

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH JOHN MELVIN JONES, TEAM LEADER,  
DIYALA PROVINCIAL RECONSTRUCTION TEAM (PRT), VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM IRAQ  
SUBJECT: PRIMING THE PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT TO TAKE BACK THEIR PROVINCE FOLLOWING  
THE RECENT U.S. MILITARY SURGE EFFORTS IN BAQUBAH TIME: 11:30 A.M. EDT DATE:  
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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): This is  
Jack. Who's joining us?

MR. JONES: Hello. This is John Jones joining us from the U.S. Embassy  
Baghdad.

MR. HOLT: Ah, Mr. Jones. Thank you very much for joining us. We've  
got folks online here. Let me get this set up.

And, all right, Mr. John Jones, you are the PRT leader for the Diyala  
Province, and welcome to the bloggers roundtable. Thanks for being with us  
today, sir. MR. JONES: Thank you. Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: And do you have an opening statement?

MR. JONES: Basically just to let you know what the PRT is and what it  
does.

We're a Provincial Reconstruction Team. The team was stood up in April  
of 2006. I arrived here in February of 2007 to assume leadership.

We work closely with the 3rd Brigade of the 1st Cavalry, and they  
provide our security. We're a group of approximately 45 or 46 right now  
persons. We're both civilians and 10 military -- USAID, Department of Justice  
and Department of Defense personnel.

Our job is to work directly with the provincial government -- the  
governor and the elected provincial government, which is the legislature here.  
And we are trying to provide some guidance and some advice to them on how to  
stand up a democratic form of government.

MR. JONES: All right, sir. Thank you very much.

And, let's see, Andrew, why don't you go ahead and get us started?

Q Mr. Jones, good afternoon. This is Andrew Lubin from U.S.  
Cavalry ON Point.

MR. JONES: Yes.

Q I appreciate you taking the time to talk with us.

Can you talk to us, please, about economic reconstruction? What are you doing -- what's the team doing to build up small business and also medium-sized light industry in your area?

MR. JONES: There are a number of employers in the province, and unfortunately not many of them are bringing people on board because of the security situation. We have several programs in place, and a lot of it will depend on how the security situation plays out.

We're trying to reestablish their largest employers, and we're working the the small businesses to provide microfinancing, for example, and small loans for businessmen who want to reopen their businesses.

Q But I mean, the security situation has got to be getting better, because didn't we just hear that over the weekend you moved 29 -- or was it 49? -- billion dinars up into your area? MR. JONES: (Laughs.) Yes, that was a great success. This was the first time that we've had this kind of success without any coalition force involvement. These were Iraqi army officials who were able to come down to the central bank and bring back almost 50 million Iraqi dinars, so this was a success.

The other side of it is that because of the difficulty at the banks, we have had to store that money at the government center, and the banks will come and pick it up from the government center as is needed.

Even though the banks are open, they're not safe, and they're in communities that are very fragile right now. And so rather than allowing the money to sit out there and be stolen, we are protecting it at the government center.

Q So this is like Rafadin Bank and Habib Bank and the local Iraqis?

MR. JONES: Yes, yes.

Q What do they keep on hand, then, a couple thousand dollars' worth of dinars just to have money in the till?

MR. JONES: Most of them, yes.

You've got to understand that the majority of the banks have been completely destroyed. Rafadin doesn't have a back wall, for example, and a lot of the others are just, you know, smaller banks in communities that don't even have safes. And it's done on a cash-and- carry basis, and normally the banker will come to the government center in the morning and withdraw what he needs for that day. That provides him with a bit of security and also prevents the bank from being overrun.

Q Yeah, because 50 billion dinars is, what, two -- (inaudible) -- worth of bills?

MR. JONES: Yeah. Yeah, it's about that. We had two CONEXes, or trailers, on the back of Iraqi army trucks, and that's what they delivered the money in.

Q Okay. Thank you, sir.

MR. HOLT: And Bruce.

Q Yeah, Mr. Jones, Bruce McQuain with QandO.net.

Diyala is fairly newly opened based on the surge and what's been going on up there. What role have -- or what connection has the -- have you been able to enable with the central government?

MR. JONES: Right now we're talking to the central government about playing a larger role in just making sure that the promises that come from the various ministries are, in fact, enforced at the province level. We're here in Baghdad today with the governor of Diyala and three other governors from the northern provinces to sit down with the deputy prime minister and eight of his ministers and to talk about the problems that exist in the northern provinces.

And I think the key thing for everyone here today was that there is sort of a disconnect. The central government understands that it's going to make promises and so forth. The guys at the provincial level are waiting for action. And so we see our role here as facilitating the contact, making sure that when the deputy prime minister says he's going to give a certain amount of money to the province to rebuild destroyed houses, that there is a method, that there is a way that the province governor and the provincial council can get access to that money. It's just that basic.

So we see us as being in a position to try to facilitate the actions or the statements of the central government and put them into action at the provincial level.

Q If I could follow up, I read a Michael Yon story about fuel in a convoy going into Baghdad and trying to pick up fuel. Is fuel a problem in Diyala, and does it remain a problem?

MR. JONES: It is a problem and it remains a problem.

