

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH GENERAL RICK LYNCH, COMMANDING GENERAL, MULTI-NATIONAL DIVISION CENTER SUBJECT: MAJOR EVENTS IN THE TASK FORCE MARNE AREA MODERATOR: CHARLES "JACK" HOLT, CHIEF, NEW MEDIA OPERATIONS, OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE PUBLIC AFFAIRS TIME: 11:03 A.M. EDT DATE: MONDAY, MARCH 10, 2008

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MR. HOLT: Major General Rick Lynch with us this morning for the Bloggers' Roundtable.

Sir, welcome to the Bloggers' Roundtable and thanks for joining us.

GEN. LYNCH: My pleasure, thanks.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. If you've got an opening statement, sir, we're ready -- online and ready to go.

GEN. LYNCH: Great! You know, I've been with you guys routinely, but I think it's been about six weeks since the last time. So let me kind of give you an update on how things are going at MNDC. You know, we're now averaging less than two attacks a day. Remember, a year ago when we got here we were averaging 25 attacks a day. The last couple of days we had no attacks. We averaged less than two the entire month of February. You know, civilian casualties are indeed down by about 75 percent and coalition casualties are down by 80 percent.

So what's happening now is the conversation is changed. As I'm out and about, everywhere I go I land at a patrol base and I get out of the helicopter, either do a dismounted or a mounted patrol to the downtown area and I meet with the locals and the conversation's no longer about security -- at least in my area: the southern belts of Baghdad and the southern provinces. The conversation's all about jobs; it's all about services; it's all about a sustainable, economic development.

So it's significant progress that we've made over the course of the year that we've been here, but it's a tenuous situation. I mean, that's the point we make all the time. That the surge came in and it gave us the combat power to take the fire to the enemy. We've killed or captured about 6,000 over the last 12 months that we've been here. We've established 54 patrol bases. So 75 percent of my soldiers live with the Iraqi people. And when we set these patrol bases, the Iraqi people come forward and ask: Are you staying? And when the answer to that is yes, they ask: How can we help?

So we now have about 40,000 concerned local citizens in our area that are providing security. And we have defined sustainable security as locals under positive control securing their communities and that's what's happening now. So we've had a significant impact on Sunni extremism in our area.

Operations that are going on now are focused on Shi'a extremism, as we work our way out towards Wasat province down the Tigris River valley.

So operations continue. We continue to focus on transition from security to stability. Security is really numbers of attacks. I talked about that. Stability is sustainable security and sustainable economic development. So I'm really finding myself focused a lot on non-lethal lines of operation. I know more about fish farming and dairy farming and poultry farming and agriculture than I ever did in my life, but it's things that I'm focused on now to create jobs and sustainable economic development here in MNDC's area.

So I always find it better just to, you know, to take your all's questions. So with that, you know, I'm happy to answer whatever questions you might have.

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

Andrea So, you were first online. Why don't you get us started?

Q Yes, sir. I have two questions for you. First, have any of your Iraqi counterparts been deployed to help with the fight in Mosul? And how will a reduction in U.S. combat brigades affect your division's capacity to train and mentor the Iraqi security forces?

GEN. LYNCH: Yeah, the answer to your first question is no. We haven't lost any of our Iraqi security force colleagues to operations up in the north. I believe some have moved out of MND-Baghdad, but we haven't lost any in MNDC.

We have now, with our operations over the last year, created this sustainable security by building these patrol bases and maturing the Sons of Iraq program and (we assist ?) in Iraqi security forces. You know, there is indeed a planned drawdown that we talk about all the time of five brigades by July. We have a plan in place to do that. We can reposition both ISF and coalition forces in my battle space so it won't affect the security situation at all. That's all planned.

What has to happen after that withdrawal is we have to look at see where we are with the three conditions that we evaluate all the time: The level of the insurgency, the capability of Iraqi security forces and the capacity of the government. And that's all based on local areas, not on provinces or nationwide, but local areas. And then that'll determine where can we next withdraw coalition forces and reposition Iraqi security forces.

We've also got the Sons of Iraq now. Like I say, I've got 40,000 of them that are currently manning about 2,000 checkpoints in my area. At some point in time, they'll go away. About a third of them will go into the Iraqi security forces and about two-thirds will need to find jobs so we're working hard to create the conditions where those jobs will be made available.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir.

And Richard Lowry.

Q Good evening, sir. This is Richard Lowry.

I have a question about your soldiers. You know, for centuries, the skill set required of your soldiers was to be able to shoot straight and do mass

fires and employ combined arms. But now in this last year, your soldiers -- in addition to having the soldier skills -- they need to be ambassadors, negotiators, businessmen and engineers.

