

TRANSCRIPT

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THIS IS A RUSH TRANSCRIPT AND MAY CONTAIN ERRORS. USERS ARE ADVISED TO CONSULT THEIR OWN TAPES OR NOTES OF THE SESSION IF ABSOLUTE VERIFICATION OF WORDING IS NEEDED.

Q: Is there consideration being given to either reducing or increasing U.S. troops levels in Afghanistan this year?

A: We have 16,000 plus soldiers in Afghanistan. It's certainly an economy of force and the tactical commander, it's Combined Joint Task Force 76. They will be replaced starting in March with the Southern European Task Force. The numbers that the Southern European Task Force come in with will be essentially the same, with the same capability that we now have in Afghanistan. That rotation will take place from March through about the July timeframe with all of CJTF-76's forces rotate out and CTAF forces rotate in.

We've done a lot to make sure that that rotation is as seamless as possible. We've done two exercises in Germany that Combined Forces Command Afghanistan and both CJTF-76 have sent representatives to. We also sent political advisors to those exercises to make sure that CTAF is as prepared as they can be for what their mission will be.

I think it's fair to say that CTAF's, well one of the most important missions certainly that they will support while they're there will be the National Assembly elections as opposed to the Presidential elections we've just had, and helping provide the security for that. Then the ongoing counterinsurgency operations that are happening.

Q: Is there any consideration given to increasing the number or decreasing during the course of the year?

A: I don't think so. The only time you might see an increase in the numbers is just what we did with the presidential elections. We brought a battalion in from the 82nd Airborne Division, about 700-plus soldiers to help us in some of the areas that we thought might be needed. That worked out very well. They were on the ground for about 30 days. They came in, they deployed, then they redeployed within 30 days and were certainly a great help to us with what they brought in.

What we're going to have to see is, and this hasn't been determined yet, is the National Assembly elections, is it going to be done in one day? This certainly has implications on how you provide security. Or is it going to be a rolling type election where you might do a few provinces, then a few more provinces, then a few provinces after that. That's yet to be determined.

Also the exact timeframe of the elections has yet to be determined.

Q: Is it going to be pushed back?

A: There's a possibility. I think that, again, that hasn't been determined but I think there's a possibility of that. The reason there's a possibility is there are certain things, and there's a whole laundry list of them that have to happen by the government of Afghanistan for these -- One is districting and census taking, just like we would in the States. That is yet to happen. I'm not sure exactly when that will. But then there's a certain timeframe after that. It might be six months, 12 months, I'm not exactly sure, of when they'll take place after that.

Q: When I was talking to the Special Ops guys there before they said every time they would go through a village there would be this explosion of cell phone calls about them going through. Is there still that kind of attention being paid to U.S. troop movements? And have you enough linguists there that you can move beyond traffic analysis as a product of signals --

A: I think linguists are probably a challenge for the military as a whole. I think we have enough linguists to do the job over there. Certainly we've been successful, I think, in a lot of the things we do intelligence wise driving operations with linguists.

I'm not out on patrols with those guys, being the J3 at the three star level. I have not heard a lot of concern from the tactical guys about people being on their cell phones. But I think more importantly there is when is the last time we've seen any type of largescale attack against coalition forces? There hasn't been one since the time that I've been there. So if they are using cell phones I'm not sure how effective their use of them are in mustering forces or reporting our movements, or whatever. And when you say using cell

phones, I'm not sure if it's necessarily a bad thing. I think cell phones are the primary means of communication within the country, so I'm not --

Q: How is the situation on the border? I haven't heard anything from the border recently.

A: Sure. You've obviously been there.

Q: So is it quiet?

A: I would say it's relatively quiet. I read a situation report this morning. We'll occasionally have rocket attacks on the border. That's the most common type of attack that we have, but the most important part with that, especially if you're the soldier on the ground, is generally speaking they're inaccurate rockets. Now if somebody's shooting a rocket at you it certainly gets your attention but we haven't incurred large casualties at all from these rocket attacks. We do have some IED attacks. But what I'm finding, and I didn't bring the statistics with it, is a lot of the local nationals are turning in the IEDs. They're coming to coalition forces, they're coming to the Afghan National Army and saying hey, we think this is an IED. Can you come look at it. Or they will destroy it in place themselves, the Afghan National Army will.

There are some problems along the border. Obviously there's always tension. There can always be tension with Pakistan as far as that's concerned and I can go into that a little bit later if you'd like, but we've taken a lot of steps to make sure that we have no incidents along the border that could raise tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan and we've set some things in place for that.

But the answer to your question is, there are some things along the border. Relatively quiet. I'd say we have one or two incidents a day across the country on an average. But we can go for four, five, six days with no troops in contact.

Q: The Pakistanis have put a lot of regulars in there for a while. Are the regulars still there or is it back to being sort of local police units and militia?

A: The Pakistanis do have regular forces in the FATA area, the FATA is the Federally Administered Tribal Area just across the border from Afghanistan. We certainly appreciate the work that they've done. We watch it very closely. We have LNOs that are inside of Pakistan working with the Pakistani army that keep us informed of what they're doing. They also have LNOs with us, down with CJTF-76, so we can avoid anything that might become contentious along the border.

But yeah, they're still working operations there. In our mindset we think that's certainly

helped us. We've done some training with Pakistan on IED training which we think, which was CJTF-76 sponsored. We've done other things that I won't talk about here with Pakistan that I think they appreciate.

We certainly value Pakistan in the global war on terror. We think they're a huge ally.

Q: What are the general missions that the troops are doing? Are they just doing patrol-type missions? And also there's been a growing awareness on the part of the U.S. military of the poppy problem in Afghanistan. What is the evolution for military roles in that?

