

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH COLONEL MARTIN N. STANTON, CHIEF OF RECONCILIATION AND ENGAGEMENT, MULTINATIONAL CORPS-IRAQ VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM IRAQ TIME: 12:00 NOON EDT DATE: FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 2, 2007

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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): On the phone with us for the Bloggers Roundtable this afternoon is Colonel Martin Stanton, who is the chief of reconciliation and engagement of Multinational Corps-Iraq.

Sir, good afternoon to you, and thanks for joining us.

COL. STANTON: Well, thank you. I appreciate the opportunity to talk. I mean, I was a little amazed, but okay, here I am.

MR. HOLT: (Laughs.)

COL. STANTON: Now, I've got some prepared remarks, which seem to me a little bit too voluminous, so I'll just kind of skim through them and give you some highlights from them because I know you gentlemen have questions and that's what, in fact, we're here for. You know, the canned statement, I'll give it to you in a paragraph: Reconciliation is about bringing groups once opposed to the Iraqi government into the political process. Coalition forces are committed to assisting former members of militia and other groups opposed to the government of Iraq to work with and integrate into the government. Successful reconciliation fundamentally rests with the Iraqi government. Coalition forces cannot enforce or directly cause reconciliation. It will ultimately depend on the government of Iraq to implement much-needed political reforms, which will take time.

Reconciliation also encompasses some other long-term goals, such as improving employment opportunities and the release of selected detainees from custody. An example of this last would be the release of approximately 1,200 detainees by Task Force 134 during Ramadan as a goodwill gesture.

Now, I could go on, you know, reading about three more pages of stuff, but let me give you my impressions as the guy who's in charge of coordinating reconciliation efforts at the Corps level.

First, the reconciliation process and the willingness of the Sunni population to turn on AQI has been a watershed in this war. There's no other word for it. The Sunni Awakening has been instrumental to the success of our operations in the past year.

The surge has also been a major contributing factor. There's no question of that, the fact that we reinforced ourselves to the point where we finally had enough troops to do the things that we should have been doing all along.

You know, you can't gainsay that. But the fact of the matter is, is we would not have been as successful without the cooperation of the concerned local citizens, to include many of our former opponents. The concerned local citizens are responsible for a significant drop in U.S. casualties.

There's a great briefing that's done by Colonel Mike Kershaw, who has just departed the theater, and he spelled out the drop in casualties that the 2nd Brigade, 10th Mountain Division had after the advent and the standing up of all the concerned local citizen groups in his AO south of Baghdad, and it was phenomenal.

He went from 12 fatal casualties to his troops and to the ISF working with him in the same AO a month to one, you know, consistently, over a period of four months. He went from 98 destroyed vehicles to like less than 30. Across the board, statistically, he had this great briefing that he showed us, that -- you know, it showed very clearly that the CLCs had saved lives, had saved millions of dollars of equipment, and had actually paid for themselves in terms of what we were paying these people on security contracts versus what we were saving in terms of equipment that had been destroyed or damaged that now wasn't being.

There are currently over 67,000 concerned local citizens, of which about 39,000 are actually on security contract with the coalition, in 11 --

Q Sorry, Colonel. How many? How many were there?

COL. STANTON: Yeah.

Q How many were there?

COL. STANTON: Sixty-seven thousand total, 39,000 on contract, in 11 of the 18 provinces in Iraq.

The majority of these are Sunni, but not all of them. And efforts to extend these contacts into the Shi'a community has continued and is continuing now.

And based upon those statements, gentlemen, what are your questions?

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much.

Sounds like we had a few more folks join us in the process here. Who else joined us on line?

Q Jarred Fishman's on.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Q John Donovan.

MR. HOLT: All right. Thank you very much. COL. STANTON: Hi, guys.

MR. HOLT: All right. Andrew Lubin, you were first on the line, so why don't you get us started.

Q Great. Colonel, Andrew Lubin from U.S. Cavalry ON Point. Great briefing. We appreciate listening to it.

