

Transcript from the conference call with Adm. Fox

**OPENING REMARKS FOR  
RDML MARK FOX TELECONFERENCE WITH BLOGGERS  
February 1, 2007**

**I'm Rear Admiral Mark Fox, Communications Director for Multi-National Force, Iraq. I've flown both combat and contingency missions over Iraq in Operations Desert Storm, Southern Watch, and Iraqi Freedom. It gives me great pleasure to be working *in partnership* with the liberated people of Iraq as they work to build a stable, secure, and self-governing country.**

**These are obviously challenging times for our mission in Iraq. Iraq continues to be plagued by unacceptably high levels of violence. This sectarian violence is now the gravest threat to our strategic objectives in Iraq, and to be honest, Iraq is a more complex strategic problem entering 2007 than it was this time last year.**

**However, in the three months I've been in country, I've seen reasons to believe that Iraq is "winnable." First, I draw hope from the fact that we are joined, *not opposed*, by the overwhelming majority of the Iraqi people in this struggle. In polling conducted in November, 89% of Iraqis nationwide agreed with the statement: "My first loyalty is to my country rather than my sect, ethnic group, or tribe."**

**I'm optimistic that in December, 1,115 Iraqi men signed up to join the Police Forces there. To put this in context, eight months ago we had zero recruits from Ramadi. In one month, over 600 tribesmen in Ramadi alone qualified for enlistment.**

**In December we restored responsibility for security in Najaf Province to Provincial Iraqi Control. Last week, Iraqi forces in Najaf detected and assessed a significant security threat, realized they were outnumbered and facing an entrenched enemy, and did exactly what American forces are trained to do in that tactical situation: call for airpower. In the end, we killed 262 Anti-Iraqi Forces, and captured 411. We also recovered 11 mortar systems and enough heavy machine guns to show this was not a group of pilgrims.**

**I've attended a city council meeting in Fallujah. It was raucous, it was disorganized, and there were some significant points of contention. But it demonstrated even if the Iraqis are not at the levels of Jeffersonian democracy yet, they are eager to find solutions to their problems.**

**I've also seen positive signs regarding the Iraqi economy. Each time I travel outside the International Zone, I'm amazed that virtually every house in Baghdad has a satellite dish on the roof. I've passed over farmland in Iraq that reminds me the farmland of central California. While everybody focuses on the violence in**

**Baghdad, rural Iraq has experienced a post-Saddam boom that is employing and putting cash in the pockets of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi families.**

**While I believe there is room for optimism, it is also important to be realistic in our expectations about the progress we will see in the short-term. First, it will take some time for the effects of the additional troops being deployed to take hold. Second, although General Petraeus brings unparalleled experience and wisdom to this fight, Iraq's problems are systemic, and will not be turned around immediately in February and March.**

**However, I believe that we are starting to see results from some of the programs put into place over the past two years. I also believe that the Maliki Government will not only "talk the talk", but will "walk the walk" as well.**

**Finally, I know you guys dig into many of these issues deeper than most of the journalists I regularly deal with here. I admire your passion about these issues, and I appreciate how bloggers allow MNF-I to get our message through the media filter directly to the American people.**

**So I hope this can be a two-way exchange, as I'm interested in hearing your opinion on some of these challenges. With that, I will open it up to your questions and I'm ready to engage on this.**

Scott Johnson: Admiral Fox this is Scott Johnson, sir, thank you for your service. I wondered. . .

Adm. Fox: I'm proud to serve.

Scott Johnson: Thank you sir, I wondered if I could ask you, are your comments available in linkable form?

Adm. Fox: Yes. We do do that. I've got, I've got people who work for me that can do that. I'm a, I'm a J walker on the information highway myself, but I've got people that can help you with that.

SJ: But whoever e-mailed the set-up, I wonder if you could just e-mail your comments, so I could get out what you have to say unfiltered. Adm. Fox, my question has to do with the role of Iran and its proxy in Iraq in fomenting the violence that American forces are contending with. Can you give me any sense of your best take on the magnitude of the Iranian contribution to the level of violence in Baghdad?