A: I think as far as conventional military operations, we're doing stability and security operations all over the country. Presence patrols in villages to let them know that we're there. I think the most important thing, one of the most important things we've done in Afghanistan is this idea of area ownership. If I were to have a map here, we have RC South, RC West, and RC East. All of those areas are owned by a full colonel who's a brigade-level commander, and he keeps his troops out in the field there in villages, in towns, so the populace is used to seeing them. We think that pays us great dividends. The reason that it does is it's like our neighborhoods here in the States. They get to know the forces that are there. They don't view the forces as occupiers. And you get quite a bit of intelligence from the local populace because they're the best ones to tell you that somebody's in town that shouldn't be in town. And more importantly in a counterinsurgency operation it's not all kinetic operations. By that I mean it's a lot of -- What do the people in the village need? We have Provincial Reconstruction Teams, 15 of them, 14 of them that are in the country to help with reconstruction and the needs of the people in the villages.

So I would say stability and security operations are the main things that we're doing with our conventional, kinetic type operators.

The other thing that's important that we're doing is we're continuing to be offensively oriented. You heard last year the great spring offensive that was supposed to come by the Taliban. Our plan is this year to keep the pressure on them on both sides of the border if possible. And make sure that they don't have the ability to launch a spring offensive.

What was your second question, sir?

Q: The narcotics.

A: Does that help you?

Q: Yes, that helps me a lot.

A: Generals don't ask that. Colonels will ask that. [Laughter].

Q: Generals say that did help. [Laughter].

A: Exactly.

Counternarcotics is certainly an issue within Afghanistan as everybody knows. There's not going to be anybody who says narcotics are a good thing.

I think what's extremely important within Afghanistan is how we take on the -- we, in a general sense -- how the counternarcotics mission is undertaken. And by that I mean all the success that I've spoken of that we've had in Afghanistan, I think we need to be careful that we don't unhinge that success and that we're smart in how we go about the counternarcotics mission itself to make sure that we don't take one step forward and two steps back.

Does that mean we shouldn't do counternarcotics? Absolutely not. But it does mean that we should do it in a sequential, well thought out manner.

Q: What do you mean by not unhinging? Alienating the populace?

A: Yeah. You have to think about alternative livelihoods. That farmer out there is feeding his family. I don't think he'll -- this is not a slap in the face to the Afghan poppy grower, but I don't think he thinks about the bigger picture of these drugs are going to Europe and bad habits and the cost of drugs to Europe, et cetera. He's worked about putting food on the table for his family. I think when we take that away from him we need to be prepared to offer him some type of alternative livelihood to be able to carry on and take care of his family.

That's as far as I want to go.

Q: Just a clarification. You said 16,000 soldiers. Is that people from all services or --

A: Sixteen thousand plus from, we've got all services represented here.

Q: Foreign as well?

A: A little bit more with the foreign. Just a couple of thousand more.

Q: About 16,000 Americans?

A: Yeah.

Q: Before you leave that, to follow up on the drug thing. I hear what you're saying, but this mission is into some years now. It seems to a lot of people that if this is a nationbuilding exercise the nation we may be building is Colombia if we don't -- [Laughter] -- If we don't get this in control. It will build syndicates and narcotic warlords --

A: Sure. Touché, sir. Certainly.

When you say we've been at this for a while, here's what I would point out. I would say in October of 2001 the Taliban were firmly entrenched in Afghanistan and people were being executed publicly in the stadium. We're in January of 2005 and we've had over 10 million people register to vote and over eight million people vote, some of those people standing in line, especially women, 40 percent women voted, when rockets came in.

So when we say we've been at this for a while, I think we as Americans are somewhat impatient. In a three year time span I think that's a pretty good track record of moving from the atrocities that we saw happening in Afghanistan, a place, a terrorist base, to an elected President who had an inauguration that was unhindered security wise and a vote with 40 percent women. Three years to me for that kind of advancement is not a long time.

What was the second part of your question, sir? You called it the exercise in nationbuilding I think.

Q: Let me put it to you this way. If the United States military is not willing to take this mission on, and clearly so far it has not --

A: Which mission, I'm sorry?

Q: Counternarcotics.

Q: Growing crops, the same sort of mission we're doing in Colombia right now, aiding the Colombian --

A: Sure.

Q: Give us your assessment of the Afghans' ability to take this on. Surely they can't feel capable yet to have the kinds of forces and the kinds of controls to really take this problem on.

So if you're not going to be able to do it, and I'm not denigrating what you're going to accomplish because clearly you've done a lot. But if you can't do this, how far are we away from the Afghans being able to take it on?

A: That's certainly an excellent question and what a lot of people don't realize, and again, it's because I don't think Afghanistan is watched that closely. Just after the inauguration President Karzai had a national seminar with a lot of the governors. The focus of the national seminar was anti-drug, counternarcotics. And basically what he told everybody was this is something that can destroy our country, number one. Number two, it's against our religion. And I expect the leaders within Afghanistan to go out and try to convince their populations within their different provinces that counternarcotics is a bad thing.

We have some anecdotal evidence that poppy cultivation people are turning over their poppies, their poppy crop, voluntarily in some of the provinces that raise poppy. So I think number one, the willingness of the Afghan people to turn away from poppy cultivation might be a little bit underestimated. What we have to do and what we can help provide militarily is possibly as a secondary or tertiary mission because we're up doing things anyway with some of our intelligence assets, is take a look and see, are poppies being turned under? It would go under, this is a little bit too far in operations, but intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance. Maybe have some of those assets that are up there already verifying, has the poppy crop been turned under? And helping the government of Afghanistan who are in the lead on this, determine if that is actually happening.

As we all know, the British are the ones that have the lead in counternarcotics within Afghanistan and are certainly working that as hard as they can. But I wouldn't say that the government of Afghanistan doesn't have the ability. They do have counternarcotics forces that are employee. In December I think it was we did a raid -- We. They. [Laughter]. They did a -- that's why she keeps me straight. [Laughter]. I can tell I don't think I'm going to eat here today. [Laughter].