A big question is the Sunnis. You seem to have a situation where the old insurgents are trying to get back in the government and reconcile, and the government doesn't want them in. How is this going to play out? And how do you twist some arms to let them back in again?

COL. STANTON: Well, it's -- that's a very, very important aspect of this, and I would be lying to you if I said that everything was just going swimmingly and we had solutions for all of that. What you have pointed out is one of the central problems we face today.

There's a lot of distrust in the government for the Sunnis -- one could almost use the word "paranoia" about the Sunnis -- and a possible return of the Ba'athists. It's kind of hard to believe when you look at the numbers and when you look at the size of the Shi'a community and the fact that, you know, they're positioned where they are and they have the population that they do and there's as many of them as there are in the security forces. It's like -- the best description I've heard of it is, the Sunnis recognize that they've lost, and they're coming to the table.

The Shi'a don't recognize yet that they've won. I think General Odierno said that, and I think he's right.

The other analogy you can use is the Shi'a are like an enormous mouse that's, you know, very, very afraid of a tiny lion, but in actuality, they don't really have anything to fear in terms of losing the government to the Sunnis. It's -- there's no way the coalition would let that happen, and there's no way the Sunnis have the numbers to make that happen, even if they wanted to. And the ones that I've talked to, you can tell that -- I don't think that's in any of the cards from the Sunni people that I've talked to. I think most of them genuinely recognize that there's no going back and that, you know, we have to make some kind of political accommodation and agreement with the Shi'a community.

But the Shi'a community is scared and we have to hand hold them through this, and it's painful and it's taking a lot of time. But ultimately, I do think we will be successful.

Q Well, sir, don't say in the meantime -- I mean, you talk to Sheikh Ahmad, you talk to Mayor Latif, you talk to Governor Mahmoud. Eventually they're going to get rebuffed enough times and they're going to split off and go -- and then declare -- (inaudible) -- and the GOI missed the boat on this.

COL. STANTON: Again, I'd be lying to you if I said that wasn't a danger, but the only way we can keep that from happening is to keep, you know, grimly pushing engagement between the two of them and to keep it in the government of Iraq's face and to keep working it. But is that a danger? Of course it is.

MR. HOLT: Bruce McQuain.

COL. STANTON: Hi, Bruce.

Q Hey, Colonel, Bruce McQuain, QandO.net. Obviously the reconciliation we're all reading about here is the bottom-up reconciliation which you've talked about, the Awakening.

COL. STANTON: That's correct, and that's the most successful part of this whole thing.

Q I wonder -- COL. STANTON: And the -- sorry.

Q I wonder, though, because, you know, we hear mostly about Anbar and some of the areas that are exclusively one sect or another, but Diyala seems to sort of be a mix of everything. And from what I'm reading, there is some reconciliation in an area successfully being undertaken. I wondered if you could talk about that and then whether or not this bottom-up reconciliation is going to be enough to drive reconciliation at a national level.

COL. STANTON: Well, Diyala is a good example of mixed community reconciliation. It's not perfect, but what's interesting is former insurgents -- I mean actual former enemies of ours; the 1920s Brigade people -- are actually working with the Iraqi police and other, you know, Shi'a people in community to -- with the community of al Qaeda and other extremists.

The -- what's interesting is the grudging support that has come around of the former, you know, Shi'a police chief there, General Ghanim, who initially was dead set against them but who has now kind of come around and said, you know, I can work with these guys. And you know, Diyala is getting steadily better under Ghanim's tutelage. He's a very good man. And, you know, we have a lot of hope for Diyala.

In terms of will bottom-up be enough, I wish I could give you the smiley-face answer to that and say, "Sure." You know, what haunts us, you know, especially me, is the prospect of, you know, all these opportunities being made at a tactical level at the bottom by units and Iraqis that are just doing magnificent work. I mean, if you go out to the brigades and the battalions and you talk to the young officers and you talk to the troops and you talk to the Iraqis they're working with, it can give you such hope and it presents such opportunities. And then you go and you deal with the people in the Iraqi government who are so paranoid and who are so, you know, reticent to embrace this reconciliation and it's a real emotional roller coaster. You know, every time you go out to the units, it just strengthens your resolve to keep trying.