A.F: I think that we see wide recognition from the President and from General Abizaid all the way down through General Casey and to the troops that there's and acknowledgment of unhelpful Iranian activities inside of Iraq. We, Multi-National Force Iraq are focused on the things that are within the boarder. We are interested and committed to ensuring the sovereign government of Iraq maintains its sovereignty. And part of being sovereign government is being able to control your own boarders and enforce the rule of law and ensure the activities that go on inside; in particular people

who carry arms and that sort of thing, are eh, the only people that carry arms would be the people that are with the Iraq security force. So we do, some of these activities that we see from Iran is unhelpful. It's interesting to see if we looked at some of the friends of some of the tipplers and some of the indications that we've seen, we are assessing the situation fairly constantly. And you've probably seen in some of the recent news some of the discussions of Iranian activity. Anytime in December and in January they were Iranian nationals that were detained. So, basically what I can tell you is we are aware of the issue. We are not, in any stretch, looking to expand or increase the level of confrontation. But we are definitely focused on supporting the Iraqi government and ensuring that they maintain their sovereignty.

I would have I guess one other comment. Dr. Ali Aldabar, he's the government of Iraq's spokesman had a press conference, this afternoon as a matter of fact, and he had an interesting quote that I'll give you here. Any Iranian attack against an American is an attack against an Iraqi. So, we are very closely aligned with the government of Iraq on this in terms of their sovereignty and support for their rule of law.

Mark Finkelstein: Adm. Fox this is Mark Finkelstein from Newsbusters and I want to join with my blogging colleague in thanking you for your service. I know that, among other things, you scored the first kill of a Navy Mig during Desert Storm and that you've also been honored with the silver star. So it's a pleasure to speak with you.

A.F.: I was just in the right place at the right time and I'm proof that good training pays dividends.

MF: Well, you're being modest and the other guy was definitely in the wrong place to be.

A.F.: He probably shouldn't have suited up that day. You're right.

M.F.: In any case, at Newsbusters we focus on exposing what we consider to be bias in the media, and specifically focusing on the success of the Najaf operation. I imagine that you have seen the way the New York Times covered it. Their headline was Missteps by Iraqi forces in battle raise questions. In the very first paragraph was: Iraqi forces were surprised and nearly overwhelmed by the ferocity of an obscure renegade militia in a weekend battle near the holy city of Najaf. I wonder if I could ask you to comment on that and in particular you consider that to be fair and accurate coverage.

A.F.: I guess the way I would put it is the good news is the truth ultimately comes out. And I think that I would applaud the efforts of people like you who ensure that the truth ultimately does get through to what some people call the mainstream media filter. In our view, and in my view, personally and our collective view of the multinational force is that the incident in Najaf actually demonstrated very clearly the growing capability in the Iraqi security forces. It went the way that you would want it to, in that it was a relatively small group, I think it was actually Iraqi police, who had received a report from an armed group that were gathering north of Najaf and they relayed that information back to the 8<sup>th</sup> Iraqi army who deployed a scout platoon who performed the reconnaissance. Now remember, we're in the season of what's called Assura right now. So there are. . . Najaf

