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**Presenter: Commander, NATO-ISAF Regional Command South, Royal Netherlands Army, Maj. Gen. Mart De Kruif****June 25, 2009****DoD News Briefing with Maj. Gen. De Kruif at the Pentagon Briefing Room via Teleconference from Afghanistan**

MR. WHITMAN: General, this is Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon. I know that we're experiencing technical difficulties, but I think what I'd like to do is press ahead and do it just audio-only. I know you can't – see us; we just won't be able to see you. But can you hear me okay?

GEN. DE KRUIF: Okay. I can hear you loud and clear. Over.

MR. WHITMAN: All right. Well, General, thank you for joining us again in this format.

This is, on the other end here, General – Major General Mart de Kruif, who is the commander of Regional Command South in Afghanistan. General de Kruif commands more than 30,000 international troops from 17 nations, who are obviously responsible for security and stability operations in the southern region of Afghanistan. He assumed this command in November of 2008, and, as you'll recall, he's done this once before with us, and so he's very familiar with the procedures.

He's going to give us a brief overview of RC South and then take your questions.

So General, thank you again. And thank you for working through the technical difficulties here. And let me turn it over to you.

GEN. DE KRUIF: Yeah. Thank you for having me. I still recall last time. The main topic of course was the possible influx of the additional coalition forces, mainly U.S. forces. And I can tell you that we are actually entering a complete new state now.

About a month ago, I took command of the 82nd Combat Aviation Brigade, Task Force Pegasus, with its rotary-wing assets. And over two weeks ago, I took command of the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade, now called Task Force Leatherneck.

And in a very short time, you will see in RC South that we will start significant operations – shape, clear, hold and build operations – to secure central and southern Helmand and stabilize Kandahar city, with the support of the new assets, especially 82nd CAB and, of course, Task Force Leatherneck.

So we're entering a new state in the operation, in which I would like to make the case that we took away the operational initiative from the insurgents and are now entering a new state, in which we will have the operational initiative on our side and maintain it.

On the governance-enriched section and development lines of operation, I would like to mention that the civilian-military cooperation cell that we established within RC South, last November, produced a regional economic plan which was endorsed last month, by all the governors and the line ministries and the task forces and the provincial reconstruction teams.

It carries about \$700 U.S. million dollars of projects, from which more of 300 million are already funded. And it focuses on seven regional projects, especially focusing on power, water, water management and regional infrastructure. This is a significant step and has added value towards the work, what the PRTs are doing in the province.

So from my point of view, fascinating times. We see the effects of the additional forces on the ground in a very short time from now. And having said that, I'm pending your questions.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you, General. And we'll get right into some here. We'll start with Daphne.

Q Hi. This is Daphne Benoit with Agence France-Presse. I have a question.

General Petraeus recently mentioned the fact that the first week of June had been the worst, in terms of violence, since 2001 in Afghanistan. Now you were mentioning the fact that you are about to launch a pretty aggressive offensive against the insurgents in the south.

Do you expect that level of violence to go even higher?

GEN. DE KRUIF: Well, first, I mentioned that we are going to start operations. But the operations are population-centric focused. So we focus on securing the population, not hunting down the insurgents; only if we have to.

So I wouldn't call it aggressive operations targeting the insurgents but operations aiming at securing the population and separating the population from the insurgents.

It is true that we had a significant increase of incidents, but we also should do some analysis. I think that most of these incidents, or some of this increase is caused by the fact that we simply have more troops on the ground; which also means that we went into areas where we've never been before. That ultimately leads towards

more incidents. I would also like to say – can you still hear me?

MR. WHITMAN: Yes, we're hearing you just fine.

GEN. DE KRUIF: Hello?

MR. WHITMAN: We're hearing you just fine.

GEN. DE KRUIF: I would also like to say that in RC – great. I would also like to say that within RC South the spike in incidents is concentrated in central Helmand and in Kandahar. But what we see currently is a decrease in incidents in the provinces of Oruzgan and Zabul; which actually means – that our assessment that the insurgency is more or less forced to concentrate its efforts in Helmand and in Kandahar.

