

Department of Defense Briefing by Gen. Townsend via Telephone from Baghdad, Iraq
Press Operations

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CAPTAIN JEFF DAVIS: Good afternoon. I understand we are feeding out over the pool line for the audio. What's that?

Hey, Tom Masten, are we able to turn the wifi on? We're not? Okay. I'm sorry. Well, all the more reason to be quick.

And General Townsend, just want to make sure you can hear us and we can hear you.

LIEUTENANT GENERAL STEPHEN TOWNSEND: Yes, I've got you.

CAPT. DAVIS: That didn't sound good. Hey Tom, we're not sounding good out here.

STAFF: (Off mic.)

LT. GEN. TOWNSEND: Okay. So that is just an unfortunate happenstance of war. We're on -- apparently, we're having a base defense drill right at this moment and that was the announcement for everyone to move to cover and lock down. So I'm in -- I'm undercover and I'm locked down, but we might have more of those announcements during this interview. I apologize for that, unforeseeable. If those occur, we'll just pause until they get done saying whatever they're saying. Okay?

CAPT. DAVIS: Thank you.

And we'll turn it over to you for opening comments.

LT. GEN. TOWNSEND: Okay. So that just adds a little real life, you know, wartime color commentary to what -- context to what I'm saying here. We're doing a base defense drill, if you weren't able to hear that. We try to smother the speaker without much success. So, OK. Thanks for giving me the time to address you all today on short notice. But we've had some significant events here in -- in Iraq and Syria. The Iraq and Syria counter-ISIS AOR, and I think when we have significant events take place, at some point, the commanders have to be willing to stand up and answer tough questions.

So I'd like to speak with you briefly about what's going on in Mosul and then I'll provide you an update on Syria and take your questions. And rather than talk about the broader campaign, I'll focus on the issues and events that I think are probably foremost on your mind, because they're what I'm seeing almost non-stop in the news right now. But I would welcome your comments, broader comments about how our campaign's going as well. So first and foremost, the death of innocent civilians in war is a terrible tragedy that weighs heavily on all of us.

That's why the coalition takes any allegation of possible civilian casualties, in any number, very seriously, and why we take a deliberate approach to assess each and every allegation and report these results publicly, unlike our enemy I might add. A general officer's been appointed to lead our civilian casualty

credibility assessment. The most recent allegation in Mosul, to determine the facts of the case and the validity of the allegation. Right now there are a lot of conflicting reports as to what brought down the building or buildings that caused civilian casualties, what we know for sure, is that we did conduct a strike in that area. What we don't know for certain is that that strike is responsible for the casualties in question.

There are also reports that ISIS may have trapped civilians in the house and rigged it to blow up. There's a report a secondary VBIED explosion may have been the cause that destroyed the house. Also, I would point out these aren't necessarily mutually exclusive, it could have been a combination of these events that caused this tragedy and that's why we're hesitant to say anything definitive until our proper process is completed.

I'll say this, if we did it, and I'd say there's at least a fair chance that we did. It was an unintentional accident of war and we will transparently report it to you when we're ready. The coalition freely and transparently takes on the responsibility to act in accordance with the law of armed conflict, in all of our operations.

We set the highest standards for protecting civilians. It is my view, that our dedication, diligence and discipline in prosecuting our combat operations while protecting civilians, is without precedent in recorded history of warfare. None of this changes the basic facts though. Civilians are dying in Mosul. Most of them are dying at the hands of ISIS and that's the real horror, the real tragedy of Mosul.

Make no mistake about it, ISIS will continue to cause massive human suffering, if the ISIS -- if the Iraqi security forces and the coalition do not prevail. Our enemy, ISIS, are evil and murderous butchers, engaged in purposeful and mass slaughter. There are countless mass graves surrounding Mosul. ISIS put those bodies in there, not the coalition. I believe we should take a lesson from history, maybe inject a little moral clarity in what we're talking about here, about this issue. ISIS, their crimes against humanity must not be forgotten.

In the past few days, we have observed civilians fleeing from ISIS held buildings. We have heard reports that ISIS was shooting civilians trying to leave Mosul.

The Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service reported they found two houses rigged to blow and filled with hostages, one -- 45 in one house, 25 in another.

They managed to defuse the explosives and release the hostages without harm. If ISIS really wants to prevent human suffering, they can easily do so. They are in complete control of the areas they hold in Mosul.

They can leave at any time. The coalition respects human life, which is why we will not abandon our partners in their time of need or because of ISIS's inhumane tactics of terrorizing civilians using human shields and fighting from protected sites, such as schools, hospitals, religious sites, and civilian neighborhoods.

To put things in a little perspective for you, this is the most significant urban combat to take place since World War II; it is tough and brutal.

House by house, block by block fights. Despite that, the Iraqi Security Forces continue to press ISIS on multiple axes, presenting them with multiple dilemmas.

We know the enemy cannot respond to this. Tough fighting in one sector provides the opportunity for other elements to advance in other areas, and that's what the Iraqi Security Forces have been doing.

I think it's important to mention as well, despite the challenges, the government of Iraq and the United Nations are doing a great job caring for the internally displaced persons or refugees coming out of Mosul.

Everyone expected that there would be a lot of refugees, and we've seen roughly double -- double the numbers of them on the west side of Mosul than we saw on the east side.

They are certainly in a horrible situation, but they're being taken care of as best as anyone on the planet can do and thousands are returning to east Mosul every week.

And we support our Iraqi partners in Mosul, we're also supporting our Syrian partners outside of Raqqa. The Syrian Democratic Forces have completely isolated the eastside of Raqqa and are currently engaged in a tough battle to seize both the Tabqa Dam and the city of Tabqa, which is to the west of Raqqa.

Yesterday, they completed the seizure of the Tabqa airfield, on the south side of the city. This is a great accomplishment by a capable partner force.

They were supported by coalition advisers, U.S. and coalition airpower, Marine heavy artillery, and Army Apache helicopter gunships. Make no mistake about it though, the coalition has taken every precaution to ensure the integrity of Tabqa Dam.

I've seen a lot of crazy reporting in the media about Tabqa Dam in the last few days. We don't access that the dam is in any imminent danger and, to our knowledge, the dam has not been structurally damaged.

The Tabqa Dam is not a coalition target and when strikes occur on military targets, at or near the dam, we use non-cratering munitions to avoid unnecessary damage to the facility.

The coalition seeks to preserve the integrity of the dam because it's a vital resource for the people of Syria. The Syrian Democratic Forces have a plan in place to care for the dam after liberation from ISIS and that plan recognized the importance of the dam to Syria's economy, agriculture, and basic human needs and security.

So, if something happens to the Tabqa Dam, it will be at the hands of ISIS not the Coalition. So, what's my bottom line? This is a difficult and brutal fight on multiple fronts.

The most difficult I have seen in my career. Although our partners in the coalition have made mistakes that have harmed civilians, we have never targeted them, not once.

On the other hand, the savages that are ISIS deliberately target, terrorize and kill innocent civilians every day. The best and fastest way to end this human suffering is to quickly liberate these cities and Iraq and Syria from ISIS.

With that, I'll stop and take your questions.

CAPT. DAVIS: We're going to start with Bob Burns from the Associated Press.

Q: Thank you.