

Operational Update: Rear Admiral. Smith, MNF-I, 17 February

Sunday, 17 February 2008

Good afternoon and Assalamu 'Alaikum.

I'd like to begin my discussion today by recognizing the significant parliamentary actions by the Government of Iraq and its Council of Representatives. As you know, the passage of the nation's 2008 budget, the Amnesty Act, and the Provincial Powers Act occurred this past Wednesday. We want to extend our congratulations to the people of Iraq and their democratically elected government on these landmark pieces of legislation.

The passage of the budget for this year provides a basis for distributing resources equitably across the country and for promoting sustainable economic progress.

The Provincial Powers Act addresses the balance of power between the national and local governments. This historic law, when implemented, will allow both groups to serve the people by strengthening the power of provincial authorities and delineating the responsibilities of the central government.

We also applaud the passage of the General Amnesty Act. The ultimate success of this legislation will be achieved through careful implementation of its provisions.

Also this week, the United Nations announced that it will offer its support, and help Iraq organize the provincial elections called for in the Provincial Powers Act to occur this October.

The improving security situation is helping to create an environment for progress.

This week, the government of Iraq marked the one year anniversary of Operation Fardh al-Qanoon – Operation Imposing the Law. The purpose of Operation Fardh al Qanoon has been to improve the security conditions under a principle of the rule of law ... to build a civil society that provides protection, services and hope for the future.

Fardh al-Qanoon has been a joint operation since its inception. As Coalition forces surged five reinforcing combat brigades into the Baghdad area, the Iraqi Security Force conducted a surge of their own. The Iraqis recruited and trained over 125,000 additional soldiers and police officers. They trained specialized units to face the unique challenges presented by terrorists operating in populated areas. Together we established local security stations to build confidence in neighborhoods ... confidence that would lead to greater cooperation from local citizens ... and greater success at uprooting extremism and deterring violence.

A year ago there were an average of 205 terrorist attacks each day across Iraq.

In June, these numbers peaked at an average of 210 attacks per day ... just as the last of the Coalitions reinforcing brigades were getting into place, and as the Iraqi security forces were beginning to surge. Last month we tracked 82 attacks a day ... a decrease of over 60%. And recently we have experienced some days where the total number of attacks across the country have dropped below 40 ... the lowest levels seen since 2004.

In Baghdad ... under Operation Fardh al-Qanoon ... this decrease has been even more dramatic. The city's residents were suffering an average of 28 terrorist attacks a day in February last year. Attacks peaked at 46 in June. Last month, there were 11 attacks per day ... down more than 60% over the year, and off 76% from peak levels.

Of course, each attack represents an attempt by terrorists to kill and spread instability. They are reminders that although the enemies of the people of Iraq are weakened, they can still recruit and conduct spectacular attacks. Iraqis are rejecting these terrorists and the Iraqi Security Forces are continuing to build its capabilities, but stability will take time and continued commitment.

With the help of Iraqi citizens and Iraqi Security forces, we are taking more weapons and munitions out of the hands of terrorists. Last month, Iraqi and Coalition forces seized 836 caches. This is the highest total since the start of Operation Fardh al-Qanoon, and it means the terrorists have less explosive material available to wreak havoc ... regrettably there are still too many weapons in the hands of enemies.

Coalition forces are making progress, but there is still much to do.

Last Tuesday, an Iraqi Police unit was on the job investigating a possible Improvised Explosive Device when they were ambushed by small arms fire from a group of al-Qaeda terrorists.

The Iraqi Police responded bravely and with lethal firepower. They swept the ambush site and killed seven of the al-Qaeda attackers. They also arrested sixteen others. One Iraqi Police officer lost his life in the exchange.

Operations like this are not just disrupting current terrorist operations ... many of them are leading to significant seizures of deadly arms and explosives. In just the past week, Iraqi and Coalition forces captured 212 weapons caches across IraqBaghdad with growing links to Iranian-backed Special Groups. ... two of those coming from here in

On Wednesday, Coalition Force soldiers from the Second Stryker Brigade Combat team operating northwest of Baghdad captured a significant stockpile of weapons.

- Nearly 200 mortar rounds
- 425 anti-aircraft rounds
- Over 8,000 rounds of .30 and .50 caliber ammunition
- 40 pounds of TNT
- 60 pounds of high explosives
- and other weapons and munitions

On Friday, Coalition forces made another substantial seizure of weapons and ammunition – this time due to a tip from a local citizen.

