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U.S. Applauds Maliki's Strategic Intent in Basra

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WASHINGTON, April 2, 2008 – U.S. leaders applaud Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's strategic attempt to curb criminal and thugs in Basra, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said today.

Navy Adm. Mike Mullen said American officials were informed of the Iraqi security forces operation in Basra, a southern oil port and the second-largest city in Iraq.

Mullen said the operation was entirely Iraqi planned with minor coalition support. "We all watched that operation very closely," he said. "We were informed about it, but in fact it was Iraqi-led. The strategic intent was Iraqi-originated."

Maliki asked for some coalition support as the security forces took on the growing criminal threat, Army Maj. Gen. Kevin Bergner, a Multinational Force Iraq spokesman said in a Baghdad news conference today. "We agreed to support their efforts, although no specific planning or requests had been initiated, and the prime minister implemented the decision on the exact timing and the scope of operations as an Iraqi decision."

Mullen applauded the prime minister's strategic intent in Basra. "We've been looking forward to when the Iraqi security forces would take the lead and be aggressive in providing for their own security," he said. "From that standpoint, that strategic intent was very positive."

Mullen said the operation "could have been planned better than it was," but the fact that Iraqi leaders and Iraqi troops launched the security operation is a positive step in its own right.

Some Iraqi security forces in Basra performed well, and others were challenged, Mullen said. "That's always the case," he added.

During his briefing, Bergner highlighted the efforts of Iraqi special operations forces. The Iraqi special force detained 20 suspected criminals, seized heavy machine guns, and discovered more than \$250,000.

“The vast majority of the Iraqi security forces performed their mission, (but) there were those who were unable to do so,” Bergner said. “That’s being addressed by the government of Iraq and their Iraqi security force leaders and the minister of defense and the minister of interior.”

The chairman said Iranian involvement in southern Iraq has not been very helpful. “We’re still finding (roadside bombs); we’re still finding weapons caches; we’re finding rockets and mortars provided by Iranians,” he said. “We’ve captured or killed Iraqis who have recently been trained in Iran. The overall thrust with respect to Iran’s support is still very negative.”

Bergner said Iranian-backed criminals are behind efforts to create “fear, division and distrust.” Attacks included indirect fire into neighbors throughout the Iraqi capital and the Green Zone, which houses U.S. and Iraqi government buildings in central Baghdad.

“These are deplorable attacks that have caused physical and psychological damage to innocent Iraqi civilians,” he said.

Iran has vowed to play a “constructive role” in helping improve Iraq’s security situation, Bergner said. “We look forward to them fulfilling their pledge to halt the flow of weapons, of training, of funding and of other resources that the criminal groups are dependent on here,” he said.

Specific evidence of Iranian influence emerged last year, when coalition forces discovered the relationship between Iran and “Special Groups” operating in Iraq. These criminal groups generally comprise Shiite militia members trained, funded and armed by Iranian Quds Force operatives, Bergner said.

Military officials further confirmed Iran’s role through information gleaned from detained suspects who have admitted to receiving recent Quds Force training in Iran, Bergner said. He added that officials hope Iran’s pledge to the Iraqi government reduces the kind of violence that occurred over the past week.

Meanwhile, the fight against al Qaeda in Iraq in the northern part of the country continues unabated. “We’re still very focused on the battle in Mosul, and it continues to progress well,” Mullen said. “It’s very violent, very tough, very dangerous, but we’re making progress.”

The chairman said the fighting against al Qaeda and other extremist elements will continue for several more weeks in and around Mosul.