



Security Growing in Northern Iraq As Iraqi Forces Come of Age

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Washington (State Department) -- In 2006, the number of coalition forces active in northern Iraq has been cut in half, demonstrating the success of Iraqi security forces in restoring security and government services to the region, says the commander of the coalition's Multi-National Division - North.

Appearing via videoconference from Tikrit, Iraq, Army Major General Thomas Turner II of the 101st Airborne Division told journalists at a September 8 Pentagon press briefing that coalition forces deployed to the country's six northern provinces are succeeding in their mission to help Iraqis "work to bring security, deliver essential services and prosperity to the people."

Multi-National Division - North is responsible for supporting security operations in an area of more than 121,730 square kilometers, and includes territory in the provinces of Diyala, Salah-ad-din, At-Ta'mim (Kirkuk), Nineveh, Sulimaniyah and Dohuk. Straddling Iraq's borders with Iran, Syria, and Turkey, the area is also home to approximately 40 percent of the country's oil and 70 percent of its natural gas reserves. The successful development of those resources will be essential to the country's future.

Nearly a year ago when Turner took the helm of the coalition's regional command, U.S.-led forces operated out of 35 forward operating bases in the area. Only one battalion of the Iraqi army operating in the area at the time was fully equipped to lead independent operations, and Iraqi police units were known to abandon their posts if confronted by insurgents, he said.

Turner's troops began an intensive training campaign, partnering with Iraqi units to teach them new counterinsurgency tactics and techniques as well as providing embedded military advisers from the coalition's military transition teams to help Iraqi officers plan operations and, if needed, arrange for additional support from coalition forces. Coalition forces also provided training and support to area police and border patrol units, helping them to become more effective in their missions.

"This partnership and training has raised the Iraqi army's proficiency and advanced their capabilities from being able to participate in combined missions to leading both combined and increasingly independent operations," Turner said.

Two Iraqi army divisions, as well as 35 battalions and eight brigades now conduct their own security operations with coalition support, Turner said. These units are responsible for maintaining security for much of Turner's operations area, including At-Ta'mim (Kirkuk) and Salah-ad-din provinces.

The other two divisions operating in northern Iraq are expected to assume their own areas of responsibility by the end of 2006, he said.

Turner added that Iraqi national police operating in the northern provinces are improving, as are the border guards, who are working with Iraqi army units to tighten security from 132 newly built forts guarding key entry points into the country.

The growing effectiveness of Iraqi soldiers and policemen is allowing them to gain the trust of area residents, Turner said, which has led to an increase in information about area militant activities. As a result, Iraqi forces have been able to detain 500 suspected insurgents and seize more than 400 weapons caches in recent months.

Currently, six of the Iraqi army's 10 divisions have been assigned lead responsibility for maintaining security in various parts of the country.

These efforts are part of the coalition's nationwide strategy to help rebuild the Iraqi security forces, whose progress was highlighted by the September 7 ceremony initiating a transfer of full operational control for Iraq's security forces to its prime minister.

As his forces prepare to complete their tour of duty, Turner reported that they are transferring only 11 bases to their coalition replacements from the Army's 25th Infantry Division. Thanks to improved security, the rest of the facilities have been either closed, handed over to the Iraqi army for use as barracks, or given to Iraqi authorities who he said plan to convert them into business centers, vocational training schools and parks.

Turner cautioned that since insurgents and terrorists are committed to derailing the new Iraq, "They will continue to attack innocent Iraqi

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civilians and Iraqi police, and attack Iraqi army forces in attempts to undermine the legitimacy of this new government."

The general concluded by praising the dedication and commitment of the Iraqi people to building a democratic future, particularly members of the security forces, who serve and protect at great risk to themselves and their families.

"The majority of Iraqis are tired of the bloodshed," he said, adding that given the growing self-sufficiency of Iraqi forces and the coalition to support them, "this enemy presents no challenge that cannot be overcome."

By David McKeeby

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