They did a raid and I think they destroyed 17 or 19 tons of opium which is a pretty large raid. Along with the factories that manufacture the product itself. So we view that as a success.

Q: When was that?

A: December.

Q: Who did that?

A: The government of Afghanistan.

Q: Can I sacrifice my question just to stay on this?

Q: Sure.

Q: I hear from you possibly and maybe as far as counternarcotics, we're heading into the [four] year now, and one would think it would be a little more thought out than possibly maybe. What exactly is the U.S. [inaudible] here? Has it been thought out? Is it still half-baked? And you're talking about proper placement, who's going to -- Presumably the United States or Europe would pay for the new crops, is that right? And if so, how much is that going to cost? Can you talk a little bit about that?

A: Actually I don't have a lot of background on that. When you say, when I'm mentioning possibly and maybe, the thing --

Q: I guess my question is has this been thought out and you just can't talk about it for operational reasons? Or are you still trying to come up with a way to deal with it?

A: I've got it. I think a lot of this has been thought out. I think there's a lot of support to the government of Afghanistan on a long-term strategy for counternarcotics. I think there's a lot of work being put into it. It's not a hit or miss type operation. We're looking at a long term process with the government of Afghanistan that certainly I think the U.S. government in concert with the government of Afghanistan will come up with a plan --

Q: How much money are we talking about, how many years --

A: Not yet.

KEATON: We don't have the dollar figures but let me just add that it is multi-agency and it's multi-government. So in other words the Brits up until now have been responsible for counternarcotics. They've been training the Afghan counternarcotics forces and they have been going out doing operations.

Right after the inauguration President put his mark on this by calling together the Loya Jurga for counternarcotics and that's where he energized all the governors and the mullahs and that kind of thing. They had what we like to call a "mullah-paluz" where they got all the mullahs together and -- [Laughter].

Q: It would appear that the big thing here is paying these farmers. Grow something else or paying them off. Do you have any ball park on what --

KEATON: What was formed as a Joint Planning Group. U.S. State Department, coalition -- and that's many governments -- and the government of Afghanistan. They have come up with a three year plan to attack the whole thing and it is multi-level, multi-faceted. Everything from eradication and a lot of that is voluntary, to teaching alternative livelihoods with crops and things like that, and also trying to break down the drug lord structure. Obviously that's another level that needs to be attacked.

A: Let me caveat what Colonel Keaton said there, and that's certainly all very true. But as we go through this I don't think there's an approved long term three to five year plan yet, but we're very close. You can't go to somebody and say let me see this plan just yet, it's still being developed.

Q: No ball park on the money --

A: No.

Q: \$100 million, \$300 million?

Q: The administration [inaudible] \$780 million last November. You may not have seen the plan but they claim they had one. The State Department announced it, the President signed off on it.

A: If we get into policy and things like that, I'm not going to go there as far as money's concerned.

Q: I think on a fundamental level, you're talking about alternate lifestyles and plans and this and that. You've got, I forget the exact number, it's like a \$2 billion drug market over there so you've got to replace \$2 billion in drug money with \$2 billion in money to help sustain a different economy, right? So you're talking about \$380 million --

A: I don't think you can do a one-for-one like that because that's not what the farmers make. That may be what the middle guy makes, the distributors and all that.

Q: Sure, the drug lords. But within Afghanistan it's \$2 billion.

A: I don't want to get too far off of operations. I know I've been to meetings at the embassy that they're certainly involved in alternative livelihoods for the farmers. They're very engaged as far as that's concerned, but in the operations world, that's not something that I get --

Q: You're going out of your lane is what you're saying.

A: Right.

Q: On his, you were talking about the Pak border. There was a report yesterday that talked about a firefight between Afghan forces and Pak forces -- the Afghan guys apparently jumped across the border and refused to move back and the Pakistani border, frontier, shot them up I guess and killed one and wounded one. Is that true? It's just something I read yesterday.

A: It's possible, but I'll tell you in the situation report that I read from my guys this morning I didn't read anything about that. Are there sometimes skirmishes along the border? Absolutely. A couple of weeks ago maybe three weeks ago now there was a small one. A slight misunderstanding, as we would say, and shots were fired back and forth. But again, that's where the controls that we have in place are so important. We have given radios to the Pak side of the border so we can communicate from the Afghan to the Pak side of the border. Again, we have the LNOs on both sides of the border where phone calls can be made very quickly. As a matter of fact, as a result of the last "dust up" as we call it, the last little "dust up" that we had on the border, Major General Olson went to Islamabad to meet with Pakistani general officers to make sure it was cleared all up and everybody understood that it was certainly a misunderstanding.

There were some loud explosions that went on. People get a little skittish on the border because as you mentioned, sir, when you were there with the Special Forces, there is activity down there and if you've been shot at some and hear that and think you're under fire you're most likely to return fire and that's how things can sometimes become clouded. It does happen, but I think we've got things in place now.

Something I think you'll find interesting is the Pakistanis have adjusted our artillery fire into the Pakistani side of the border to go after anti-coalition militia.

Q: Could you explain that?

A: When you shoot artillery it's a non-line-of-sight system. An artillery Howitzer will shoot let's say five, six, ten, kilometers. There has to be somebody out there who says here's the target and when the round lands he'll say go left, go right, go up, go down. And so what we had were coalition forces firing artillery that were adjusted by Pakistani forward observers.

Q: They were acting as the FOs?

A: Right. Just along the border.

Q: So we have that level of communication now?

A: That level of communication. That's a huge step forward. That's a wonderful step forward. We think that's a good news story.

Q: And that's being provided by the LNOs?

A: No, no, no, no. It was being provided by the Pakistanis on the border.

Q: The LNOs is the new thing, the liaison officers?

A: Yeah, the liaisons are in Islamabad, at Bagram, in the headquarters themselves.

Q: Not out in the field.