Acting on the information supplied from a resident of Baghdad, soldiers from the Second Brigade Combat Team discovered and secured:

- 120 mortar rounds
- 33 107mm rockets
- 500 rounds of anti-aircraft ammunition
- 50 rocket sleds and associated components
- 30 hand grenades
- and several other munitions, along with a dozen automatic weapons.

These deadly weapons were captured in the Adhamiyah neighborhood. They were ready to be used. They had the potential to kill and wound countless innocent men, women and children. Thanks to a tip from a concerned citizen they have been removed from the streets and destroyed.

We also saw earlier this week evidence of just how dangerous explosives can be in the hands of Special Group criminals. On the afternoon of February 14th, there was an explosion at an open-air market in Sadr City. The explosion killed two Iraqis and wounded 24 others.

Initial reporting by the Iraqi security forces that responded to the blast suggested that it may have been caused by a car bomb, or perhaps a suicide vest. Further investigation revealed the explosion was caused by the accidental detonation of explosives that were being sold out of a car at the Muraydi market. The munitions were being sold on the black market by two Special Group criminals.

If their sales had been successful, who knows how many might have died. In this case, it appears the only fatalities were the two criminals trying to sell the explosives. But 24 others were wounded.

While Coalition Forces continue to work with Iraqis to improve security, we cannot stop all of the violence. Sometimes all we can do is help repair the damage and care for the injured.

On February 10th, 20 Iraqi men, women and children were gravely wounded by a car bomb about five miles east of Balad and were airlifted to an Air Force Theater Hospital by Coalition Force soldiers.

The victims, including two children, were suffering from a number of serious injuries, including head wounds, shrapnel wounds and severe burns. Four of the most grievously wounded Iraqis did not make it through their first night in the hospital, but after more than 77 combined hours of surgery, 16 victims survived the ordeal. Third Iraqi Army Colonel Hamad Ali Jassim expressed his thanks, "Coalition forces are like angels – the doctors and the nurses ... save not only our people, but also our culture." Today, all but seven of the victims have been released ... and those seven Iraqis are expected to make full recoveries.

In another sign of cooperation between Iraqi and Coalition security forces, this Friday, Iraqis assumed security authority for the town of Hit.

Hit was once a violent city, torn by the fighting occurring across too much of Anbar province.

This week, Anbar Governor Mamoun Sami Rasheed presided over a ceremony of speeches, songs, poetry and marching as Hit became the second city in Anbar to transfer to Iraqi security control since December.

Throughout Anbar, security has improved as the local citizens have decided to reject al-Qaeda. A province that was once considered lost by some observers has instead become a model for Iraqi cooperation.

I started today's discussion with you by noting political gains that were made possible by security progress ... I'd like to close my remarks by touching on a few signs of economic progress.

The first is the successful staging of the Baghdad Business 2 Business Expo and Conference, held here in the capital city at the al-Rasheed Hotel. The event was hosted by the Baghdad Chamber of Commerce and supported by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

Over the past three days exhibitors from Iraq's banks, hotels, trade unions, business associations, and State Owned Enterprises showed what they had to offer in over 260 booths, and more than 8,000 interested executives, entrepreneurs, salespeople, investors and trades people attended.

The event was organized by Iraqis for Iraqis, and was designed to promote commerce and cooperation across the country. It made for quite a scene ... one which we hope will be repeated many times across Iraq in the months ahead.

The growth in business that we all hope to see depends on the restoration and expansion of essential services across Iraq. This is an ongoing and vitally important process. In the past infrastructure had been neglected ... and essential services were not fairly distributed across Iraq ... yet some areas are fighting back and making progress one day at a time.

After dedicated effort by the local citizens, their government, and Coalition partners, there is a renaissance underway in Arab Jabour. The expanded availability of electricity, coupled with the installation and maintenance of a network of operational street lights, has allowed a restoration ... even a considerable improvement ... in business and commerce in the area. Shops are open later, families walk the streets, and sales have increased for merchants. This is a prime example of security leading to opportunity.

This is a country blessed with many gifts ... both in natural resources and incredible human capital ... the economic development spurred on by improved security is beginning to open doors to a brighter future and the Coalition is proud to be a partner.