That having said, I think, Daphne, you're absolutely right, there will be an increase in incidents in the next couple of months, based on the fact that we are going to deploy these forces and secure areas where we've never been before until now. And we will also be able to put much more pressure on the insurgency than we did until now.

MR. WHITMAN: Andrew, go ahead.

Q General, this is Andrew Gray from Reuters. Can you tell us what kind of statistics or metrics or indicators you will be looking at to see if you're being successful? What do those indicators look like now, and how will you be looking for them to change? Are you looking at areas under your control or under Afghan government control? What are going to be the measures of success?

GEN. DE KRUIF: Yeah, that's a great question. And we're actually discussing these issues now with HQ-ISAF, to see whether we can align the measurements of effects we have with HQ-ISAF.

What we do in RC South is that we have a regional common operational picture in which one of the main elements is a polling of the Afghans. We did it now for more than 16 months, so we can see trends. You just mentioned some other metrics which are used, like the amount of incidents, the amount of IED finds. But I will actually tell you that after being in theater for more than eight months my – the best two metrics I have seen until now is the amount of shops open in the bazaar and the amount of schools open in the villages. I would say that's by far the best metrics that I've seen until now.

Q Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: Jeff, go ahead, please.

Q General, Jeff Schogol with Stars and Stripes. In your last briefing you mentioned that some insurgents were shooting at ISAF forces because they were getting \$10 a day. Are you making an effort to give money to those people so that they don't shoot at you?

GEN. DE KRUIF: Well, the answer is no, we don't pay them off. But especially on the reconstruction and development line, we are conducting right now a agricultural study based on the economic plan, and that's actually focusing on setting the conditions for the farmers to be able to grow all kinds of crops except poppy. If we are successful in that – and it will take a couple of years – we will take away the economic incentive for insurgents to start shooting at us.

So we will never pay the insurgency – pay them off. But what we will do – and that is counterinsurgency – is set conditions for economic growth and thus denying the insurgency motivation to get paid and start shooting at us. Over.

Q If I can follow up, these sound like they're going to be a couple years off, and if you're talking about going from \$10 to \$20 per person, that doesn't seem like a lot of money. And quite frankly, paying off the insurgents worked really well in Iraq. So what's to stop that from working here?

GEN. DE KRUIF: Well, the first thing I would say is that if you start to pay off the insurgency, then you got to realize where and how you can stop that. I think there's no end to it.

Secondly – and we see some examples of it – once you reached a level of security in which people feel pretty safe and secure, like now in parts of Oruzgan, and parts of Zabul, you will see a accelerated economic progress within a couple of months. So don't think it is actually a matter of years. From a regional point of view, it is, but from a local point of view, it absolutely isn't.

So I'm pretty optimistic that we can see the first fruits of this program and economic development overall in a very short notice once we are able to establish security. That's the key.

MR. WHITMAN: Courtney?

Q Hi, General. This is Courtney Kube from NBC News. Can you just update us on the status of the Afghan security forces in RC South? How many Afghan army police officers do you have that you – that your 30,000 troops operate with? And how would you characterize their capabilities?

GEN. DE KRUIF: Yes, I can absolutely give you an update. The Afghan National Army – as you know, we've got the 205 Hero Corps, which is deployed with four brigades within RC South. These brigades are not completely manned and have a very high operational tempo. That means that not all of them will extend their contract after it expires after three years of service. So actually, we have some manning problems now within these kandaks, and that's mainly based on the high operational tempo, and not able to establish a period of operations and then a period of rest, refit and leave.

That having said, it's fair to say that the leadership of the Afghan National Army has significantly increased its capabilities over last couple of months. They are able to conduct independent operations. We will see additional kandaks coming in right now, four kandaks, one to every brigade. And a kandak is a equivalent of a battalion.

And we are working hard with CSTC-A to increase the manning levels of the battalions that we have, and we will see significant more forces coming in RC South next year. That's the ANA. The ANA is seen as independent by the people, is very trusted and is – has an increased operational capability.