Can you comment on how the life of your soldiers has changed over the course of the last year?

GEN. LYNCH: Well, that's a great question, Richard. And yeah, I'd love to work on this a little bit. So we've got -- we've got an amazing Army these days. It's an experienced-based army. And I'll just use captains as an example. The captains that I have currently commanding companies were here as lieutenant platoon leaders, were here as junior captains on somebody's staff, and now they're back here as senior captains, as company commanders. They're well grounded in combat operations.

Like I say, we were doing nothing but kinetic operations for about the first seven months we were here. Once it transitioned, I told them, okay, that's not the main effort now. We can focus on nonlethal. They have the amazing capability to worry about schools and worry about services and do engagements. And they truly have become ambassadors at all levels.

Now, I contend that's primarily because we are an experienced-based army. We've all been down these roads before. We've seen what we need to do to transition from security to stability. The soldiers, candidly, they like it. I know we as a division will make our reenlistment objectives for fiscal year '08 by the first of April -- that's six months early -- six months early -- because these soldiers know they're part of a winning team. They feel very good about the progress that they're making here in Iraq. They're focused on completing the mission.

I am indeed very proud of them.

You know, I mentioned early on that, you know, I've got a graduate from West Point, I've got a master's degree from MIT, I've got 30 years in the military, but I never knew anything about fish farming or dairy farming until I've got here. But we've got such a resilient army, we pick up these skill sets and then we apply it to the task at hand.

MR. HOLT: All right.

Chuck Simmons.

Q Good afternoon -- or good evening, General. Chuck Simmons from "Americas North Shore Journal."

First of all, Rich stole my question. But one of the things that in the last couple of weeks were highlighted in the popular press were some disagreements with the Sons of Iraq. One apparent leader was quoted as saying that he had lost 19 of his men to friendly fire.

Are we looking at the media just finding some disgruntled SOI or are we looking at minor incidents? Or what is the actual relationship there that caused some of those fellows to say they were pulling out?

GEN. LYNCH: Yeah, it's -- you know, it's something we're dealing with every day over here. That particular incident I'm not aware of. I think it happened up north. But in my area I've got 40,000 of these folks that are

manning 2,000 checkpoints. And I do have isolated instances where the Sons of Iraq aren't acting like sons of Iraq. I mean, it's a true statement that probably about 60 percent of them at some point in time had insurgent tendency. And sometimes these guys flip back to their old ways. You know, we watch them very closely. We make sure that they stay on the right side of the fence, that they're part of the solution and not part of the problem.

You know, they're divided into groups. Those 40,000 are divided into about 200 groups and my company commanders meet with the group leaders on a daily basis. I personally go out and engage with the Sons of Iraq leadership on a routine basis. So in my area, you know, we've only had 28 attacks against the Sons of Iraq in the last five months. We did have a Sons of Iraq leader assassinated by a suicide bomber, but on investigation, he was a Sunni leader who was killed by another Sunni leader. It was tribal infighting. It wasn't an attack on the Sons of Iraq.

We do see al Qaeda here. They're scared to death of the Sons of Iraq program because you can't have an insurgency that doesn't have the support of the population. So every time we generate a Sons of Iraq program in some place where the enemy used to be, we see al Qaeda do an attack against the Sons of Iraq.

But what I find is the Sons of Iraq fight back. They establish their positions, they hold their ground, and they truly are securing their local areas.

So it's the dance that we're dealing with. These -- remember, you don't reconcile with your friends, you reconcile with your enemies. And we're in the process now of reconciling with folks who may have been our enemies yesterday, but they're our friends today.

And I'm convinced that they want three things. They want security. They want what you and I want. They want to be able to be free from fear. They want to be able to send their kids to school; they want to have a job. They want to have an opportunity to go on the streets and not worry about getting attacked. They want pay. I mean, they're honorable men and they want to take care of their families. So the fact that we pay them about \$8 a day meets that need.

And the last thing that they're looking for is the recognition by the government of Iraq. They want legitimacy. They want the government of Iraq to recognize that they are, indeed, value-added and they're securing their local areas. And all those things, we have forward progress on, so I'm comfortable we're moving in the right direction with the Sons of Iraq.

Your question was a good question. There could be situations where they could flip back or something bad might happen to them, but it's the exception, not the rule.

Q Thank you, sir.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Bruce.

Q Hey, General Lynch. Great to talk with you again. Bruce McQuain with gando.