But, you know, I would -- like I said before, I would be lying to you guys if I told you that, yep, we've got a national-level plan for reconciliation and everybody's agreed to it and they're all working towards it assiduously with big smiles on their faces, because that's just not the case. I mean, the government of Iraq has some very big concerns about the Sunnis trying to reconcile. And we're just trying to get them over their paranoia.

And so will it be enough at the end of the day? The big question mark is -- and it goes back to the first gentleman's question -- how long before all of these people who are trying to reconcile get discouraged at continuous rebuff and, you know, come up with their own plan B? And what does their plan B look like? Either A, try to break off and make their own country, or B, take up with insurgency again. How long do we have before that occurs, and what are the signs that that could be happening? Don't really know the answer to that.

And, you know, all I can tell you is we just keep working each issue to get the government of Iraq to come along and start top-down to meet the bottom-up that's very successful.

Q Yeah, thanks for that. MR. HOLT: Okay. Spencer.

COL. STANTON: I hope that answered your question.

Q Colonel, if I could pick up on that.

You talked about how plan B might be to return to insurgency. What kind of window do you think, in terms of time, the government has in particular provinces -- say Diyala, say Anbar -- where if they don't put people on payrolls or whatever your metrics are -- and if you could explain those, that would be great -- for getting them inside the process, that they'll take up arms again or in any other way demonstrate a rejection of the efforts that you and the coalition have put into it?

And just as a follow-on on that, could you give us a sense of how frustrated the CLCs feel right now with the government and what they talk about in terms of their intention?

COL. STANTON: Well, the first thing is, God, man, if I knew that, I would be so much happier with my job than I am right now, because I can't tell you.

You know, what are some of the indicators that we would, you know, have of that occurring? You know, in some places you'll know it when you find a big pile of, you know, reflective belts on the street and the IED rate starts going through the roof again. That hasn't happened yet.

How frustrated are they? I get the sense that we still have some time, because I don't think that rebuff has been so complete. I think that they recognize that, you know, they're working with people that don't inherently trust them, and they're just, you know, trying to stay with it.

We haven't had such a complete and total rebuff of a CLC that it would cause them to go back to the insurgency. Now, what would rebuff be? Absolute refusal to hire any of them into the Iraqi security forces. Refusal to recognize, you know, their rights to protect their neighborhoods.

You know, another big one that everybody's hanging their hat on is provincial elections. You know, you talk to people out in all the Sunni communities and in a lot of the other communities as well, and they're really looking forward to the next set of provincial elections to try to get leadership that would be more representative. And, you know, an indefinite postponement of provincial elections, for example, would be a very bad sign to a lot -- you know, to a lot of the Sunnis that, you know, the government is not going to let them have any kind of political empowerment. But we haven't had that kind of a move from the government yet, so I think we've got some time because, you know, I think the Sunnis understand that this isn't something that they're going to just smack their forehead with their palm and go, "Oh, I'm so glad to see you back."

I don't think it's just works like that.

But I would be nervous if they -- if the same metrics we're experiencing now still existed into the summer.

Q Could I just ask a follow-on on that? Is it fair to characterize what you're saying, to get a kind of bottom-line assessment, that you don't see the Sunni awakening, as you call it, or the CLCs as representing a fundamental break with the insurgency, that it isn't a tactical shift to kind of wade into the waters of where reconciliation might be possible, as opposed to, say, we're laying this option off the table?

COL. STANTON: I don't see them as a fundamental break, no, I mean, because nobody here is going to take any option off the table for them. I think it shows that they are less likely to go back to insurgency if the government does anything at all to meet them, you know, even close to halfway or even a third of the way.

