Casey assesses the success of the elections, and how this -- what it (portends?) for the future, and really understand his recommendation (to?) the secretary, we can't really comment there, and that's probably as good as it gets for right now.

Tim, does that kind of answer your question?

Q: Yes, sir, it does. Thanks very much.

[REDACTED] Okay. Any other questions? Well you all are pretty well-behaved today. I was warmed up for all the worst, but, I appreciate it. If there's something that you think of in follow-up, get back to Tara, and we'll try to get you whatever information we can. We appreciate all of your support. You're doing great work.

Q: Well, thank you very much.

Ms. Jones: All right, thank you gentlemen, take care, happy holidays.

Q: Merry Christmas.

Q: Merry Christmas.