

Al Qaeda Remains Coalition's, Iraqi's Biggest Target

By Jim Garamone

American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, Jan. 20, 2008 – Al Qaeda remains the most dangerous terror group in Iraq, and coalition and Iraqi security forces continue to attack it, Navy Rear Adm. Greg Smith, a spokesman for Multinational Forces Iraq, said today in Baghdad. Smith gave an update on Operation Phantom Phoenix and a short history of al Qaeda's operations in the country. He also spoke about Iran's influence in Iraq.

The effects of Operation Phantom Phoenix have been substantial, Smith said. "Since January 1, Operation Phantom Phoenix has conducted 18 battalion-level operations, detained 1,023 terrorists and killed 121 terrorists," Smith said during a news conference. Coalition and Iraqi forces have captured or killed 92 high-value targets and found and cleared 351 caches, 410 improvised explosive devices and three car bomb and suicide bomb factories, and uncovered four tunnel complexes.

Smith told reporters attacks using deadly explosively formed projectiles have fallen off following a surge in attacks using the Iranian-supplied weapons earlier this month. "The number of signature weapons that had come from Iran and had been used against coalition and Iraqi forces are down dramatically except for this short uptick in the EFPs in the early part of January," he said.

"It's uncertain, again, what is happening in Iran that's leading to that occurrence," Smith said. Coalition officials said they believe Iran continues to train Iraqi insurgents and fund Shia insurgent organizations.

But even with the problems caused by offshoots of the Shia Jaish al-Mahdi special groups, al Qaeda in Iraq remains the biggest threat, Smith said.

Al Qaeda infiltrated Iraq following the fall of Saddam Hussein. Its purpose was to purge the coalition, which it refers to as "the infidels" – from the country. "Al Qaeda senior leadership, who by that time had been driven into northwestern Pakistan, saw Iraq as its caliphate, its center of struggle and dominance for establishing its Taliban-like ideology in the heart of the Arab world," Smith said.

The group is foreign-led – its current leader is Egyptian – but uses dissatisfied Iraqis as fighters.

Al Qaeda in Iraq uses barbaric tactics to intimidate Shia, Sunni, Kurds and Christians. "They executed young and old, men and women," Smith said. "They beheaded fathers in front of their children. They extorted, kidnapped and murdered for little or no reason. To even the most casual observer, it appeared that all of Iraq was the enemy of al Qaeda. No Iraqi was spared from their wrath."

The main weapon in al Qaeda's arsenal is the suicide bomber. Suicide attacks launched against the Golden Mosque in Samarra in February 2006 came very close to pushing Iraq into a civil war. There have been a number of high-profile suicide bombings in recent months, even though the overall numbers of attacks are down. Smith said foreigners carry out 90 percent of the suicide attacks in Iraq.

At the beginning of 2007, al Qaeda seemed on its way to victory, Smith said. Vast stretches of Iraq were under the terrorists sway and in Ramadi, the provincial capital of Anbar province, al Qaeda even sponsored a parade down the main street. The group had freedom of movement and safe havens in many areas of the Western Euphrates River Valley and in many neighborhoods of Baghdad.

In 2007, al Qaeda in Iraq launched 4,500 attacks that targeted civilians, Smith said. "Al Qaeda murdered 3,870 Iraqis, injuring nearly 18,000 additional innocent civilians," he said. "The violence peaked in March and April and as the surge of operations pressed through the summer, the number of high profile explosions slowly began to decrease.

"However," he said, "the numbers still remain alarmingly high."

The keys to progress against al Qaeda were the surge in U.S. forces into the country and the increased capabilities of Iraqi forces, the admiral said. Iraqi security forces continue to grow, develop their capabilities and shoulder more of the burden of providing security. "In 2007, the Iraqi security forces grew by more than 106,000 personnel," Smith said. "The total force now stands at over 567,000."

The growth enabled the success of the "clear, hold, build" strategy in the country. Coalition and Iraqi forces cleared areas, then had the numbers to hold the areas and protect the people living there from al Qaeda re-infiltration.

By the end of 2007, some 140 battalions of Iraqi army, National Police and special operations units were in the fight with 122 of those battalions capable of taking the lead in operations. "All Iraqi battalions are heavily involved in combat operations and have been increasingly the first line of defense, with losses two to three times that of the coalition," Smith said.

Beyond the military fight against al Qaeda was the role the tribes, sheikhs and people played, he said. The so-called "Anbar Awakening" had a profound influence on taking large areas out of al Qaeda's dominion. The people were tired of al Qaeda's bloody tactics and began working with Iraqi and coalition security forces to improve security.

"Today, more than 130 different concerned local citizen groups are providing neighborhood security throughout Iraq, with over 80,000 active members – 80 percent of whom are Sunni (and) 20 percent Shia," Smith said. "Under the control of local Iraqi security or coalition forces, these brave Iraqis have turned the tide against al Qaeda and are no longer afraid to fight against their ideology and violence."

Progress depends on squeezing al Qaeda in Iraq from every direction and with every possible means, Smith said. "Progress made in security must be followed quickly by improved economic security, with employment being foremost," he said. "The government of Iraq is acutely aware of this challenge and has worked side by side with the provincial leadership to address many of their needs and concerns. All of this will need to be worked in order to continue squeezing al Qaeda out of their safe havens and operating bases and into the open where they can be killed or captured."

Overall, operations against al Qaeda in Iraq in 2007 resulted in the capture of 8,800 terrorists while an additional 2,400 were killed, Smith said. Of those captured or killed were 52 emirs, 32 improvised explosive device leaders, 24 cell leaders and 92 facilitators.

"As Operation Phantom Phoenix continues, we know that a tough fight is ahead, and we remain committed to pursuing al-Qaeda in order to ensure security and stability for all of Iraq," Smith said