A: Not out in the field. But what you do have is you do have border elements, border commanders that will meet along the border to talk to make sure that we don't have any issues along the border. Will they happen sometimes? Absolutely. Does it help? You bet. As soon as something like that happens, right away communications are started to figure out what's going on, to make sure somebody hasn't violated somebody's airspace. Because as you know, have any of you been along the border with Pakistan and --

Q: Yeah.

A: It's mountainous, you're dealing with a tribal type society. They don't recognize borders. As you know, Afghanistan is a tribal, family first before you get to nation state type thoughts. The border to them is nebulous. And it's very hard. It's like any border. There's no real signs out there a lot of places that say you're now crossing into Pakistan.

Q: Has there been any discussion about putting American advisors with the Pakistan, on the Pakistan side with Pakistan forces to help, maybe not call them advisors, but liaisons or whatever label you want to put on it, to ease that?

A: I would say I've heard nothing in the open that says that we're going to put advisors with Pakistani forces along the border. But I can tell you that we're conducting air assault training with the Pakistanis with Special Operations services now to help them learn air assault operations.

Q: Where is that being done?

A: In Pakistan.

Q: I have some broad questions and specific questions. I'm hoping that you can explain to us who the drug lords are. Who are the people who are paying it? Are they warlords, are they somebody from outside, are they old Talib? And could you walk us around the country and talk about who the different warlords are and what the threats are in each area, what you're dealing with?

A: I would hate to say. I'm not sure I'm qualified to say because that's not my forte' as far as who the drug lords are.

Q: Who are you fighting then? Presumably there are people that you're opposed to, these drug lords or --

Q: Who's the focus on?

Q: How do you do counternarcotics if you don't know who you're fighting?

A: I think what you do is first you find out where the poppies are being grown. That's more conventional military operations wise. We're not fighting. I wouldn't say we're fighting rug lords right now. I'm fighting Taliban, HIG, anti-coalition militia. I am not fighting a drug lord per se.

As you know, the military is not lead agency in counternarcotics. Those would be INL people, DEA people, and more importantly the lead will be with the government of Afghanistan to determine who the drug lords are. I certainly don't have the ability to sit here and say Joe, Bill, Bob and Tom are drug lords and we're going to go after them.

You have to understand, I think, that we would be in a supporting role in the counternarcotics mission.

Q: Would you do the warlord and the threat areas?

A: That's ISAF's area up in the north. They have nine provinces in the north. I don't know if it would be smart of me to go around the country and name different warlords who we're after. I don't see anybody -- Let me put it this way.

Ishmael Kahn you could have said was a warlord in the Harat area. Ishmael Kahn is no longer in Harat. He's in Kabul. I'm not sure if he's taken a position within the government or not. He was offered a position in the government and I know for a while that he declined that. But he is no longer a -- here's a success story -- "warlord" in Harat. There's a new governor in Harat. That new governor was installed by the government of Afghanistan. We did a pretty extensive operation in the west. Shindan, Harat. There was fighting between Ishmael Kahn and Almanula Kahn. We inserted Afghan, or the Afghan

government inserted their forces in between them supported by Special Operations Forces. We probably moved over 500 Afghan soldiers in a period of 18 hours. I talked to a gentleman from the Wall Street Journal the other day, and this is a really good story I think that he could look into. We moved over 500 Afghan National Army soldiers in under 18 hours out into the western part of the country, put a demarcation line in between Ishmael Kahn and Almanula Kahn, had them withdraw their forces to either side of that line.

But the beauty of it was it's not only the military operations that took place and as a colonel working at the three star level for the first time, this is the first time I saw the interagency process work like they taught me at the National War College that it should work. [Laughter]. The ambassador was certainly involved talking with high level politicians in the government of Afghanistan. I know he was talking to people out in the west as this operation took place. So you had the diplomacy part of it working, you had the military instrument of power working and it all worked extremely, extremely well. Supported by Special Operations Forces that got out there very quickly to help advise the Afghan National Army.

Now in that conflict you had heavy weapons. You had tanks that were being used. And Almanula Kahn was driving towards the town of Harat to take down Ishmael Kahn. That was stopped in a period of 24 to 36 hours.

Soon after that the weapons that both Ishmael Kahn and Almanula Kahn had at their disposal were taken into heavy weapons cantonment. So that whole area now is extremely stable with a new governor and Ishmael Kahn the "warlord" -- your word, not mine -- being taken into Kabul.

Now I don't think you can get a much better success story than that with the government and our three year plan as we're doing it as three years. The government of Afghanistan reaching across the country, the entire country, to the western part, extending its influence, stopping fighting between two warlords and eventually have the warlord that some people might, not me, but some people might have said was the instigator of it, being brought to Kabul, a new governor installed, and you know what's happening now? The Afghan National Police and Afghan Border Police are working down the border, taking over -- I shouldn't say taking over. Establishing border crossing points that will be run by the central government. What does that mean? Revenue.

KEATON: Potentially a huge source of revenue.

A: Yeah. Absolutely.

Q: What happened to Almanula Kahn?

A: Almanula Kahn now resides in Kabul as well.

Q: They're roommates. [Laughter].

A: They're separated and they're under control and everything is fine. But if you look to the north, General Dostam, DDR, General Dostam I know you're familiar with. Haven't heard much from him in a while. All his heavy weapons. We helped him with some health issues. As soon as that happened -- the government of Afghanistan helped him with some health issues and we supported that. As soon as he came back he started his heavy weapons cantonment.

What's the other important piece of this when we talk about the "warlords", I think they're understanding that the political process is the way -- The way of the gun is gone and the political process is the way to go. If you don't canton your heavy weapons, if you don't DDR, you cannot register your political party.

Does that help you?

Q: It helps sort of, but I still don't have a really good flavor for what else is out there. Those are the big names that I'm obviously familiar with, but I'm trying to get my arms around what kind of problem you guys are dealing with.

