

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

February 27, 2008

PRESS BRIEFING
BY
SECRETARY OF DEFENSE ROBERT GATES

Via Teleconference

1:04 P.M. EST

MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody. It's Josh Earnest. Thank you for jumping on the call. As Rob mentioned, we'll hear some brief remarks from Secretary Gates and then we'll open it up for questions. We're running tight on time, so we'll move quickly and we won't have any follow-up questions. So you just get one bite at the apple here.

Secretary Gates, do you want to start us off?

SECRETARY GATES: Sure. I'll just start with a couple of comments. First of all, the atmosphere here at Camp Lejeune for the speech was very warm, very enthusiastic. And I would also say that the welcome has been pretty extraordinary. I think that the speech was very well received. There were a number of interruptions for applause, as you may have all seen.

On the substance, I obviously am very supportive of the option that the President has chosen, the decision that he has made, as is the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Frankly, this is where both the Chairman and I thought this should come out and it was a very thorough, deliberative process, where a lot of different options and a lot of different analysis were examined.

So with that, why don't I just go straight to questions.

MR. EARNEST: Thank you, Secretary. Rob, why don't we go ahead and open it up to some questions now.

Q Secretary Gates, one of the things that surprised me in the speech was his flat-out saying, all troops would be out by 2011, at the end of 2011. And I know he referenced the Status of Forces Agreement, but he seemed quite definitive about that. Can you explain what he meant and -- is that what he meant, everybody is out by 2011, no matter what?

SECRETARY GATES: I think what he was referring to was that under the terms of the Status of Forces Agreement, which is what we are operating under now, all U.S. forces must be out by the end of 2011. It will require a new agreement -- or it would require a new agreement, a new negotiation -- almost certainly an Iraqi initiative -- to provide for some presence beyond the end of 2011. So in the absence of that agreement, in the absence of any negotiation for such an agreement, it is in keeping with the SOFA that, to say definitively, that we will be out at the end of 2011.

Q Hello, sir. What difference did the three months make for you, going from 16 months to 19 months? And what problems did you have with the 19 -- with the 16-month issue in the first place?

SECRETARY GATES: Well, I think that the view of the commanders in the field, particularly General Odierno, was that the real concern -- I'm going to

interrupt myself -- the real concern has been how do we get through this year and all of the elections that will take place -- beginning with the district and sub-district elections early in the summer, the national elections at the end of the year -- and have a period of adjustment after those national elections, to make sure people are accepting the results and so on, and that we would have the maximum force presence during -- through the end of this year, and early into next year?

And if you go along that timeline, even if there are some reductions during the course of this year, as there will be, it provides the maximum available force for General Odierno, during that sensitive period. And to try and get everybody out by May, would have -- if you do that, then really would present some significant logistical and security issues. And so the extra two months or so was considered to be important, in terms of just the logistics of how you do that.

Q Thank you.

Q Hi, Mr. Secretary. I just wanted to follow up on the first question about the possibility of forces remaining after the end of 2011. You've said in the past that you foresee that that could happen and in fact would be useful to assist the Iraqi forces. Does that remain your view, if the Iraqis are interested in doing it, that it would also be in the interest of the United States to do it?

SECRETARY GATES: Well, I think we'll have to wait and see. I mean, it's a hypothetical. The Iraqis have not said anything about that at this point. So it remains to be seen whether they will take an initiative. I think that we should be -- my own view would be that we should be prepared to have some very modest-sized presence for training and helping them with their new equipment and providing, perhaps, intelligence support and so on beyond that. But again, it's hypothetical, because such a -- no such request has been made, and no indication that it will be at this point.

Q Hi there, sir. I just wanted to get a little clarification on the difference between the combat and non-combat troops. Once the U.S. has pulled all combat troops out by August 31st of next year, the remaining troops will be non-combat. But they will, presumably, be combat-capable. Will there be a real significant difference in what troops are doing today and what the troops will be doing once they're officially designated non-combat?

