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1st Armored Division commander says coalition, Iraqis are creating 'historic turnaround'

By Donna Miles

American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- Citing "monumental" improvements since his Soldiers arrived in Iraq last year, 1st Armored Division commander Maj. Gen. Mark P. Hertling credited his troops, Iraqi security forces and the Iraqi people with creating a historic turnaround.



STAFF SGT MARY ROSE MITTLESTEADT

Maj. Gen. Mark Hertling, commander of 1st Armored Division (left), and Maj. Gen. Robert Caslen Jr. (center), commander of the 25th Infantry Division talk with Kirkuk provincial governor Abdul Rahman Mustafa Fetah-eh in the city of Kirkuk, Iraq, Dec 4. As the 1st Armored Division returns to Germany, Hertling officially passed authority for the Multi-National Division - North mission in Iraq to Caslan, Dec. 9.

Hertling also commanded Multi-National Division - North during his division's tour in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. As the 1st Armored returns to its home station in Wiesbaden, Germany, Maj. Gen. Robert L. Caslen Jr. and the Army's 25th Infantry Division assumed responsibility for the MND-N mission

during a ceremony Dec. 9.

Hertling and his Soldiers arrived in Iraq just as the troop surge was taking effect in Baghdad and

"the awakening movement" was beginning to push al-Qaida out of Anbar province.

“I told our units that we were arriving at a critical time and that our actions, one way or another, would make history,” he told Pentagon reporters during a video teleconference from Contingency Operating Base Speicher near Tikrit, Iraq, earlier this week.

The situation then was dire. Enemy attacks had hit 1,800 a month, the Iraqis had little trust in their central government, and unemployment was staggering, Hertling said.

“For every two steps forward, we assessed, they were making one step back,” the general said.

“When we arrived, our task was to decrease violence, partner with the Iraqi security forces as well as local and governmental leaders, and grow the nation's economy,” he said. “We saw our roles as allies with the Iraqi people, working with them to change their communities and stop those who sought to destroy them.”

Hertling pointed to broad indicators of progress across a region the size of Connecticut, New Jersey, Maryland and Vermont combined. Violence is down dramatically, Iraqi security forces are gaining in numbers and capability, the local economy is improving and the Iraqi government is making strides, he said.

“I believe the changes in northern Iraq over the last 15 months have been monumental,” he said, citing the combination of “heroic and courageous actions” by coalition troops and civilians assigned to provincial reconstruction teams, actions of the Iraqi security forces and patriotic Iraqi leaders and civilians.

“I've watched them make miracle[s] happen,” he said.

Hertling conceded that the picture isn't all rosy, and that challenges remain. “There are still enemies that need to be destroyed,” he said, noting that “anywhere in this country has the potential of falling back under the control of al-Qaida.”

“It's a nefarious, evil group of individuals, and they will continue to attempt to conduct the kinds of attacks that kill innocent civilians, wherever we give them the opportunity,” he said.

Meanwhile, the Iraqi government is still very fragile, and needs to polish the representative process and methods of infrastructure repair, he said.

But despite these challenges, Hertling said, he's witnessed a major transformation during his time in Iraq that shows promise for a new future.

“The most dramatic change is one that only we get to see over here -- and that's now a new hope in the eyes of the Iraqi people,” he said.

The progress MND-N made in the region during Hertling's command came at a big cost, the general noted, with 104 U.S. Soldiers killed and 891 wounded, and substantial Iraqi

losses as well. “At every memorial, we rededicate ourselves to our motto, ‘Make these sacrifices matter,’” he said.



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