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Coalition, Iraqi Forces Neutralize Insurgents in Babil Province

By Seaman William Selby, USN
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WASHINGTON, March 7, 2008 – Coalition forces have disrupted extremist activity in the northern part of Iraq's Babil province, a senior military official said yesterday.

Extremists can no longer find sanctuary in the Iraqi population due to the stability of the Iraqi security forces and intelligence received from local citizens, Army Col. Tom James, commander of the 3rd Infantry Division's 4th Brigade Combat Team, said during a teleconference with online journalists and "bloggers."

The 4th Brigade Combat Team is part of Task Force Vanguard, which is securing an area of more than 40,000 square kilometers south of Baghdad and working to prevent enemy "accelerants" from moving into the Iraqi capital, James said. The 3,000-plus-member coalition task force also is building the capacity of Iraqi security forces, government institutions and economic programs, he said.

The current security situation is stable, he said, due to the disruption of Sunni extremists. He also noted that the Shiite threat has been defused in the southern part of the area of operation. "The decisive point is the town of Iskandariyah because of the Shia-Sunni balance, the location and its large industrial complex," he said.

James attributed the current security situation to the coalition forces' counterinsurgency strategy adjustment and surge deployment, the Iraqi security forces' improved capability and the "Sons of Iraq" program, in which concerned local citizens man checkpoints and otherwise contribute to the security effort.

"The five-brigade surge gave coalition forces the resources required to concentrate combat power in extremist-dominated areas, and allowed us to occupy key terrain in these areas to avoid enemy reoccupation," James said. Because of the surge, he said, coalition forces now occupy 15 distributed locations including patrol bases, security stations, forward-operating bases, military transition teams and police transition teams.

"These forward locations and transition teams facilitate partnership with the Iraqi army and police and provide greater maneuver flexibility, and allow us to receive and process more human intelligence from the population," he said.

“The Iraqi security forces have improved significantly,” James said. “Most of these organizations are capable of processing intelligence and executing precise independent operations.”

For instance, with limited help from the coalition, Iraqi security forces safeguarded some 9 million pilgrims as they converged in Karbala, Iraq, for a Shiite Muslim religious observance, James said. He attributed careful planning and massive security operations to the overall success of the event.

“(The Iraqis) deployed 39,000 soldiers and police to man checkpoints, secure routes and collect intelligence,” he said.

James added that having coalition troops living among the Iraqi people seems to have had a positive effect on the citizens and their security forces. “We have found that when the people know that the coalition and Iraqi forces are living with them, they feel more comfortable providing information on extremist activity,” he said. “The Iraqi population is tired of their families being terrorized by extremists and have stepped up to secure their neighborhoods.”

James also said the coalition is using the Sons of Iraq in “static security positions” to thicken security lines in certain areas where coalition and Iraqi security forces are thin.

“We currently have just fewer than 10,500 Sons of Iraq employed in our area that man 552 security checkpoints,” he said.

James said he is optimistic about Iraq’s future due to the success and progress of their security forces. “I see (Iraqi security forces) improving every day,” he said.

(Navy Seaman William Selby works for the New Media branch of American Forces Information Service.)