A: When you say what kind of problem --

Q: Are there a thousands warlords out there? Are they little tribal guys? Are there two or three more big guys like Dostam and Kahn that you want to deal with?

A: You've got General Dostam, Atta, Ishmael Kahn who we've taken care of, Almanula Kahn we've obviously taken care of. I don't view, my personal opinion, I don't view that we have any big problems with any of these warlords right now. I think the warlords understand that the political process is the way to go in Afghanistan now, and you don't see the warlords resisting coalition forces or ISAF forces. There are no largescale engagement with people that you would say these people belong to X warlord and they're fighting us. It just doesn't happen any more.

Again, I think that goes to the success that we've enjoyed.

We still deal with small, anti-coalition militia elements that usually operate, as we said earlier, along the border in very small numbers and generally exceptionally ineffective. Here's an example.

For the presidential inauguration, if I was an anti-coalition militia member speaking to the tactical level I know the Vice President's going to be there -- maybe I don't know this -- the Secretary of Defense, all the people that visited. All I have to do is launch one attack in Kabul. It doesn't have to be an accurate attack, it just has to be an attack because why? You guys are there.

So what's the first thing that might come out of that? Afghanistan's unstable. Afghanistan has a huge security problem. Here we are at the inauguration and there was a rocket attack. Not one attack.

So the answer to your question is there are no warlords that we're really doing battle --

Q: So it's just old --

A: Taliban, HIG, maybe some AQ members that --

Q: Turning to the western side of the country, what kind of Iranian activity are you seeing coming into Afghanistan? Also what are your forces particularly your SOF forces doing either to counter or monitor it?

A: Obviously we have an exclusion zone with the Iranian border, 10 kilometers, that we will not violate, get close to.

The unit that we have in the west is a cavalry unit. It's exceptionally suited for mobility operations, to be able to get out and look at what's going on.

The areas that we focus on in the west are Harat, Shindan, Furra, to a smaller extent Qualinah and Shaochiran, and it's been extremely stable in the west.

As far as Iranian influence, operationally I certainly don't see any Iranian influence that has any impact on our operations out there.

As I said, the Afghan National Police and the Afghan Border Police are establishing border checkpoints along the western part of the border, but we aren't. The reason that we aren't is we understand the sensitivity with that border and we won't put our forces that close to cause any type of incident at all.

Politically, might there be some -- We all read the same things. Might there be some influence? Maybe. But I think that's probably out of my lane to discuss.

KEATON: If I could just add, and I'm Lieutenant Colonel Keaton, the public affairs officer there.

One thing that we have seen is a huge increase in Iranian media in the Harat/Shindan area, and we're getting a lot more stories out of the Iranian media there.

I think in November five new Iranian outlets established offices there and as a result we established a coalition press information center there to deal with it.

One thing we also find is they don't always report regularly. They tend to just report, number one, what the Taliban tells them; or, number two, what they observe and they don't go after the facts.

Q: What the Taliban tells them?

A: Yes. The Taliban has spokesmen and they talk with the media daily.

Q: Have you moved any type of SOF activity up to that area?

A: We do have SOF forces out there, a very very small contingent. But you have to remember, what SOF forces do best, white SOF as opposed to black SOF. What white SOF does best is train indigenous forces. They are absolutely fantastic at that. That's what they're helping do out there. They continue to work with the Afghan National Army that we have stationed out in the Harat area.

And the Afghan National Army is a huge, huge success story. You talk about guys who are fierce fighters, these guys were born to fight. [Laughter]. It's true. You can turn these guys loose and they will kill or capture whoever they are after.

The problem we have with them, it's very difficult to --

Q: Point them in the right direction. [Laughter].

A: That's the whole problem along the border. They're not worried about that border thing. [Laughter].

But they're wonderful fighters. The problem that we have, and it's actually ironic, and we're retooling is the wrong word, we want to make sure that the Afghan National Army has the logistics that it needs to support itself. Because in the Afghan mindset it is not a manly thing to be a cook, it's not a manly thing to fix trucks or do those kind of support operations that you need to do to support yourself in the field.

Q: I hear Haliburton. [Laughter].

A: Exactly.

Q: He's just kidding about that. [Laughter].

A: That was a joke.

But anyway, they're a terrific army. They now have four regional commands, one in Mez, one in Harat, one in Kandahar, and one in Gardez that they're now starting to populate. What we're going to do is cut them a piece of ground that, operationally when you're in the military somebody always owns the ground. And I don't mean that flippantly. In other words if you're doing an operation one person has to own this certain piece of terrain and they have to understand what's going on in there so everything's coordinated.

So what we're going to do is for those regional commands, we're going to cut a piece of ground out of the coalition commander's battlespace and give it to the Afghan National Army. What they do within that battlespace is their business. It's totally going to be given to them.

Now if they come out of there, they will coordinate with the task force commander who owns that ground --

Q: When is that going to happen?

A: It's happening now. We're developing that. The four regional commands have already been stood up. They've been garrisoned. They're building -- And that would be something great for you guys to go see. They're building a barracks for them there and the Afghan National Army continues to grow. We're training, we're at the five Kandek, model Kandek is an Afghan National Army battalion. But I'll tell you, the guy who did, whoever asked the question when we were talking about the west, Major General Moene was the commander that went out and executed that operation. I thought it was terribly interesting, I think sometimes we look at things through our western prism and we, that was a beautiful example of a combined operation because the Afghan Ministry of Interior was involved, the Afghan Minister of Defense, the coalition forces and ISAF. And a deputy commanding general of the coalition forces looked across the table at Moene and kept grilling him on questions. If this happens, what are you going to do? If that happens, what are you going to do? Finally general Moene leaned across the table to him and he said "Sir, this is not the first time I've conducted this type of operation." [Laughter].

These guys have been fighting for a long, long time and they are very very capable.

