

Coalition Completes Aerial Bomb Blitz of Al Qaeda Sanctuary

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Special to American Forces Press Service

BAGHDAD, Jan. 22, 2008 – Thousands of pounds of bombs rained down near the village of Arab Jabour on Jan. 20 as coalition forces continued their relentless pursuit of al Qaeda.

A military commander in the region said the drop was designed to eliminate al Qaeda's tactical advantage before coalition ground forces move in to clear the heavily agricultural community southeast of Baghdad.

Army Col. Terry Ferrell, commander of 3rd Infantry Division's 2nd Brigade Combat Team, with responsibility for the Arab Jabour portion of Multinational Division Center, said in an interview that the improvised explosive devices targeted by the bombing were part of a "defensive belt" al Qaeda had established around Arab Jabour to keep coalition forces from entering the area.

"The strikes that we concluded (Jan. 20) were focused on IEDs and caches that we have targeted, that will allow us to get our ground troops further into the zone," Ferrell said.

The roadside bombs and other explosives "pose great risk to our soldiers, catastrophic risk to our soldiers, and we've used the Air Force to help reduce those risks," Ferrell said.

Some 19,000 pounds of bombs hit 35 targets in an initial series of precision air strikes that lasted more than two hours. A combination of Air Force, Navy and Marine aircraft was used in the strikes, including F-18 Hornet fighter jets and B-1 Lancer bombers. By the time follow-on strikes were completed, 34,500 pounds had been dropped on 40 targets.

In total, coalition forces dropped 114,500 pounds of bombs around Arab Jabour over a 10-day period that also included strikes on Jan. 10 and Jan. 16. In all, 104 targets were struck.

"The operation that occurred on Jan. 10 was part of the shaping of the operation for (Jan. 20)," Ferrell said. "All along, we have been conducting operations underneath of the airstrikes that allow our soldiers to enter into the areas that we've not been before."

Despite the scale of the bombing, Ferrell said, great care was taken in selecting targets, as the Army worked side by side with the Air Force to prevent collateral damage to civilians and property.

"The process that we go through to orchestrate an event of this magnitude, or any targeting cycle that we work together with the Air Force, is a very detailed, deliberate process," Ferrell said. "We identify the targets, and they sit beside us, and through detailed and thorough analysis, we target it, they help analyze it, describe what effects we want to achieve, and then they work back through the Air Force system to get the desired effects."

This most recent operation was conducted to improve quality of life and restore stability to southern Arab Jabour, similar to what has been accomplished further north in the region, the colonel said.

“We can get in and establish the operations to allow these people to have the same success and the same privileges that we’ve been able to establish in the northern portions of our area -- in the cities of al Buyatha, Hawr Rajab, Adwaniyah, where the people can now walk freely on their streets, the kids can go to school, (and) the markets can come alive,” Ferrell said.

Areas like Hawr Rajab have improved dramatically relative to Arab Jabour, thanks in part to coalition-led capacity-building programs. Under the military’s local-engagement model, these programs are coordinated with tribal leaders and their kin, some of whom were former members of the insurgency. Community development initiatives and jobs programs work by giving Iraqis a stake in their communities’ welfare, U.S. commanders say.

“As time goes by, it will be less likely for them to turn against us. At the end, they want to secure their communities and feed their families,” Army Lt. Col. Mark Solomon, commander of the 3rd Infantry Division’s 6th Squadron, 8th Cavalry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, told The Associated Press.

The challenge now for military commanders in the region is to link together areas they have improved into a system that can withstand insurgent violence.

“It’s a march of clearing towns, making sure it’s secure, establishing local citizens groups, bringing in the Iraqi army, jump-starting the economy with micro-grants and trying to get local government up and running, Solomon explained in a separate interview with USA Today. “Only then do the soldiers look forward to the next town on the map.”

Despite a concerted shift to capacity-building by U.S. troops, “a relentless pursuit of the enemy” will continue, Ferrell said.

“Wherever al Qaeda wants to operate, we’re going to find him,” Ferrell said. “We’re going to capture him; we’re going to kill him, because we’re not going to allow him to believe that he has any ground that he can hold to call his own or where he can find sanctuary.”