SECRETARY GATES: Yes. All of the combat units will be out of Iraq by the end of August in 2010. And those that are left will have a combat capability. There will be, as the President said, targeted counterterrorism operations. There will be continued embeds with some of the Iraqi forces in a training capacity and so on. So there will be the capability, but the units will be gone. And more importantly, the mission will have changed. And so the notion of being engaged in combat in the way we have been up until now will be completely different.

Q Secretary Gates, how flexible is this plan? And can you describe -- the President has suggested often that he is partial to decision-making based on conditions on the ground. In light of that, how fluid and nimble is this timetable projection? And if it is so nimble and fluid, why set a date at all?

SECRETARY GATES: Well, I think that -- first of all, because he said that he would, and I think that it is important to have a date in terms of the conclusion of one mission and the beginning of another mission. And I think that the date provides a way of delineating when one mission in Iraq and a completely new and different one begins.

So I think that the date is important. It's important for our troops to know. It's important for the Iraqis to know. And I think in terms of flexibility, I mean, the President has made clear that he's the Commander-in-Chief and retains the flexibility to make changes. He clearly does not anticipate having to do that; he has balanced the risks of staying longer or coming out sooner, and has come out in this direction and I think it is the expectation of all of us involved in that process and, above all, him, that we will meet these timelines.

Q Thank you.

Q Hi, Secretary Gates, I'd like to ask you about the shift -- President Obama says twice in the speech about refocusing on al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan. We've got 17,000 troops going over; people are calling it a surge, but it seems like a buildup. Can you talk a little more about how you see that force, in terms of how long they're going to be -- I guess it will be 55,000 troops by summer in Afghanistan -- if you see that force getting larger in the coming years.

A surge tends to imply that these folks would -- you know, those numbers would come down in a couple of years, as they did in Iraq. Do you see that force remaining a large force for years to come? Do you see that force getting larger than 55,000? How do you foresee that scenario in Afghanistan with the troops?

SECRETARY GATES: First, no one involved in the process has, to my knowledge, ever referred to the additional troops going into Iraq -- I mean, into Afghanistan as a surge. I think that the question about how long the additional forces will be there is a question that will be addressed, and whether additional forces would be sent is to be determined by the review that is going on right now and the decisions the President will make once that review is over.

And I think that there won't be a real sense of the ultimate size of the force or the duration of its presence until he has made those decisions subsequent to the conclusion of the review.

Q Thank you.

Q Thank you, and forgive me if I'm asking a question that you already answered -- I got disconnected. I wanted to go back to the issue of the 35,000 to 50,000 troops that are going to remain in Iraq after 18 months. You have said they're not going to be combat brigades, but are you going to take combat brigades that are in the United States and sort of rename them, redesignate them, or are you going to create new units for this specific mission?

And if I could as a separate question on Afghanistan, the Marines that are -- that Barack, the President, spoke to today, what will their mission be when they get to Afghanistan? Will it be population security, to mentor Afghan forces, (inaudible) the Taliban? If you could talk a little bit about specifically how they'll be used.

SECRETARY GATES: Well, with respect to the second question, I think it's probably all of the above. My understanding is they will be deployed principally into the south, and so they will be combating the Taliban, it will be population security.

And with respect to the 35,000 to 50,000, I think that that's a question probably better directed at General Odierno. But the clear idea is to

consolidate U.S. forces into a few places where both civilians and military would be. In other words our folks would provide protection for the provincial reconstruction teams and other civilians working in Iraq. And in terms of whether those are new units or whether they are re-missioned units that are already there, I think remains to be seen. But if they are our forces that are already in Iraq that remain at that point, then -- then they will be re-missioned to the new much more limited mission that we've been talking about.

Q Hi, Secretary Gates. If the situation in Iraq were to take a turn for the worse, has the President mentioned discussing how many troops he'd be willing to send back to the country, in addition to the troops that are there, as non-combat forces? And would that affect the troop levels being built up in Afghanistan?