Again, this is one of these paperwork problems. It's a case where there is sufficient fuel at the refineries, but no one has thought about the method to authorize people to go to the refineries to pick up the fuel. And so you might get there with your tanker trucks and someone at the gate will say, well, you need a letter from this minister or you need a letter from that person.

And so it's a frustrating process, because we really can't make the connection. Even though the minister of oil will say, okay, Diyala is entitled to X number of tons of fuel, there is something in the bureaucratic mix that normally gums things up.

And so one of our problems here is to try to figure out what that is, what's needed. Does the prime minister or the deputy prime minister have to sign off on every piece of paper. So we don't think so, but we think that there is a way for the process to work better. And we're working with the ministries

here in Baghdad and the director generals in the province to try to figure out how that connection should be made better.

Q And could you address the availability of electricity?  
(Laughter.)

MR. JONES: I could, because it's about null and void. We have, in the province, two lines, one coming in from Baghdad and one coming in from Iran. We have generators that burn out often, because the kind of electricity, the amount of voltage that we get from Baghdad is too high for most of the generators, so they burn out. The voltage that comes in from Iran is very weak, very -- strong enough to turn a light bulb on.

So it fluctuates. In the city, you might have anywhere from two to five hours of electricity per day, but no one is sure as to how strong that current is. So it's a problem; it's a major problem.

Q Thanks.

MR. HOLT: All right, Jarred.

Q Yes, sir, thanks for your time.

Could you just talk to us -- some more of the recent positive events -- put out a report and some -- maybe the two or three top things which you would want the American public to see which is demonstrating progress on your end?

MR. JONES: Yeah, well, over the last about a month and a half, we have seen a real rebirth of commerce in the capital city of Baqubah. The streets are full of people; the shops are open; the markets are open. And we see that as a positive result of combat operations that have been going on up in the Diyala River Valley for the last month and a half. So we see that as a positive. I think the key things for Americans to understand is that these forces are forces that have been in play up there for 1,000 years. We see our toughest job as being trying to get reconciliation among the tribes, reconciliation among the sectarian groups, so that they have a better sense of what it means to be Iraqi. And until they do that, they're going to fall back on their tribal alliances and their sectarian divides, and that's going to be sort of the rule of the day.

So our problem here is to try to get them to understand that they can work together for the betterment of the entire province, and it's going to take time.

It's not going to be something that we're going to overcome here in a generation. It's something that's been going on for a thousand years out here, and we need to change the mindset of those persons involved. And that's what we need to get going right now.

MR. HOLT: All right. And Grim?

Q I'd like to ask about the support the PRTs are receiving from back in Washington. Do you feel like at the interagency level, all the various people involved are helping you as they could, or do you feel like you might need more support from certain of the agencies than others?

MR. JONES: I think right now the problem is getting enough interaction up there. We can't do a lot without security, and so everything is based around

security. If we have security, then we can bring in agencies like USAID and consultants and so forth to do things. It's going to take a while before the security situation gets stable enough so that you can have a lot of these other agencies involved. I would like to see USAID out there, you know, doing agriculture projects, the Peace Corps out there doing things, but it's not feasible right now and I think it's going to take a long time to get stable.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right. Any other follow-ups?

Q Yes, I have one. Mr. Jones, Andrew Lubin again from U.S. Cav ON Point. From everything we've heard today from yourself and from the other two people and in the past couple weeks, everything -- every problem that we seem to hear goes back to the Iraqi central government. And then you mentioned today that it's going to be generational trying to reconcile some of the sectarian and tribal differences. How does Ambassador Crocker present this to the Congress and not be booted off the stage?

MR. JONES: (Laughs.) (Cell phone ringing.) Hold on one second. (Pause.) I'm sorry.

I don't know. I don't know, it's all a mixed bag out here. We have to take some time. And it's a question that everyone knows that the ambassador is working hard on, and it takes some convincing. It's going to be a while, I think, before everybody is on the same page of music. So I'm not sure how the ambassador sees that, but I think he's doing the right thing right now by providing advice and by being very neutral in his opinions.

Q Oh, no, that's not the issue. What you guys are doing is tremendous. It's just that I -- (chuckles) -- you know, you're looking at the far battle, and here their idea of the near battle is like the 24 hours.

MR. JONES: Yeah. Well, yeah, it's -- (chuckles) -- I -- you know, I really don't know an answer. It's a difficult thing to deal with. And you sort of have to look at the history here, and that is that the folks out in the provinces for 35 years have been accustomed to a centrally directed economy. They were directed in all the facets of governance. And so now they're being asked to step up and make decisions, and they're not accustomed to doing that, unfortunately. Those decisions are normally going to be centered around tribe and district and so forth.

And so we've got to try to break that barrier down, and I'm not sure whether the central government fully appreciates that. I think they're trying to give a picture of, again, an organization that is going to be able to run the entire country, and I think they've skipped that step of having to deal with the sectarian groups and tribes.

Q Okay. Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And anyone else? (Silence.)

All right. Thank you very much.

Mr. Jones, thank you very much for joining us today.

MR. JONES: Thank you. Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

MR. HOLT: And hopefully we can talk to you again.

MR. JONES: Okay. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right. Thank you.

MR. JONES: Bye-bye.

MR. HOLT: Bye-bye.

Q Thanks, Jack. END.