



As Iraqi Progress Update Closes, Dialogue Remains Open

By John J. Kruzel
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, April 10, 2008 – The top U.S. military commander in Iraq presented Congress a comprehensive Iraq progress update in a grueling two days that comprised nearly 20 hours of testimony. "To be candid, we're trying to get through this week," said U.S. Army Gen. David H. Petraeus.

But keeping Washington officials informed and discussing critical issues with Iraqi leaders on a daily basis is standard for Petraeus, who answered wide-ranging questions from reporters today here at the news conference at the Freedom Forum's Newseum.

Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker, the top U.S. diplomat in Iraq, described the flux of information from Baghdad, providing a glimpse of the inner workings of communication lines connecting the Iraqi capital to U.S. officials around the world.

The general stressed that U.S. leaders in Iraq hold biweekly, weekly and daily talks with counterparts in Washington and the Middle East on the way forward in Iraq. He also suggested a common misconception: that comprehensive discussion about Iraqi progress happens only when he and Crocker appear at congressional hearings.

"First of all, there is direct, constant communication by phone and by e-mail with [the U.S. Central Command commander], and as you may know, there are video teleconferences with Central Command, the NSC, which of course includes the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the secretary of defense, the next folks up the rung, the president and again the other members of the NSC," he said, referring to the National Security Council.

In the almost-weekly video conferences with Petraeus and Crocker, "everyone chimes in," the general said. "Everyone gets to contribute during that process as they go around the horn," he added. Every two weeks, Petraeus holds a video conference with Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates and various deputies, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Navy Adm. Mike Mullen and his vice chairman, Marine Corps Gen. James E. Cartwright, and senior officials from Central Command and the Pentagon. "There's a quite a bit of that back-and-forth," he said.

In addition, top Defense Department and military officials have the prerogative to schedule a teleconference or to visit Multinational Force Iraq in Baghdad, which they do regularly, Petraeus said.

When “bigger issues” appear on the agenda, Petraeus participates in the weekly videoconference between Multinational Corps Iraq headquarters and individual service branches. Issues in his purview include requests for additional forces and emerging needs and changes, he said.

Furthermore, officials in Iraq provide daily battle assessments and weekly situational reports up the chain of command, the general said. “So I think there’s a pretty good amount of situational awareness,” he added.

“The kind of dialogue that I think is obviously helpful, are in terms of understanding the mission, the desired end-state, the tasks and commanders, and ensuring that their bosses know what they believe the resources required are [and] the levels of risk,” he said. “And we’ve actually had a great deal of that over the past year.”

On communication with Washington regarding diplomatic efforts in Iraq, Crocker said he receives a number of visits from high-ranking officials.

“In terms of senior visits, we have a number of them,” he said, adding that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s numerous trips with Deputy Secretary John Negroponte were followed in March by the arrival of Vice President Richard B. Cheney.

In addition to face-to-face discussions with officials from the State Department, Crocker has met with most Cabinet secretaries in Iraq over the past year, he said. “I think we’re going to see an ongoing series of high-level engagements,” he added.