is about 100 miles south of Baghdad, and north of Najaf is a town called Karbala, which is the site where these pilgrims, there are tens if not hundreds of thousands of these pilgrims that move up there. So there are a large number of people that are moving around in this area. So the scouts, back to the story, the scouts on the 28<sup>th</sup> of Jan, from the Iraqi army came under fire from a substantially larger group of these anti-Iraqi forces. And after the fact, apparently these forces that they were dealing with some sort of a cult, the Soldiers of Heaven, who apparently desire to bring in the apocalyptic end of the world by assassinating Shia clerics in Najaf. And Najaf is kind of the, I guess you could call it the Vatican. It's where Sistani, the senior most cleric stays. So while these scouts did, they radioed back and in fact it was clear that there was a situation that was beyond their control. The provisional governor called and requested assistance from the coalition force. And that included a joint patrol and we sent some aircraft over there to do some close air support. As that morning developed, it was a small Iraqi unit that first came into contact with these millennium cultists and then they got into a situation where they needed additional help and as I said in my statement they did exactly what American troops in the exact same situation would do. They called on some air support. We had AC 130's that were overhead. We had some; I think they were some fixed wing airplanes that were doing close air support, and ultimately this thing played out exactly the way that we wanted it to. So rather than characterizing it as they were almost overrun, they did exactly what they were trained to do. I think this is a success story for the Iraqi security force and for the provincial Iraqi control process. You know, Najaf only went to what we call PIC, the Provincial Iraqi Control; the only made that transfer of the sovereignty to the province in December. So this was relatively early on in the process after having gone through the transition to Iraqi control. So in our view, it's a good story. Thank you.

Bill Roggio: Adm. Fox, this is Bill Roggio. Just as a statement I want to say having traveled in Anbar province for the last several months, I agree with your assessment that the situation is on the up-rise there. But turning back to the situation in Najaf, the media reports seem starting to say the United States was pulled into the middle of a sort of an internecine fighting between differing Shia organizations. What's the coalition's position on that?

A.F.: Our focus is supporting the unity government and the appropriately elected provincial government in Iraq. And so we didn't view this necessarily in anything other than supporting the legitimate government of Iraq, both at the national level and the provincial level. So, we didn't view it as being, you know this place, you have to appreciate for a second, as you mentioned you've been to Iraq. This is not; we're not in Kansas anymore. It's a very complex and very diverse and difficult situation in particular when you consider the mix of ethnic, of sectarian, of religious, of tribes; it's a really complex environment. And so, the thing I think is important to remember is that this government, less than a year old, they haven't even gone through a full budget cycle yet, are dealing with things a government fully formed and in existence for a long time could have a challenge dealing with. So we don't feel that we're being viewed at all as being drawn into some sort of local conflict. We are here to ensure that the government that was elected by the Iraqi people continues to thrive and grow. It took our nation I think a

lot longer than a year to get everything sorted out. This is going to be one of those situations where you need . . . American virtues are many, but patience is not one of them. And so we tend to be impatient people, and I guess the thing I would go back to in terms of viewing this long war on terror, as we described, would be to kind of view it like the Cold War. Professionally I grew up in the Cold War, I was commissioned in 1978 and for the first 13 years or so of my career was the Cold War. And then one day we woke up and it was pretty much over. And none of us really saw it coming. And that's kind of the way I view, in a large sense, the global war on terror. You won't obviously have . . . there won't be a surrender ceremony on a battleship deck. There won't be a negotiated settlement. The people that we're dealing with in the Global War on Terror are eager to kill and maim and they won't negotiate. So we're going to have to be patient and long suffering, but very determined in that one of these days we receive the same posture that the United States had in the Cold War against this threat that we are dealing with now. That's the way that we will endure and will prevail.

Paul Crespo: Adm., this is Paul Crespo in Miami. How are you?

A.F.: I'm well thanks.

P.C.: I have a couple of questions. One is I wanted to know if there is any more . . . it seems the President has been a little more detailed in accusing Iran of actually targeting American forces and being a protagonist in Iraq. Is there going to be anyway or anything coming out of your shop, your offices down there to document Iranian involvement? There are already people coming out in the media saying that it's overblown. That Bush is exaggerating to try and divert attention from what's really happening. And is there going to be a concerted effort any place where you can go to and say this is the kind of stuff we are documenting from this Iranian influence in Iraq.

A.F.: You know, there's always a gap between what you know and what you can show.

P.C.: I understand that.

A.F.: We're in a continuous process gathering evidence and information and intelligence on this. And the right people who need to know; know. And this is obviously its work in progress and I think I'll probably leave it at that.