The Afghan border police still got lots of issues. But I think it's also fair to say that besides the corruption and sometimes the lack of training, the shortage of ANA forces the Afghan National Police into a position that they are used as light infantry. And that's not what a police force should do. So if you've got more ANA, we will ultimately put the Afghan National Police in a better position.

It's fair to say that the Focused District Development program and the mentoring are very successful in RC South. And what we're looking into now is the uplift for the coming elections. So we will definitely see an increase of quantity of the Afghan National Police. What we need to work at is better training.

And therefore, over the last couple of months, we established new training centers in Oruzgan. It's been very like -- we have one in Lashkar Gah, and we have one in Kandahar city. So we are making progress, but it's in -- a work in progress.

And last but not least, the Afghan border police -- we are just starting training them and partnering and mentoring them. So I would say they need a lot of extra attention to be able to conduct operations independently.

Q I have a follow-up question.

MR. WHITMAN: Okay, go ahead.

Q I have a follow-up. This is Daphne Benoit again with Agence France-Presse. Can you tell us what role exactly will the ANA play during that new phase of operation you were mentioning? And just a detail, but can you give us an actual figure for the number of Afghan national forces present in the south?

GEN. DE KRUIF: Well, we have about 30,000 ANA and ANP forces in RC South right now. What the Afghan National Army does is -- we support them once we conduct the clear phase of an operation, in which we secure an area and deny it for the insurgency. And after that, during the whole phase, they are responsible for the security of the perimeter, thus setting the conditions for the Afghan National Police to do community policing within that security bubble. That is, I would put it simply, the mission and the tasks of the ANA if you talk about shape, clear, hold and build. Over.

Q General, it's Laura Jakes with Associated Press. I'm wondering if you can give us your assessment of this year's poppy crop, and also how you see not only the insurgents reacting and benefiting from it and how, by extension, your forces are reacting to the insurgents.

GEN. DE KRUIF: Okay. Well, it's absolutely clear that there is a very strong nexus between the insurgency and narcotics. And I can say that because the force I have available -- the regional force I have, which is mostly special forces and a British battalion, which is called the Regional Battle Group, specifically focused over the last six months in hitting the nexus between IEDs, narcotics and the leadership of the insurgency.

And every time we launched a operation, we found significant amounts of poppy, IEDs and material that points to leadership, like radios, manuals and things like that. So there is a clear nexus. And we know that the narco-trade, from a financial point of view, fuels a significant part of the insurgency. So the nexus is still there.

Focusing on this year, I think overall the numbers of poppy has gone down. That's not sure yet; that's just an impression I can give you. But I think we have a decreased amount of poppy now in RC South. One of the main reasons therefore is that, especially in Helmand, Governor Mangal had a very successful alternative livelihood program, in combination with an eradication program led by the governor, and also based on the fact that the price of wheat went up, so it was a viable alternative for the farmers.

That doesn't mean that poppy is off the world market now, because I know there's still a lot of stocks out there. But I think overall, it's fair to say that the nexus is there, we've proven it, and that the narco-industry is fueling the insurgency partly, and that there is some decrease in poppy harvest now, but overall, the effect of this will be seen on the long run, not next year. Over.

Q General, it's Luis Martinez with ABC News. Can I ask you, do you have an estimate for the size of the Taliban force in RC South? And what do you attribute the decrease in violence levels in Zabul and Oruzgan to? And do you have any evidence that shows direct command and control over Taliban in RC South from the Taliban leadership in Quetta?

GEN. DE KRUIF: Well, it's very hard to assess the exact amount of Taliban because we have, to put it very simple, three different kinds of Taliban.

We have the religious, motivated Taliban, which forms the leadership in Quetta. We've got the Taliban which is linked with the narcotic trade. And we've got the \$10-a-day Taliban. But we also have -- some of these people are not local, but come from Pakistan; are Pashtun, but are called out-of-area fighters. So they come in, and they come out. Our estimation is that in RC South it's somewhere between 10 and 18 thousand fighters, but that's including the \$10-a-day fighters.