But you know, would I talk about any group that formerly opposed us in the context of what we're doing now and say they have absolutely crossed the Rubicon and there's no way in hell they could ever go back to insurgency? No, I can't make that value judgment, because I think they, in their own minds, have all options on the table. I know they don't want to go back to insurgency. I feel pretty good about making a statement like that. But I don't know what would make them feel that they were forced to go back to insurgency -- you know, reluctance on the part of the GOI to recognize them and to include them politically.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And Bill.

COL. STANTON: Yeah. That's my assessment.

Q Well, I have sort of a general question. You know, if you could, you know, bullet-point out an answer for me, if it's more than one thing -- it may just be the one thing -- but when we hear about reconciliation translating into the immediate security gains and the reduced casualties we've seen over the past couple months, how does that play out beyond the formation of the CLCs? What else is the broad term reconciliation doing to improve security so dramatically?

COL. STANTON: Well, it's improving security simply because it's making the neighborhoods untenable for the people who used to live there and to strike at us with, you know, not impunity but with much greater ease than they do now.

To use the Maoist analogy, it's making the water toxic for the fish. You know, the people are no longer the sea. People -- I mean, and not just CLCs standing on a street corner with rifles; people with cellphones; people who, you know, will make that phone call now. It's whole communities sensing, you know, empowerment, not only for their men standing on the street corner with guns in a yellow PT belt, but for the fact that, you know, we can do things now that we couldn't do before.

Our children can play now. We can open our shops now. There's normality coming back to a lot of neighborhoods. And a large part of it is due to the CLCs. The CLCs to a lot of people represent a return to a possible normal life. And I think that's a big thing that, you know, we kind of miss in all our euphoria about the fact that they have saved us a lot of lives, is it's a good deal from the Iraqis' perspective too because, you know, life in Iraq for

the past three years hasn't been a lot of fun. And you know, they're all of a sudden living better than they have in a long time.

Q So -- but -- and forgive for being dense here, but when we talk -- when you use the term "reconciliation," that almost seems like it's a separate issue from the population standing up and turning against insurgency. So how --

COL. STANTON: Okay, I can see what you're --

Q -- (inaudible) -- from the political leadership or the tribal leadership on down, especially in areas where the tribe doesn't control every man, woman and child in the population.

COL. STANTON: Okay. Hit me with your question again. I was talking over you, which was rude.

Q So let's say -- no, that's fine. So let's say -- when you talk about reconciliation, you talk about, like, Shi'a and Sunni sheikhs working together. You talk about Sunnis trying to engage the government. You talk about all these type of things that go into reconciliation. So is that a distinct issue from what you're talking about as the general populace rising up against the concept of insurgency?

COL. STANTON: No, it's all part of it. It's all a -- it all kind of like folds together.

Q Okay.

COL. STANTON: You know, in communities that are mixed, a lot of the people are working together. You know, we had this great example recently where the eight sheikhs, four Sunni and four Shi'a, were kidnapped by the AQI.

Where was that again? In -- STAFF: In Baghdad.

COL. STANTON: Yeah. That was in north Baghdad. And the Iraqi army rescued them, but the story that came out of it was they offered to let one of the Shi'a sheikhs go, and he refused. He wasn't going to live his Sunni compatriots there to face the music alone. And there's a growing sense of, you know, lower-level community like that in a lot of places. It's not complete -- there's still a lot of sectarian mistrust -- but there's, you know, the beginning of reaching out amongst the border communities to each other that's a hopeful sign.

Now, in terms of true reconciliation, you know, as in absolute peace and acceptance of everything my enemy has done, I think that's a generational thing. We're just happy they're not shooting at each other anymore.

Q Okay, thank you.

COL. STANTON: You know, I mean, that's -- I think that's a fair assessment. To get these guys to where they just don't instinctively distrust and hate each other is going to be generations.

Q Okay, thank you.

MR. HOLT: And Jarred.

