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Mullen Cites Brittle Nature of Iraq Security Progress

By Jim Garamone
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WASHINGTON, March 13, 2008 – Security in Iraq has dramatically improved, but it remains brittle, and it will take time to lead to political and economic progress, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said yesterday.

During an interview on the “Charlie Rose Show” broadcast, Navy Adm. Mike Mullen drew on recent visits to Iraq to explain the security situation. The chairman made the trips to assess conditions on the ground and to talk to Iraqis and Americans making the difference in the country.

“I saw a dramatic improvement in security ... literally from December to a couple weeks ago,” the admiral said.

Mullen walked through the Baghdad neighborhood of Dora, a place he could not have toured in a tank a year ago. “Shops were open, and I engaged a lot of local shop owners, a lot of Iraqis,” he said. “And they talked about their needs. And it’s very clear that the security is enabling other discussions.”

The security improvement is because of the American surge into Baghdad and the increased capacity of the Iraqi security forces, Mullen said. And average Iraqis -- sick of the violence -- have “taken back their villages, their towns, and are providing security,” he added.

Mullen also walked through the city of Hawija, in Multinational Division North’s area. “Our toughest fight right now is up north,” Mullen told Rose. “And in Hawija, it was much more dangerous, much more recently, than even in Dora.”

But he saw the same thing there, Mullen said. “Shops were open; people were asking for services,” he said. “They need water. They need sewage. They need electricity.”

The chairman said he was struck by how quickly and how much security had improved. “I consider the surge a tremendous success in that regard,” he said. “But it’s not enough. That security has got to be sustained.”

Mullen noted that the improved security has spawned “side effects.” He visited training sites where Iraqi forces are working hard to develop capabilities “in more depth and breadth than they could be if the level of violence was where it was a few months ago,” he said. And the Iraqi people are asking their provincial and national governments to provide services and jobs that will help maintain the security progress.

“They need these services,” Mullen said. “That’s not taking place rapidly enough.”

Still, political progress has been made at both the provincial and national levels, the chairman said. “They’ve passed some laws, (and) they passed a budget,” he explained. “They’ll continue to struggle. This is an ancient government. But being on the streets with local citizens, they are in need of support from their provincial governments, as well as their central government. And they’re asking for those services.”

Mullen said he’s encouraged that security is good enough for Iraqis to be concerned about services and political progress. “But it’s fragile, and it’s going to take us a while,” he said.