To follow up on that question, I think the places they were talking about was Baqubah, Babil -- I guess it's Babil province -- and then Diyala province where some of these things were occurring. And it seems to me that what they're talking about more than anything is -- other than the point about getting in a firefight with some U.S. forces -- is frustration with the Iraqi government and how slowly they're moving. I wonder if you could address that. And secondly, another thing that they mentioned in this article is the possibility of AQI infiltrating the Sons of Iraq. Maybe walk us through the vetting process for the Sons of Iraq.

GEN. LYNCH: Yeah, both great questions. I'll take the last one first, and I'll probably forget the first one. You'll have to remind me. (Chuckles.) So --

Every time we get these guys that come forward -- and I'll just use the current fight. We're doing Marne Rugged, which is south of the Tigris River. We're attacking from west to east at the town of Suwayra. And as we work our way from west to east, we establish these patrol bases, and the first thing that happens is the locals come forward and say hey, I want to help. So we've got a very detailed vetting process.

First off, they're vouched for by their tribal leadership. The Sons of Iraq is tribal-based. I mean, the tribal authority here is paramount, so the tribal leadership comes forward and vouches for them. That's number one.

Number two is we put them into our database. You know -- you know, we have this biometric database. We take thumbprints and fingerprints and their retinal scans, to make sure they don't show up hot in our database. And then we just watch them all the time.

My rule is we don't have concerned citizens where we can't watch them. You know, we give them badges, we give them uniforms, and we check on them on a daily basis. And I do have a priority intelligence requirement that is focused on Sons of Iraq flipping or being infiltrated by either Shi'a extremists or Sunni extremists.

Remember, about 20 percent of my Sons of Iraq are Shi'a. They're not all Sunni, but 20 percent are Shi'a. So we're watching for that very closely, because that is a concern. I haven't seen that, you know, over the course of the last eight months, but that doesn't mean that it won't pop up tomorrow.

And then to your first question, you know, there is progress. And about a third of these bubbas want to join the Iraq security forces. They're either -- they're interested in doing that and they meet the age and physical requirements and the -- (inaudible) -- requirements. And in some cases, now, I've actually taken Sons of Iraq, been vetted by the Iraqi government and sent to Iraq police academies and have come back to be policemen in their hometowns. And that has, indeed, been happening.

It's not happening nearly as quickly as we'd like. You know, we process all these lists of people who want to be Iraqi army or Iraq police, and some of them, for whatever reason, get pulled off the list by the Iraqi government. But there are signs of progress; it's just not nearly as quickly as we'd like it to have happened. Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right. Andrew.

Q General, good afternoon. Andrew Lubin. How are you today, sir?

GEN. LYNCH: Andrew, how are you doing, buddy?

Q Good, thanks. Wouldn't miss this for the world.

Sir, part of basic services nowadays is education and schooling. Can you talk to us about Task Force Marne and what you're doing as far as getting the schools up and running?

GEN. LYNCH: Oh, yeah. That's a great question. It's -- see, the people of Iraq want what we want -- I'm convinced of that. See, we have about 26 million Iraqis, and on any given day maybe 10,000 insurgents, but the rest are all just good people and they want to be able to send their kids to school.

So we've kind of perfected this, Andrew, so that when we do a major operation, like going out to secure Safiyah. As soon as we're out there and we establish that patrol base, high on our list of things to fix are the schools, because you've got to get the kids back into school. It makes the parents comfortable; it makes the kids comfortable.

So we've figured out pretty much the TTP on how to rebuild the school, how to engage with the ministry of education to make sure that the school gets the right supplies and the right staffing, and then we continue to mature this.

But as I think through what's most important as we transition from security to stability, schools are close to the top of the list. And we're doing that with great effect. We built probably -- in the year we've been here, we've probably rebuilt 40 schools or so. And we find that the teachers are there.

The teachers, unfortunately, were not employed because of the conditions at school or the security situation. And now that we've worked through all that, the teachers are back to work and the kids are back in school.

Q Are they getting -- are you getting support from the ministry of education?

GEN. LYNCH: Yeah, we are. Yeah, that's, candidly, probably the least of my worries. I don't struggle a lot with getting the teachers that have been accredited by the ministry back in the school systems.

You know, yesterday or the day before, I was in Ad Diwaniyah. I walked through the new school that we're building that's going to be done in a couple of weeks. The teachers are already on standby, the ministry of education's already agreed to re-supply them, and they'll put the teachers back in. So that's working pretty well.

Q Great. Thanks very much.

MR. HOLT: And Dave.

Q Good evening, sir. Dave Dilegge, Small Wars Journal.