Secondly, there is a link between Quetta and the insurgency here, in a way that Quetta sets out the long-term strategy and the long-term goals which need to be achieved at the local level. But it's not so that if Quetta would not be there tomorrow any more the insurgency would stop. Therefore, the insurgency is just too much linked within the narcotics trade and is too localized. Over.

Q And if I could follow up again on Oruzgan and Zabul, what do you attribute the decrease in violence there?

GEN. DE KRUIF: Okay. Sorry.

For Oruzgan and Zabul, I think there are a couple of reasons that we see a decrease of incidents there. First, like I always said before, I think the capable insurgency leadership is under a constant pressure and is therefore forced to concentrate on the main effort. And that is Kandahar City and the approaches towards Kandahar City and central Helmand.

That doesn't mean that there's no leadership in Zabul and Oruzgan, but it's a different kind of leadership, with the difficulties of synchronizing the operations on a provincial level. And besides that, that leadership that's still out there is under a constant pressure by especially Special Forces. And that actually leaves room for the Task Force Zabul, the Romanians, reinforced by the Americans and the American PRT, and in Oruzgan for the Dutch task force and the PRT and the Australians, who make good use of this room to maneuver offered to them. And for instance, in Oruzgan a couple of months ago, we were able link Tarin Kowt with Chora, clearing the whole Baluchi Valley, which was a significant progress.

Well, I think it's fair to say that you see that based on the fact that the insurgency is forced to concentrate, the constant pressure on their leadership, and the agility of the task forces and the PRTs, we see progress there in Oruzgan and Zabul. Over.

MR. WHITMAN: Andrew, go ahead.

Q General, Andrew Gray from Reuters again. You have a significant buildup of forces this year in your sector to a very high level. How long do you anticipate that high level of forces having to remain? I mean, first of all, are you confident that's going to be enough, the level of forces you have now? And how long is it going to be necessary to keep that level of forces in this area?

GEN. DE KRUIF: I missed the first part of the question, but I think you're asking me whether we should need additional forces and whether the current forces we have are enough to achieve success. Is that correct? Over.

Q Yup, that's part of the question, whether the current level is enough. And secondly, how long do you think you're going to have to sustain this current level or increased level in RC South?

GEN. DE KRUIF: Okay. Thanks. Well, I think, as we all know, there's a very good manual about counterinsurgency, which was partly written by General Petraeus, which defines the amount of soldiers that you need regarding -- and amount of civilians to conduct counterinsurgency operations.

From that point of view, we are still short of numbers. So although we had a significant increase of forces, we still have to conduct a counterinsurgency in a country that's five times as large as The Netherlands, with a limited amount of force. Nevertheless, I think that, with the forces we have now, we can secure most of the population. And if we are able to do so, that means we are able to separate the insurgency from the population.

And I think we can have relatively success on the secured line of operations in a couple of years. But we should bear in mind that security is the supporting line of operations. At the end of the day, it's good governance and reconstruction and development that will bring lasting success. Over.

MR. WHITMAN: Okay. General, we have pretty much come to the end of the time -- actually, gone over, due to the technical difficulties at the beginning. But we want to be respectful of your time, and we appreciate you taking the time.

Before I bring it to a close, let me just turn it back to you to see if there's any final comments that you might have that you want to share with us.

GEN. DE KRUIF: Well, my final comment would be that I think it's fair to say, like I said in the beginning, that we're entering a new phase. And being out there with the commander ISAF, visiting the U.S. Marines, visiting the Brits in Helmand and visiting the Canadians in Kandahar, I would say it is overall on the ground at junior leadership that we have great spirits and high hopes, and we think that we can significantly increase the security before the elections, and thus setting the conditions for successful elections in our south.

It will not be easy. It will be a difficult time. But I think we are setting conditions for successful elections and lay a fundament for a significant increase in security over the next couple of months and years. Over.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, General, again, thank you for taking the time.

It's very helpful to get a perspective from somebody like you, on the ground there. And thank you for taking the time. And hope that we might be able to do this again sometime in the future.

GEN. DE KRUIF: Thanks very much. Happy to be of your help. Always available. And stay safe. Over.

MR. WHITMAN: Thank you.

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