P.C.: Ok.

Cindy Morgan: Adm. Fox this is Cindy Morgan with the Soldier's Perspective.

AF: Hi Cindy.

CM: Thank you for your service. I was a civilian contractor over there for 2 years. My son is soldiering; I'm a recent enlistee into the Army myself.

AF: Good on you.

CM: Thank you. One of the things that I know; I've heard from my son, from other soldiers I've talked to is about . . . deals with the rules of engagement. And I was just curious if that is going to change where as you know, if our soldiers are on the ground, they see somebody setting an IED up are they going to be able to take that person out without having been shot at first.

AF: Well you know what Cindy; they do that right now, as a matter of fact. That's called a hostile act and that's part of our rules of engagement as we speak. Specifics will change based on the environment. The urban environment is different for the rural environment. But I'll tell you that the commanders on the ground; nobody is more interested in ensuring that the American troops have the ability to accomplish their mission than the guys (garbled) So I would say that the rules of engagement are built so that you apply the right amount of force at the right place at the right time. And as you well know, any kind of combat situation has inherent what we call the fog of war. There's something that you don't know and that's why we write the rules of engagement to give a good clear understanding to our troop of how to apply force. You know, when I was air wing commander, I had about 110 aviators in my air wing, of which only probably about 50 of them actually had an ability to release ordinance against the enemy; so out of the entire aircraft carrier, there about 50 or 60 people that were actually release ordinance against the enemy.

Contrast an Army organization that has, let say 3200 people and they're all boots on the ground soldiers and they all are carrying weapons. Then that's 3200 troops that could potentially release ordinance against the enemy. And anytime you make a mistake, it's a strategic issue. So the rules of engagement for the Army and the Marines on the ground battle is a challenge just because you have a much greater number of people that are actually carrying weapons and having contact with the enemy. That's been my previous life so it's an issue that we look at very carefully and when the conditions warrant it we do modify the rules of engagement. But, the issue that you just described of; if we see somebody deploying an IED or putting it on the side of the road we already do that; we have an ability, if not an obligation to deal with that with force.

PC: Adm. Can I follow up? This is Paul Crespo again. I just wanted to follow up on the second question I had initially. It's about the al-Sadr militia or militias depending on how you see it. The reports that they've said, or some of them are saying, that they're laying down their arms. They're not going to confront US troops in anticipation of this increase in troops in Baghdad. Did you have anything more to say about that and also, is that also not a problem if they just, you know, take arms out of Baghdad, cache them somewhere else, and then wait until things settle down in a few months, and then bring them back out and start the whole thing all over again. Part of it looks good, because maybe it will dampen the violence in the short run, but if they just hide the weapon, and reports they're ready to pull the weapons out, and trying to avoid any conflict with the US forces, but maybe down the road they'll bring them right back out again and start all over again.

AD: Right, well, the way that we view this is, first of all it's important to see people taking action; people that are extremists to take action to either take arms away or to avoid contact with American and coalition force. I would remind you also that this is not just the Bagdad security plan we're talking about. It's a whole issue security approach to the entire nation of Iraq. And of course the Marines out west in al-Anbar; we've got folks up in the north. So, if people are moving arms and munitions around in the country does not mean that they are necessarily going to get away with it. Secondly, the thing of encouragement to me is that fact that you hear and you watch the Prime Minister's very strong and unambiguous message about the only legitimate armed force in Iraq is the Iraqi Security Force, the Iraqi police and the Iraqi army. Those are the only people who can legitimately bear arms and the coalition. And so, what we're working right now, a good portion of the strategy is there some elements of the extremists that we're never going to be able to deal with other than with force of arms. But there's also a need to create the opportunity to deal with people in moderate sense so that if they do put their arms down and they then don't return to them that they will have an opportunity to include them in the political dialogue. And so that's the situation, the phase of operation that we're in right now. And in the short run, as you say, it could take the arms out of Bagdad or reduces the violence than that's a first good step and then we'll continue to makes steps to ensure that we don't allow either those arms to come back or the violence to flare up from taking the steps from outside of Bagdad.