I pulled up this morning your 100-day letter that outlines your focuses of effort that -- main focuses as you're getting ready to turn over to (Tank ?) Mountain. And I was wondering if you could expand a little bit on the -- pushing through the national media statement, specifically how you're reaching out to Iraqis, the Arabic press, really, the people in-country there. What types of IO things that you're doing. GEN. LYNCH: Yeah, sure. I mean, I believe that you're really speaking to three publics. You're speaking to the American public, the Iraqi public, and the insurgency. And we've got systems in place here in Task Force Marne to do all three. I've got a great public affairs office that reached out to the American public.

My point about the national media, I find myself very frustrated, because as much as we talk about the progress being made, rarely do I see that reflected in the national media. And I'm not sure why that is. I just wish that -- I wish that there was a balanced approach there, talking about the good things and the bad.

I know for a fact that if something bad happens, it'll be on everybody's TV station and everybody's newspaper. But the good things just don't make it through the national media filter. So what I've decided to do is go straight to the hometowns.

I mean, I have everybody in my staff, the leaders, all my leaders across the subordinate units engaging with their hometowns in print media, TV media, radios, to tell the story. To tell the progress to our -- I mean, we're America's army over here, fighting America's war. The American public deserve to know what's going on.

And then, for the Iraqi public, what I've done is I created an Iraqi media section. And that Iraqi media section does nothing but share the stories with the Iraqi media and facilitate them going out to get the stories. So we're actually transporting Iraqi media out to the places across our area of operations so they can talk to the people, understand the progress.

And a perfect example is just recently we had a major governance center open in Salman Pak. And as a result of that important event, we took out a lot of Iraqi media, both print and TV, and they covered it appropriately.

But telling the stories is important. It's important to tell it to the American public and the Iraqi public.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Jonathan Gurwitz.

Q Jonathan Gurwitz, San Antonio Express-News.

General, if the conversation now is about economics and jobs, how well does the United States joining that conversation? And I'm not talking just about the troops who are performing admirably, I'm talking about the PRTs and the full range of assets that the United States is employing in Iraq right now.

GEN. LYNCH: Well, that's a great question, Jonathan. You know, we're doing the best we can with what we've got. You know, there are indeed PRT -- and I have those in all my provinces and all my brigades have EPRTs, the Embedded PRTs, and those are patriotic Americans from the State Department, USAID, USDA and they're doing the best they can. But I've got to tell you, it's not sufficient. We don't have sufficient strength from the other agencies over here to help us build capacity. If it's about the governmental development and economic development, we need more folks from the Department of State and Department of Treasury and Department of Justice -- Department of Agriculture to go over here and help build that capacity.

My soldiers are doing the best they can, you know. But they are not folks who have been trained on capacity-building. The EPRTs we do have are doing great work, but they're not manned at the level they need to be. The PRTs we have, I'm proud of as well. But they really need to be -- you know, about, you know, 10 times stronger than they are now to truly focus on capacity-building. I just came back -- before I got on the telephone with you guys -- from Wasat Province out in there -- out in al Kut. We've got a robust PRT. It's got about 40 people now and it's well led and well resourced, and we're making great progress out in Wasat Province because of that. So it really is getting the right folks in here that can focus on capacity-building.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

And Jarred.

Q Yes. Good evening, General.

If you could speak a little bit about the bureaucratization of the Iraqi -- not only the forces and the troops and bringing the Sons of Iraq into the actual ISF, but the government officials -- as we all know, the problems with the central government versus the provincial governments -- people -- actually farmers on the ground seeing someone from Baghdad and not viewing them as the enemy. If you could talk a little bit about the ability to kind of build a real, functioning government of one Iraq in your sector.

GEN. LYNCH: Great question, Jarred.

What I find it's doing is we're building this government from the ground up. You know, we do these operations, we secure the area, we get the checkpoints established and then we gather together the local leaders and say, "Okay, you guys have got to organize yourselves now into some kind of a local

council and then we'll connect you with your NIEA Council, your Qata Council (ph), provincial council and the national government."

So we've generated a lot of local councils and what I'm excited about is a lot of those councils are formed by both Sunni and Shi'a citizens of Iraq. They're working it out together. So we're spending -- I've got a DCGS, General Cardone, who does nothing but helicopter diplomacy. He works to bring the provincial government down to the local citizens -- to bring the national government down to the local citizens. For example, he's doing an overflight this week with the Minister of Agriculture to show him the agriculture opportunities in MNDC's area. Tomorrow, we're taking the rural planner from the Baghdad province out to Arab Jabour to meet with the local government council and the hawza (ph).