The Afghan National Army is very well received wherever they go. They're ethnically

balanced. Maybe you've been over there.

Q: That's true.

A: When they come into town people want to join the army, and one of the things we have to do is try to bring the police on par with the army. Not as a paramilitary force, but as far as capabilities, as far as training, as far as communications, et cetera. Once we do that, certainly the picture in Afghanistan will continue to get even better because then the police can pick up more police missions.

Q: How big is the Afghan Army?

A: It's about 20,000 or so right now.

Q: How many [inaudible]?

A: We're at about 21 or 22. Now you'll see, this will fool you. You'll see if you really study it, the 29th Kandek graduated. That doesn't mean there's 29 whole Kandeks. But we're about 21, a little over 20, ball park figure. I don't know what's graduated. I've been out of the area for about a week.

Q: Is the pipeline going to widen?

A: I think there's a good chance that we'll go from training five Kandeks simultaneously to six.

Q: Kandek stands for what?

A: I'm sorry. It's an Afghan National Army battalion. We would say battalion, they call them Kandeks.

But those guys are just a wonderful -- The example I gave you, go to the U.S. Army and tell 500 guys to move in less than 18 hours. We'd be hard pressed to do that. When we had the situation in Harat, I mean literally I went to a meeting at the Ministry of Defense's office in the afternoon. That next morning U.S. gray tails -- this is how we support them -- were landing at Kia International Airport and every Afghan National Army soldier who was supposed to be there was there. Loaded up, ammunition, weapons, and went.

Q: -- loyalty unquestioned?

A: I have not heard of any examples of -- That's incorrect. There was one report when

they had a roadblock up, there were some Afghan National Army soldiers who apparently were doing illegal things. Taking money, whatever. I'll tell you what, the retribution was swift and they brought them back to Kabul immediately.

Q: Colonel, I wondered if you could tell us a little bit about how you operate with the Afghan National Army operationally. Their equipment is quite different than ours, and their understandings are different, so how do you actually coordinate and work with them?

The other part is, are you learning anything operationally that you can adapt for coalition forces, U.S. forces, when you just mentioned the speed of movement?

A: Let me go to your first question first. The way that we command and control, it's called a dual key system. Every Afghan National Army Kandak has embedded tactical trainers with them. They're largely U.S. tactical trainers, largely from the National Guard that go out with these Kandeks to help train them in the field. Those embedded tactical trainers, I don't want to get too in detail for you, are under the operational control of CJTF-76.

Now what do the embedded tactical trainers bring? They bring to a large degree logistical support, although in the middle of March the Afghan National Army will start to do their own messing and feeding. That's another step in the right direction for them. But more importantly, embedded tactical trainers bring closer air support and other indirect fire assets, what we call combat enhancers to the Afghan National Army.

If there is an operation that is to be undertaken with the Afghan National Army, the coalition forces have to turn what we call the dual key. In other words, I would say there is no light between the Afghan National Army and coalition forces for 99.9 percent of operations. But hypothetically speaking if they said they wanted to come take control of the Fairmont Hotel today, we would say nope, we don't support that mission and we will not deploy your embedded tactical trainers in support of this operation. We cannot tell the Afghan National Army you're not going to do something. It's their own government. It's their own Army. It's their country. But we do have the ability to say we understand your position, we disagree with your position on this operation, and we won't support it with the ETTs.

It's a beautiful system. It works extremely well. I have seen in my eight-plus months there no conflict between us and the Afghan National Army on any operations.

Q: Does the dual key work the other way as well? Where the Afghans can say no to an operation?

A: Absolutely, yes sir. Absolutely. They certainly do have the ability to do that.

Q: Have they?

A: Nope. Not to my recollection.

In other words, you have the dual key that helps control them. Then obviously whenever they work inside a battle space, inside a particular geographical area on the ground, the American commander, the full colonel who owns that particular space, will be fully apprised of the operation that's going on because he's supporting it as well with American troops.

What you find a lot of times is Afghan platoons -- these are working with American forces on operations. We are very careful in Afghanistan to make sure that we don't violate customs, traditions, et cetera. It is not a good idea to go around doing what we call hard knock operations, kicking the door, rushing the place, take people into custody. That does not do well for relations. We're very careful to try to keep an Afghan face with our operations, we actually support the Afghans, to separate people. To bring women in to search women; to talk with tribal elders before we do it; or just to knock on your door as you would in the States and say hi, how are you, I'm Cardon Crawford, I'm with the coalition forces; or I'm Afghani and these are my coalition force brethren. We're looking for Joe X because we think he did this. Can we come in and look?

We find that to be a much better way to do business than to kick your door in in the middle of the night at 3:00 o'clock in the morning, toss you around a room, and then -- And Pam will be the first one to say. She'll come down and say did you guys do this? [Laughter]. To which I will deny. And she'll say, you're lying to me, you son of a bitch, tell me the truth! [Laughter].

So we go to great lengths to make sure that we respect the customs and cultures of the country and we do that in conjunction with the Afghan National Army on dual operations.

Does that answer your question, ma'am?

Q: Yeah. And the operation part. Are you learning anything from it? People often an, the iconic picture of the man on the horse, you know. Do you have a special cavalry unit these days? Are you learning anything you can use on operations?

A: I think we have certainly learned a lot about flexibility from the Afghan National Army at the operational and strategic level. I am sure out on the ground every day when you're a lieutenant or a captain and you work with people who have been fighting for 25-

plus years, I'm sure they learn a terrific --

(END SIDE A / BEGIN SIDE B)

A: -- thinks I look young. He said, "Young man, I've spent many many years up in those mountains above Kabul here shooting rockets into this city. I think CBS, 60 Minutes and BBC," remember those documentaries about when they were fighting the Russians, et cetera? One of the documentaries was done on him. These guys have done terrific work and they're fighters by trade. They know the terrain. If you're an infantryman on the ground knowing the terrain is priceless -- as the commercial says.