Roxie Merritt: Hey everybody, this is Roxie. We're running out of time here. We got time for one more question. Any of you guys that didn't get a chance . . .

AF: I'm on a roll. If you want to go about 10 more minutes or so I can hang on for that.

(Garbled back and forth)

Cindy: I did have one more question. It's Cyndi. I met a couple of soldiers out in Fallujah last year that were dealing with the MIT teams and had been training some of the Iraqi's out there. At the time I had talked to him he had said he was supposed to get 100 new recruits and only about 30 of them had shown up. And they were also having a problem with these guys understanding they had to come to training everyday. Has that improved in the last 6 months?

AF: Yes it has. Cindy, one of the things is we look at the Iraqi army through American eyes. In other word, when somebody joins the US Armed Forces they leave the past behind. They put on the uniform they swear allegiance to serve and we expect them to be able to be deployable.

C.M.: Right.

AF: In Iraq, their nation is much different and in fact out in al-Anbar, the people who live in Anbar aren't necessarily all that eager to . . . when they join a security force they aren't eager to necessarily leave Anbar. So that's one of the reasons that we've seen that the police recruiting is really good because the police have the option and the guarantee

essentially of staying in the area when they join. So one of the things the Marines are doing out there is to look at ways to essentially incentivize people to join the army by giving them some sort of a guarantee or something like that or a means by which they can have some level of prediction that they're going to stay closer to home. Remember, we're dealing with a different kind of culture here.

C.M.: Right.

A.F.: You know, but I think there are a lot of reasons for a person to be optimistic about the way that this thing is going. The political will that I can demonstrate here with the government of Iraq. I deal with members of the government of Iraq on a routine basis and I'm encouraged, quite frankly, by what I've seen. Dr. Aldabar, I just quoted him earlier, the man is wealthy. He lived outside of Iraq for many years, he's got a lot of resources, but he's here because he wants to see this place to succeed. You know, the economic reason for optimism here is . . . You know I was flying up to Balad the other day in a helicopter, and looking out the window I was reminded kind of, of the Central valley of California where I used to live when I flew Super Hornets in Lenoir, California. But there were shepherds waving at us, and tractors that were plowing, and there were people tending vineyards and that sort of thing. Every time you fly around here you look out and you see satellite dishes and cell phones, you know satellite dishes on every house in Bagdad. On the military side, we just talked about the Najaf operation and how well we feel that the Iraqi security forces actually did their job. They stepped up to the plate there. So there are a lot of reasons to be optimistic and there are a lot of reasons . . . you know this is a complex and difficult environment. There's no question about it. It will not . . . you won't see significant changes in the short term. It's going to take months and months to pass; it won't be something that happens in a few weeks. But, there's . . . the Iraqi, this is an Iraqi challenge that ultimately will be met with Iraqi solutions. And I'm encouraged, quite frankly. Are the Iraqi forces at the level of professionalism, the confidence and capability that American troops are right now? No, but you know what, they're light years ahead of where they were before. And the unifying nature of the armed forces in particular, when we look at our own military we take people from all over the country and when they become a member of the U.S. military, even though they came from Maine, Alaska, Hawaii or Florida, they become a part of the team and are identified as part of something that is a national institution. And that's what we're working on here with the Iraqi army. I was at Iraqi Army Day, back earlier this month, actually it was last month now, it was in early January. And the Prime Minister was unambiguous and unyielding in his commitment to unifying this nation and the Iraqi army I think is going to be one of the key institutions in a positive sense that will help unify this nation. I have a son at the Naval Academy, and he graduates this May, and it's going to be a really fun thing to be able to pin the shoulder boards on and give him an officer's cap. And I want the Iraqi . . . there's an Iraqi dad out there that pinned on the Lieutenant bars of a young Iraqi officer just recently at their graduation. The opportunity to see young people coming into an institution and to serve their nation is something I think is really important. And it's a unifying thing.