So -- you know, what has to happen is you've got to form this foundation of governance at the local level and then you've got to connect them with your higher-level governments, and you've got to give them some sense of confidence that their higher-level governments are truly going to work to meet their needs. So we're spending a lot of time working through that.

MR. HOLT: All right.

And Richard -- Richard Miller.

Q Yes.

Good evening, General. Richard Miller from Talk Radio News.

I'm wondering if I could shift the conversation just slightly -- actually outward.

And if you might comment on the border situation -- both the borders with Syria, Saudi Arabia and Iran because there has been renewed focus on the number of bad folks coming over to feed AQI. And I'll leave it at that.

GEN. LYNCH: Yeah, thanks for that, Richard.

You know, I do indeed have a portion of the Iranian border in my area of operation out in the Wasat Province. I don't have anything on the Syrian border. I do have a portion of the Saudi Arabian border from Najaf Province. We're putting a lot of effort to block external influences coming into Iraq. So for example is Wasat Province, which is where I spend all day -- you know, I've got a brigade from the country of Georgia -- 2,000 infantry men that man six checkpoints along the major routes from Iran into Iraq through the Wasat Province. I've got another 200 Georgians and a Border Transition Team who actually live at the single point of entry from Iran into Iraq into Wasat Province. That's the Zurbatiyah point of entry.

And we've now inspected over 60,000 vehicles since last October. Everybody that knows when they come from Iran into Iraq through Wasat Province, they get searched and their vehicles get searched. And as a result of that, we found nothing. There has not been any Iranian munitions come across the POE in Zurbatiyah since last October. At least, none that we have found. We do believe that they're still coming into Iraq, but they're coming in from different areas and not through Wasat Province.

We're still finding Iranian munitions in our area. Just two weeks ago, the police down in Juballah (ph) -- all this happened today -- we got munitions in this house. We went there and they were Iranian rockets and Iranian C4 that wasn't old. I don't know how new it was, but it wasn't old -- it wasn't buried. It was there, prepared to form IEDs or whatever it might be. Now I'm not sure when that came into our area, but it's still there. And we're still coming across situations where Shi'a extremists have been trained by Iranian surrogates -- either Iraqis who went to Iran to be trained and came back to train Shi'a extremism, or actual Iranians who come over to help train the Shi'a extremism. So I can't address the al Qaeda thing in the Syrian border. I can talk you though what we're doing on the Iranian border and the effect that we're having. So that's pretty much where that is. Q General, I have time for a follow-up question --

GEN. LYNCH: Sure.

Q -- and that is, have you noticed any changes in that situation since the surge began?

GEN. LYNCH: Well, it's hard to say. You know, it's -- I've found -- you know, 26 weapons caches in the last year that have had Iranian munitions in it. And I just found another one, as I say, two weeks ago. So in terms of the amount of ammunition I'm finding, there has been generally no change. You know, we were significantly attacking by EFPs which are traceable back to Iran when we first got here. That has reduced in my area, but it's still pretty significant in NMDB. So the Iranian influence is still there and from my tactical perspective, I really don't see a drop in Iranian influence.

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

And we're about out of time here. Just one real quick round.

Any follow-ups?

Q Yes, sir, I have a quick follow-up.

If you could describe what you feel is the biggest improvement in the Iraqi Security Forces in your area since you deployed?

GEN. LYNCH: Yeah, that's easy. It's competent, capable leadership. You know, I spent today with an Iraqi army brigade commander and he is powerful. He is a military professional that's Iraqi. He's not Shi'a or Sunni. He's Iraqi. And I'm seeing a depth to the experience and a depth to the confidence in the Iraqi Army that I didn't see in the past, and we're trying to help that in Task Force Marne. We created a Task Force Marne NCO Academy akin to our own NCO academies to focus on leader development of the junior leaders inside the Iraqi Army.

So to answer your question, the biggest change I'm seeing is competent, capable, effective leadership. And as a result of that, the Iraqi Army in my area is leading a lot of operations. There have been patrol bases I've actually turned over to the Iraqi Army because they're at the point now they can accept the security requirement there. So I do see great progress in the Iraqi Army.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much for joining us today.

Major General Rick Lynch, commanding general of Multi-National Division Center throughout the MNDC out of Baghdad. Thank you, sir, for joining us and we appreciate your spending the time with us, and hopefully we can speak again. GEN. LYNCH: Yep. And thanks, folks. I appreciate what you do. Take care. God bless.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, sir.

Q Thank you, General.

END.