Q: Do you have a few more minutes?

A: I love this woman.

Q: Do you agree with her that you --

A: I would be foolish not to. [Laughter].

Q: Colonel, you mentioned giving the Pakistanis radios. I understand there have been some roadblocks during Operation Enduring Freedom about getting communications for the Blue Force Trackers to other allied nations working with the United States in Afghanistan. In your eight months have you seen any sort of difficulties in sharing equipment or intelligence with partner nations in Afghanistan?

A: No. I have not. I'm not saying it hasn't happened in the past. I have heard nothing as far as equipment problems or any type of friction, Blue Force Tracker people not having access to that type of thing.

A good example I would think of sharing intelligence would be this. For a while, and Colonel Keaton and I experienced this, we did have quite a few rocket attacks in Kabul that were, you could almost set your watch by it for a period of about three to four weeks. As you know, Kabul itself is owned by ISAF. That piece of ground, as I was explaining, is owned by ISAF. There was a terrific dual intelligence effort to try to figure out where these rockets were coming from, who might have been firing them, et cetera. Between the coalition intelligence people and the ISAF people. I can tell you that I don't think there's been any type of, effective is even the wrong word. Any type of rocket attack that's been noticed in Kabul since October. That says a lot. And even the rocket attacks we did have before, again, were relatively inaccurate although one landed probably about 100 meters from where Colonel Keaton lives. As an artilleryman I can assure you that's about as close as you want to get. But since that time, none. And as I told you, during the inauguration on December 7th, none. So we view that as a good

sign.

Q: Can you bring us up to date on the hunt for bin Laden and the level of effort that 16,000 U.S. troops are putting on that.

Q: Finally. [Laughter].

A: I think we all have to understand and I think we would all agree that the global war on terror is certainly bigger than one man. I'll get back to your question, but I think if you want to focus on bin Laden, I'd rather say al-Qaida or terrorist organizations certainly have been hurt. They no longer have a staging base in Afghanistan. So I would say those 16,000 plus soldiers and those that preceded them starting with the special Forces soldier on horseback have done a terrific job in taking away a terror base of operations.

We certainly continue to look for bin Laden. There are forces that specifically focus on al-Qaida top leadership. I guarantee you they're working right now. I will guarantee you when you go to sleep tonight they are working then. And when you wake up in the morning they'll be working then as well.

There's a huge effort that goes on with that.

Q: These are black force, black SOF forces?

A: As far as I would go is I would say there are forces that are dedicated to killing or capturing al-Qaida top leadership.

Q: The bin Laden video came out right before the election.

A: Which election?

Q: Our election.

Q: Presidential.

Q: What did that trigger by way of a hunt to try to track him quickly? I mean did it generate any special effort on your part?

A: This is getting a little out of my lane. Twice a week I brief Central Command, obviously our boss. At that level, you've got to start to look regionally at General Abizaid's level on what could hurt us. Is it oil infrastructure? Is he going to go after oil infrastructure? Is he after some type of catastrophic attack in the United States? So I

would say, I think it would be fair for me to say that we heightened security as much as it needed to be. We're pretty much on heightened security all the time. We would look to protect those things and look to work with those governments, those foreign governments to help give them as much intelligence as we can on what we might think might happen so they can embolden their security forces and so they can prepare for anything that might happen.

Q: I was asking when that video came out did you have a specialized effort to try to locate him quickly? After the video came out. To see if there's a trail you could --

A: I would say the specialized effort is, and I'm not trying to avoid your question. You guys pay taxes, you deserve to know what's happening as do the American people.

I would say that there's a specialized, that's the wrong way to put it. There is a concerted effort every day to find the top leadership of al-Qaida. If we find them we will kill them or capture them.

Q: Did they come close in the eight months you've been there, capturing bin Laden?

A: Close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades. [Laughter]. So I'd rather not comment on that.

When we capture or kill one of those people, believe me, you guys will be certainly some of the first to know.

Q: With a couple of day's lag, right?

A: I don't know. You'd have to ask Colonel Keaton that as the PAO.

KEATON: ABC asked if we could just, right before we get him, give them time to get over there so they could videotape it. [Laughter].

Q: Colonel, since the elections what changes have you seen in the way the Taliban and also al-Qaida organizes and operates in Afghanistan? Have there been splits in these groups? Are some of them joining, coming into the political process?

A: I would say our intelligence to some degree, and I can't go very far into this because there are probably splits in the Taliban.

As we know, counterinsurgencies are not one with, I like this new term that everybody likes to use, kinetic operations. Non-kinetic operations are as important or more important in a counterinsurgency operation.

I think there are indications, and this is as far as I'll go, that there are some Taliban leaders who are probably willing to come in, literally and figuratively, from the cold. I think there are political, and I'm getting out of my lane, I think there are political --

Q: Still on the record, right? Yes. [Laughter].

A: I read your thing. You told me on the record the whole time.

Q: I just wanted to remind you.

A: There are politically --

Q: Negotiations going on?

A: I would say if you watch Afghanistan very closely in the near future the government of Afghanistan might come out with a plan to widen the fissures within the Taliban leadership.

Q: Amnesty?

A: We don't use that word. We don't use the term amnesty. There is national reconciliation. There's planning for reconciliation but not amnesty.

A: That's as far as I'll go.

Q: Plea bargain.

A: I wouldn't say it's a plea bargain. You guys are going to get me to go down the wrong road here.

Q: This is the right road. [Laughter].

A: I would say that the government of Afghanistan is looking at political options to help unify the country with those who before may have not been included in the political process. And I think it will be done inclusively, not just for select groups. I think that's important for Afghanistan. It's like the counternarcotics thing. There has to be some type of balance. People don't want to feel excluded. I think it has to be a nationwide program and I think the people at the U.S. embassy in Kabul the best ones to comment on that.