B.R.: Adm. Fox this is Bill Roggio. Having . . . I actually embedded with Iraqi soldiers, tactically they're pretty good. They're committed to taking the fight to the enemy, I mean, these are real soldiers. But one of the big problems I've seen with the various (garbled) I've been with pay and logistics. Some of these guys aren't getting paid. The last two battalions I embedded with, there are actually soldiers on strike; the units are undermanned because they're not getting paid and they're not getting the equipment that they're promised. What is being done, at the level of the ministry of defense to resolve these problems? I mean this is crucial. If we want the Iraqi army to succeed and be a force of unity for the country, we certainly need to make sure the soldiers are being compensated for their service.

A.F.: You are absolutely right, and that is an issue that we are aware of. They are what we refer to as three L's and there is the solution to that problem. One is leadership. It's key that NCOs and the junior officers at the leadership levels that are key in an army that they continue to refine and improve that. The next one is logistics. And part of logistics includes getting pay to the troops. It's something we don't appreciate, but when the young Iraqi soldier gets paid, he has to take leave to . . . give the money to his family to pay their bills. So there's definitely improvement of logistics that are needed. And they're working it, very hard. And then the final piece of it is loyalty. And ultimately it will be the Iraqis that will do the vetting and the screening; it's not ours to do that. But the loyalty aspects of service in the military is also key. But the good news is just as you just described up there. Confident soldiers and they've got great potential and they're serving credibly and well but there's still a lot of room to improve. We have seen units that folded under pressure; we've taken them back, we've reconstituted, we've re-glued police units and that sort of thing. It's not a flick of a switch, it's not a quick solution but there's unquestionable positive momentum towards a more competent and capable Iraq professional security force.

I'll take one more then I'll say good-bye.

Unknown: If I could, I think this is an important one that everyone will appreciate. When I was in Iraq in November, I was struck by the high level of morale of our troops. At the same time, it was also obvious that our troops have tremendous access to media from the United States, are well aware of what's going on, and they're certainly aware of the debate that's going on in Congress and these various resolutions that would oppose the surge, oppose what we're trying to do there. Both General Petraeus and Secretary Gates have testified that this could be harmful to our efforts and even encourage those on the other side. I wonder if I could invite you to comment on that.

A.F.: You bet. You know, you've just described I think, one of the most important intangibles that did not make it back through the mainstream media filter. And that is the sense of mission, and the morale of the people who are serving here. It's not everyday that you have the opportunity to leave your fingerprints on great work. And this is one of those times where everybody that's here understands what an incredibly important mission we're engaged in. We're also focused on this mission to the point where we understand the vast majority of the American people support everything about the

military. And the people who disagree with the nature of the political decisions that brought us here, we still appreciate the fact that those people also support the military. So, there's not many here that feel any lack of support specifically. We also understand that this is our political process at work. I used this as an example to my Iraqi colleagues of this is the way a free and democratic country behaves. We just went through an election where both houses of Congress changed hands, and we used words and not weapons, and ballots and not bullets in this fight. And so this is a good civics lesson for us and we need to remind ourselves about. You know I have personally a great sense of confidence in the common sense and the center of gravity of the American people. We're doing fine in this fight. Every time that you are around the Iraqi troops, contact with the Iraqis equals confidence in our ultimate goal and the outcome of this thing. So is it distracting? If people wanted to be distracted, you know, the Iraqis that I deal with sometimes ask me about that and say you know, we're concerned about what one politician said or another. And then I will quickly turn that around and said well remember how one of your politicians was quoted and it was taken as a great cause of concern all around the other side of the ocean. So, I think mature people can look at this and understand that politicians do and say what politicians do and say and the mission remains. Our focus hasn't changed and we're going to do just fine.