SECRETARY GATES: I think -- you know, that's pretty hypothetical. I think, you know, we are -- we feel that we have -- the decisions the President has made has taken into account the risks that have been identified both by Ambassador Crocker and by General Odierno surrounding the election. And one of the reasons that General Odierno wanted to maintain as many troops as he could just beyond the end of 2009 was, in fact, to be available for those kinds of -- those kinds of contingencies.

I think that -- you know, the truth of the matter is, the Iraqis are going to have to step up to their responsibilities in this, and I think you saw with the performance of the Iraqi security forces in the provincial elections that they really did a superb job of maintaining security.

So I think the general view is that we will proceed on this -- on this timeline and the approach the President has identified. And I don't think anybody is talking about sending more troops back in there if there are problems.

Q Thank you.

Q Secretary Gates, I was wondering if there was -- you had talked a little bit about the drawdown being sort of back-loaded to 2010, to make sure there's enough troops for the elections. I wonder if you could say, first, how many units we should expect to come out this year, just sort of roughly. And also, if you could talk a little bit about the movement of air assets, and if we should see -- expect a lot of surveillance and attack aircraft moving from Iraq to Afghanistan, and when we might see that.

SECRETARY GATES: I think that the two theaters are clearly separate, and frankly I don't know the answer to your question about air assets and so on moving from one place to the other.

We are adding intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities in Afghanistan. At this point -- or up to this point, most of what we have been adding in Afghanistan are new assets; they have not been assets transferred from Iraq. But as we draw down in Iraq, some of those enabling assets may move from one theater to another. We'll just have to wait and see.

In terms of the number of troops coming out this year, I think we'll just have to wait and see what General Odierno's specific recommendations are. But again, the general approach is to try and -- there will be drawdowns this year of combat brigades, but in terms of how many and when, I think we'll wait and get the specific recommendations from General Odierno.

Q Hi, Mr. Secretary. Can you tell us what happened to the 23-months option? And you said this came out where both you and the Chairman thought it

should, but at one time there were some pretty strong voices arguing for a longer timeline. How did you settle on the 19 months versus a slightly longer version?

SECRETARY GATES: (Inaudible) to General Odierno about his views, to General Petraeus about his views, to the Chiefs, and then obviously the Chairman and I talked to him separately, or independently. But -- and I think in this whole process, there was really, with each of the options that was being examined -- 16 months, 19 months, and 23 months -- and all of those dated from the inauguration, basically -- was a weighing of the risks involved, the risks of the progress with respect to the sustaining progress in Iraq, but also issues relating to stress on the force and the need for additional capability in Afghanistan.

All these things were taken into account, and I think that the -- I think that General Odierno and General Petraeus are comfortable with the option that the President has decided on. And both the Chiefs as well as the Chairman and myself are very supportive of that option, as well.

Q Thanks very much. Mr. Secretary, in his speech, President Obama talked about a training mission for Iraqi security forces that was conditioned on them being nonsectarian. Can you talk a bit about what mechanisms you'll have in place going forward to adjudicate whether or not certain units act in a sectarian fashion that might require the withdrawal of American support?

SECRETARY GATES: Well, first of all, I think that we have been very pleased by the progress in Iraq and the development of the Iraqi army as a nonsectarian force, and it has operated as a nonsectarian force as illustrated by the offensive several months ago in Basra. And so I think we have a pretty good feel that this -- that the army is developing along nonsectarian lines, is operating on nonsectarian lines.

And so that's -- that really is the premise from which we start. We have close enough relationships with these units -- both as advisors and occasionally as embeds, that I think if we saw concerns like that we would be aware of them and be able to bring them -- that some unit was acting in sectarian fashion, that we would be in a position to bring that to the attention of the Iraqi leadership.

Thank you, all.

END

1:24 P.M. EST