Q: What about al-Qaida? Are they operating in Afghanistan now? And possibly

operating differently?

A: I don't think operating any differently, sir, and I've certainly seen nothing intelligence wise that shows us, you know, you have IEDs, you have small scale attacks, you have rocket attacks which would particularly describe how the attacks go in Afghanistan.

You never want to bait somebody but I would say I've heard more rhetoric than I've seen actual action on the ground from any coalition militia organization.

Q: I get the sense that they don't have a presence any more then in Afghanistan.

A: That would be difficult to say. I don't sense a large presence. Let me put it this way. I don't see since any, I've seen nothing in the past eight months that shows us based on the results that we've seen, any effective presence. I think that would be a fair statement to say. No effective presence.

Q: Let me just follow up Tony's question on bin Laden. Your boss and several others last year said their best guess is that he's --

A: My boss meaning General Barno [ph]?

Q: Yeah. That he's in the border region, on one side of the border or another in the mountains. As opposed to anywhere else in the world. Is that still your best guess? Is that still your working assumption, that he is in that region and Zawahiri as well?

A: I would hate to speculate. I think if we knew where he was at we'd go get him. And I'm not trying to be flippant to you. Is there a possibility that he's there? Sure. Absolutely. If we had a good bead on where he was I think you would see that we would go get him. Or members of the global war on terrorism would go get him.

Q: There seemed to be not certainty last year, but there seemed to be a pretty good working assumption that he was probably in that region and there was a lot of effort devoted to that region.

Is there a feeling that maybe he may not be there? There's less of a chance that he's there because you've done a lot of looking in the region?

A: I think it's difficult to say. I think for all of us as Americans, as a world community, I know we want to get bin Laden and certainly that would be a huge success. But again I go back to, and this is what I'd like to get with you guys is, he's taken a huge shot in Afghanistan. He's lost an operating base there, and we're focusing on one guy. There's a huge success story there that I think needs to be told. Are we trying to go after him?

Absolutely. Is he the be all and end all on the global war on terrorism? I don't think so. I think we're effects-based. What effect are we having? What effect have we had in Afghanistan? And I think we had a very positive effect.

I saw you guys writing, which I guess in your profession means that was something worthy of taking down. [Laughter]. We talked about, look at the cooperation we're having along the border with Pakistan. That's a quantum leap forward.

So I would say okay, Mr. bin Laden, I understand you're still in hiding but how effective are your operations in Afghanistan? Not very because we've had an election, we've had a successful inauguration. Does he have the capability -- absolutely not. But you have to look at our successes and say you know what? Things have gone pretty well. Could there be rough times ahead? Possibly. Are we moving in the right direction? Absolutely.

Q: The President said dead or alive. He's the one who put a mark on the wall.

A: I'm not trying to belittle it at all.

Q: Going after him -- The president elevated it. That's why we keep asking.

A: Okay. I'm not trying to give anybody a hard time. I'm not trying to be confrontational. I'm not saying it's not important to get him, but I say I think there are some other things we have to look at certainly as indications of success in the war on terrorism.

Q: I wanted to ask about National Guard Special Forces. I understand they've been written out of the rotation into Afghanistan for right now. Are they being saved for something? Are they going to go back in? What's going on? What's the plan for them?

A: I would not say that National Guard Special Forces have been written out of anything. I don't talk about current ops. The current unit that we have there is an active duty Special Forces group. Before I deployed I did live in the great state of Northern Virginia and at my son's baseball game I happened to be standing next to a guy that turned out when he found out I was going to Afghanistan, he works for one of the large firms up here, Special Forces Reservist. He went all the way from Mezz down to Kandahar. Standing next to him you'd have never known it.

The Chief of Staff of the UN, Larry Sampler, a great, great guy. I met him, come to find out as the Chief of Staff of the UN, his former life -- Special Forces non-commissioned officer, graduate of Georgia Tech.

So I would not say that we would write any Special Forces people off, or any servicemember off or unit off because they're National Guard. 3/116th is a unit that's in

Afghanistan now. I believe out of the great state of Virginia, doing a terrific job. So because you hear National Guard Special Forces, write them off. I certainly don't think that's true at all

Q: What effect did the Iraq operation have? They drew a lot of Special Forces and obviously they're units of choice in Afghanistan. What kind of effect did that have on your operation?

A: It had no effect as far as force level of Special Operations. That's a very good question, actually. I don't think I can go into, there were contingency plans made with Special Operations forces for the region, but it had no direct impact on the force levels within Afghanistan.

And sir, that might go back to maybe what, somebody asked me a question about the threat when bin Laden came out. There were some contingency plans made within Central Command that had to do with Special Operations Forces, and that's as far as I'll go, but it gave the Commander of CENTCOM flexibility with Special Operations Forces.

Q: You said it's a good question but you're saying it had no effect, so why is it a good question?

A: I think it shows a certain amount of insight on your part.

Q: With regard to, once again coming back to Guard units, [inaudible] some folks I know who were in Afghanistan since I haven't been myself, and they said you know, when we were deploying we were told we couldn't get a lot of the spare parts we wanted because we were [inaudible]. Then we showed up in theater, they told us we should have brought them with us. And so there was some resentment about that and some feeling that it was because they were National Guard and there was a misunderstanding of who was going to have all the stuff. Have you heard of anything like that happening? And is there anything going on to try and fix it?

A: Certainly I haven't heard of any problems in our theater of operations about people receiving priority treatment because they're National Guard or not National Guard. And as far as anything like that, we're getting new HUMVEEs in, the up-armored HUMVEEs are coming in. They'll go to the National Guard units just like they'd go to any other unit, but certainly nothing with people saying I'm in the National Guard therefore I'm not getting parts or equipment or kit.

Q: Thanks.

Q: Colonel Crawford, thanks a lot. So long everyone.

END TEXT