



U.S. EMBASSY - BAGHDAD

2008 Provincial Reconstruction Team News

-General Petraeus Lauds PRT Volunteers-

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March 23, 2008

Baghdad - The more than 800 volunteers on U.S. Provisional Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in Iraq are critical to success in the war on terrorism and to the well-being of the Iraqi people, says Coalition Forces Commander General David Petraeus.

The PRTs were a “very key element of the civilian surge over the course of the past year,” Petraeus said during a recent interview on the Good Morning America television show.



PRT volunteers, Foreign Service Officers Glenn Guimond and Angela Gemza, outside the entrance of the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, formerly the Republican Palace.

“There are substantial numbers of patriots [that] is the only word for them,” Petraeus said, who “fill out the ranks of the Provincial Reconstruction Teams” partnering with Iraqis on reconstruction and stabilization efforts.

They “bring enormous capability... and experience to bear to help our brigade...divisional...and battalion commanders” as they secure an environment necessary for economic development, added the General who commands roughly 150,000 U.S. troops in Iraq.

The General echoed President Bush who during a press conference in January called PRT members “some of our bravest citizens” who are doing “important work...in communities all across Iraq.”

The President said the PRTs were “a central part of the new strategy in Iraq that I announced a year ago.” In addition to the military surge that helped clear terrorists out of Anbar and Baghdad “a civilian surge” of PRTs were deployed across Iraq, he said, “to ensure the military progress was quickly followed up with real improvements in the daily lives of the Iraqi citizens.”

More than 10 teams, called Embedded Provincial Reconstruction Teams (EPRTs), were created as surge operations began in spring 2007 as part of President Bush’s New Way Forward strategy. They work closely with Army Brigade Combat Teams (BCTs) or Marine Regiments to support the military surge in the greater Baghdad area and Anbar Province.

Established in November 2005 as a State Department initiative, the majority of Iraq’s population is now served by 25 PRTs stretching from Mosul in the north to Basrah in the far south. Coalition participation includes the British-led PRT in Basrah, the Italian-led team in Dhi Qar and the Korean-led team in Erbil.

Manning of the PRTs is diverse including: Department of State, USAID, Coalition military personnel, U.S. Department of Justice, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Gulf Region Division of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and contractors. All are volunteers serving at least a year in Iraq.

As an example of the caliber of volunteers on PRTs and EPRTs, Petraeus mentioned retired Ambassador John Bennett who volunteered to run an EPRT in Baghdad for two years. "I served with him back in the Balkans," the General said, and "he is tremendous. He also has a son serving in Iraq, as well," Petraeus added.

Bennett's team covers the Baghdad Districts of Mansour, Kadhimiya, and Karkh and includes four Foreign Service officers, two Army officers, three Defense Department civilians, and five contractors. Achievements his team can point to in 2007 include: Mentoring members of District Councils and Departments of Public Works; providing micro-grants to small businesses; and providing funds for generators powering markets and residential areas.

Glenn Guimond, an eight-year veteran of the Foreign Service, works as a public diplomacy officer for the Baghdad PRT -- at 110 members it is the largest in Iraq. He said he was motivated to volunteer, leaving his family behind, because "I felt this is one of the most difficult times our country is going through and that it was important to serve here."

"For the Foreign Service, Iraq is clearly mission number one and I wanted to contribute what I could to the development of this country," he added.

The purpose of the PRTs, Guimond explained, is "to build the capacity of provincial and local governments; civil society; and the private sector." He said an example of a successful initiative along those lines was the PRT-sponsored Business to Business Expo recently held in Baghdad. "It was so successful the Ministry of Trade and Mayor of Baghdad now announced they were sponsoring similar expos using their own funds."

General Petraeus touched on this capacity building when he said, "We're not about winning the hearts and minds of the Iraqis. Our goal should be to help Iraqis win the hearts and minds of fellow Iraqis, to help the Government of Iraq, the Iraqi Security Forces, and the other local governance organizations gain legitimacy in the eyes of Iraqis. That's what this is about."

Guimond said his message for fellow officers considering joining a PRT is that "it is incredibly rewarding work. It's not easy. Be prepared for challenges. Be prepared for setbacks. Some of them can be heartbreaking, especially if you lose a colleague to violence. But the way ahead is clearing up and with concerted efforts we can continue to make a difference here."

Angela Gemza, a newly arrived Foreign Service Officer assigned to PRT Salah ad Din said a family connection with the Middle East first pointed her toward Iraq.

"My father was in Iraq 50 years ago with the U.S. military and I grew up hearing about his experiences. I wanted to be on the front lines of American diplomacy and serving on a PRT allows me to get outside the wire and directly engage with Iraqis and help them create a peaceful and stable country for themselves," she said.

Gemza, a five-year veteran of the Foreign Service, said she is especially proud of the work her team has done with women's groups in Salah ad Din where her PRT recently met with the Director of the Organization for Arab and Iraqi women to discuss the progress of a recently opened kubba (meat pastry) factory.

This women's civil society organization will be meeting with the PRT regularly "to discuss efforts to assist orphaned children and needy families as well as a women's magazine to start publication in the near future," Gemza pointed out.

On collaboration with her soldier counterparts, Gemza said, "Working with the military is both challenging and rewarding; overall I enjoy my military colleagues. It's a whole new way of thinking and viewing the world. Both sides have a lot to offer and a lot to learn from one another."

She added, "I hope that this PRT experience helps the civilian and military sides of the U.S. Government work better together to make a safer and more secure world. And I truly appreciate the security they provide that enables the PRT to accomplish its mission."

For General Petraeus, military/PRT collaboration is a natural fit because of the changed circumstances of war fighting. Instead of the war of maneuver against large units that characterized Coalition intervention in 2003, the reality of combating terrorists in a mainly urban environment means a more integrated approach for Coalition Forces.

"If you saw the new 'Army Field Manual 3.0, Operations,' it describes the concept of full-spectrum operations, which explicitly states that what we do is... some mix of offense, defense, and stability and support operations. And that's the sort of the military term, if you will, for nation building," Petraeus said.