

# Petraeus describes factors affecting Iraq assessment

by Jim Garamone

Armed Forces Press Service

BAGHDAD, Iraq (March 2, 2008) – The top military commander in Iraq gave some insight Sunday into what he will consider as he prepares to report to the president and Congress in April on the way ahead. Army Gen. David H. Petraeus, commander of Multinational Force Iraq, spoke with reporters accompanying Navy Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who is visiting the country.

The security trend lines all are favorable, the general said. "Attacks have continued to go down. We've had a five-month period consistently of a level of attacks we've not seen since spring of 2005," he said. "This past week was the fourth-lowest since October 2004."

Petraeus and U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Ryan C. Crocker will explain why they believe attacks have come down when they report to President Bush and Congress.

The general said he is encouraged by the statistics and what he sees around the country. "In fact, the level of attacks has come down in recent weeks below a level we thought might be the 'irreducible minimum,'" he said.

Petraeus said he also will consider the progress Iraqi security forces have made. "The Iraqi surge of 2007 was well over 100,000," he said citing the growth of the nation's army and police force. "Added to that is the 90,000 Sons of Iraq – the concerned local citizens – who have added considerably. (These forces are) substantially 'thickening' our forces."

The general said he also will consider Iraqi civilian deaths in formulating his recommendations. "If your focus is on securing the people, then it is a metric you have to pay attention to, and we do," he said.

Crocker will lay out the developments in the political arena and describe the laws that have passed over the past couple of months. The ambassador will talk about the potential for provincial elections in the fall and describe the economic situation, Petraeus said.

The general said he will lay out his recommendations "for the process by which we'll go about assessing conditions in the wake of the drawdown of the surge brigade combat teams." The drawdown of the original surge forces is set to end in July. He said he will explain the factors he will consider in making recommendations on subsequent withdrawals.

The way ahead in Iraq will not be easy, the general said. "Each day something bad happens," he said. "(But) the relative degree of the bad news tends to be less."

The number of car bomb attacks has dropped, but there is a slight increase in suicide-vest attacks. Al Qaeda is having a tough time building car bombs and then getting them through checkpoints, Petraeus explained, but suicide vests are transportable and are now being handed to women.

The command has already drawn down a brigade combat team and a Marine expeditionary unit. Another brigade combat team will leave the country this month. Petraeus said the command will "thin out" coalition forces as this occurs, and "not just hand off an area completely to Iraqi forces."

"We will maintain a sufficient footprint with an adequate, generally substantial, Iraqi force of police and soldiers," the general explained. "It provides situational awareness and a link to the enablers that we can provide – indirect fire, close-air (support), medevac, quick-reaction forces and so on." The idea also maintains a fusion cell for intelligence.

"Obviously, as we draw down, (the Iraqis) have to pick up more of the responsibility, and that is the case," Petraeus said.

Al Qaeda remains the biggest threat, and over time coalition and Iraqi forces have killed, captured or run off substantial numbers of the terror group. But there is still a lot of work to do in the Diyala and Tigris river valleys, and in Iraq's second-largest city of Mosul and surrounding Ninevah province.

"We are going after al Qaeda relentlessly wherever they are, and wherever we can find them, we put our teeth into their jugular," Petraeus said.

Mosul is an important place to al Qaeda. "Analysts have said that while Baghdad is critical for al Qaeda to win in Iraq, Mosul and its area is critical for their survival," the general said. Recent successes notwithstanding, Petraeus warned, a "final battle" with the terrorist group is not imminent.

"Al Qaeda is incredibly resilient," he said, "and they are receiving people and supplies through Syria – although numbers through Syria are down as much as 50 percent."

Coalition and Iraqi forces will take on al Qaeda in the north, but will do so on their timetable and according to their plans, the general said. He will not start shifting U.S. and Iraqi forces willy-nilly around the country.

"The key is to hang on to what you've got," he said. "You cannot, in your eagerness to go after something new, start to play 'Whack-a-mole' again. You have to hang onto the areas you've cleared; you have to have that plan to do before you go." Coalition forces are moving to Mosul and Ninevah, but Petraeus said he will not risk losing gains made in Baghdad, the belts around Baghdad and in Anbar province to do so.

"Al Qaeda is trying to come back in," he said. "We can feel it and see it, and what we're trying to do is rip out any roots before they can get deeply into the ground."

The bottom line militarily in Iraq is a "feel" for the country and the determination of what constitutes an acceptable risk, the general told reporters. "At the end of the day, it's about feel," he said. "We have commanders in most cases on their second tours in Iraq, some on their third. Over time, you can start to feel where you can take a bit more risk and also where you cannot.

"You have to walk the streets, talk to the leaders, talk to your own commanders and then you bat it around every day," he said.

Petraeus said he doesn't feel any anxiety over his decisions.

"If you want to talk about anxiety, talk about coming back to Iraq in February 2007 and being greeted by 42 car bombs," he said. "The level of attacks was more than 150 a day, and our losses were exceedingly tough."

With so much chaos in the country, it was hard just trying to get a handle on where forces needed to go, the general recalled.

"We've worked our way through that," Petraeus said. "These additional concerns are very serious, but we're working on those with the Iraqi government."