Q Yes, sir. Thank you for time. Two distinct --

COL. STANTON (?): Excuse me guys. Five minutes.

Q The first part is following up on what you just said, sir, the generational. What is the structure for the educational system to make sure that the next generation doesn't hate each other and that they don't want to kill each other, that they feel as one Iraq and as all Iraqis versus sectarianism?

COL. STANTON: Well, we can -- I can just tell you that they're putting the -- you know, the Iraqis and the coalition together are putting the national education system back, you know, on line. Kids are going to school again. I'm not really up on the curriculum. I can't imagine in any kind of a school that they have, you know, social studies, math, you know, reading and, you know, hate your Shi'a or hate your Sunni. You know, it's not a -- it's not something that they learn in school. It's something that's kind of inbred into their communities. You know, and that's a bad word, but it's something that their community builds in them. You know, it's what the 'hood does for you, it's not what the school system does for you.

And how do we get it so that they don't attack each other? Well, live -- you know, if you're going to have to live in peace together and, you know, have the wealth of the country distributed more equitably in terms of the resources, you know, how people live -- like if you've ever gone into into Sadr city, I mean, Sadr city in 2003 when we first got to Iraq was, you know, one of the worst slums I've seen in the Middle East. And, you know, the rest of the Shi'a -- or the Sunni areas in the town were fairly nice. If you get the Shi'a living at a better standard of living, I mean to the point where everybody's living in the suburbs or at least their version of it, I think then you've got a shot at tamping the hatred and the resentment down. But it's going to take decades. MR. HOLT: Okay. One more question.

John, are you still with us?

Q No, I just -- I've really got to dial in on time. (Laughter.) Everybody's asked my questions.

MR. HOLT: Okay. All right. Well, Colonel Stanton?

Q Can we sneak in a quick follow-up?

MR. HOLT: Well, we -- okay, go ahead.

Q Colonel, can you address the JAM issue? Sunnis, Shi'as, they're fine, they're nice people, but but JAM are religious extremists. Do they blend in? Do they fit in?

COL. STANTON: Well not all are -- you know, there's JAM and then there's JAM. There's, you know, like all sorts of different flavors of JAM, to use a very bad pun. (Laughter.) There's some that are truly irreconcilable, and, you know, they're almost to the point where they're as bad as AQI. There's some that are very reconcilable. And you know, you can't paint all of them the same, and you just sort of have to deal with the separate little factions of them separately.

You know, we don't really want to fight all of JAM, and if we can, you know, make peace with most of it to the point where they're supporting the government and, you know, not causing, you know, factional fighting, we want to do that. But there are some irreconcilable, you know, members of JAM, and there are some, frankly, criminal elements that use JAM as their cover. And those will have to be dealt with differently.

But you know, JAM is a much bigger problem than, you know, yes, they're all bad; no, they're not. I mean, it's much more complex than that. There's plenty of JAM that's, you know -- even the majority of JAM that, you know, in certain circumstances we can work with. So I'm hesitant to call them all enemies.

Q But very quick, one-word answer, a follow-up a question. What portion of them would you say, if you had to put a percentage on it, are under the control of Sadr or are affected by the cease-fire that's going on right now?

COL. STANTON: Well, quite a few of them are affected the cease- fire. Does that mean they're perfectly under control of Sadr? No, some of them have gone under the cease-fire for their own purposes. But more of them -- you know, much more of them are obeying the cease- fire than are not. On the other hand, we got rocketed last week, and it was attributed to JAM. So you know, nothing's perfect.

But the cease-fire is having much more of an effect than I personally would have thought it had.

Q Great. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. And Colonel Stanton, thank you for being with us. Do you have any closing comments for us before we end?

COL. STANTON: Nope. It's my second tour. It's good steady work. You know, if I wasn't here, I'd have to have a job, so --

MR. HOLT: (Laughs.) All right, sir. Well, thank you very much.

COL. STANTON: So other than that, gentlemen, you all have a good evening.

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