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TELEVISION PROGRAM TO "CBS NEWS' FACE THE NATION. "**

CBS News

FACE THE NATION

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**GUESTS: General JOHN ABIZAID
Commander, US Central Command**

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Chicago Tribune**

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**FACE THE NATION - CBS NEWS
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BOB SCHIEFFER, host:

Today on FACE THE NATION, what's really going on in Iraq? The top US general in the region, General John Abizaid, will talk to us.

Suicide bombers in Iraq attacked again today, killing at least 31 people in what has become a daily occurrence. Yet the administration says progress is being made. What is the situation on the ground there? And can US forces beat this insurgency? We'll ask General Abizaid, the head of the US Central Command. "60 Minutes" correspondent Lara Logan, who has reported from both Afghanistan and Iraq, will join in the questions.

Then we'll turn to the Supreme Court. Will a justice retire from the court next week? We'll ask Jan Crawford Greenburg, who covers the court for the Chicago Tribune.

I'll have a final word on preaching to the choir.

But first General Abizaid on Iraq on FACE THE NATION.

Announcer: FACE THE NATION with CBS News chief Washington correspondent Bob Schieffer. And now from CBS News in Washington, Bob Schieffer.

SCHIEFFER: And good morning again. General Abizaid is in the studio with us this morning.

Welcome, General. And joining in the questioning, CBS News "60 Minutes" correspondent Lara Logan.

Lara, glad to have you with us.

General, let me get right to it. The Times of London reports that American military officers have been meeting secretly with insurgent leaders in Iraq and are trying to establish some kind of dialogue. What can you tell us about that?

General JOHN ABIZAIID (Head of Central Command): I don't know that I can really comment on that specific story. I don't know the details behind what they're talking about. I can only tell you that American officers and certainly diplomatic people in Baghdad and also Iraqi diplomatic leaders have been talking with a broad range of people from the Sunni-Arab community, some of whom obviously have some links to the insurgency. It's very, very important that we have opportunities for dialogue with all aspects of the society there. The Sunnis need to be part of the political future. This doesn't mean that we're talking to people like Zarqawi or people that are linked up with his organization. But I think that we'll continue to have a dialogue. And I can't really give you much more than that.

SCHIEFFER: OK. Last week, you famously disagreed with the vice president's assessment that the insurgency is in its last throes. You said you thought the violence was about the level it's been for the last several months. You also said that more terrorists seem to be pouring into Iraq. Are you in disagreement with the vice president?

Gen. ABIZAIID: I certainly am a military officer in the United States armed forces, and it's not my place to disagree with the vice president of the United States. My place is to tell people what I think about what's happening in Iraq. I wouldn't say that I famously disagreed with him nor did I say that foreign fighters were pouring across the border.

In nine hours of testimony, the nine-second soundbite probably didn't allow people to really understand that the four of us that were testifying before the committee said, 'Look we've made good progress. It's a tough fight, it's a hard fight. The enemy can't win. We are providing an opportunity for Iraqi security forces to develop, for the politics to take place and a combination of a legitimate Iraqi government developing, good Iraqi security forces, solid American protection for that process will destroy the insurgency over time.'

SCHIEFFER: Lara?

LARA LOGAN ("60 Minutes"): Well, a lot of Americans know that an end to combat operations was declared, but the war is still going on. So how do you measure success? I mean, can you explain to American people that there will never be a military solution to this problem or will there be?

Gen. ABIZOID: Lara, as you know, you've been out in the region an awful lot. You know how things operate there. An insurgency is the most difficult of any type of an operation that has a military component to it to fight. And it's very clear that you've got to have the military, the economic, the political and the diplomatic all coming together in order to achieve a political solution to the situation. The problem is that our patience level is low. We seem to think that we're in a sprint. This is not a sprint. It's a marathon. We're making good progress. The enemy can't win. The enemy can grab headlines. They can try to break our will, but there's no way that the United States military in either Afghanistan or Iraq is going to be pushed into the sea. We're the shield behind which politics will take place. And ultimately, if the government is legitimate, if Iraqis are seen fighting and dying for their own country, the insurgents don't have a chance.

LOGAN: You say you're making progress. What does that mean when there is still 700 attacks a month on American forces and, you know, dozens of people killed across the country, even on the day that you were testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee?

Gen. ABIZOID: The insurgents are targeting the Iraqi people. They are trying to cause chaos, kill people, grab headlines. Secondarily, they target the Iraqi security forces, and at a lower level, they target American security forces. The idea is to create the impression that we're not making progress, that we're not winning. Yet when I talk to my commanders in the field, as you've talked to many of them, you get a clear sense of progress, of confidence, and what was most encouraging to me in my most recent trip is that Iraqi commanders were confident. They knew that their capabilities were increasing. They were engaging more frequently and steadily in combat. They're not ready to stand alone yet, but they will be. And so I think when you look at what has happened, Saddam has fallen, and a government has been elected, a new Cabinet has been seated, a constitutional process is going forward--these are revolutionary events and they won't come without violence. But if we stay on track, if we stay patient, if we stay confident, if we recognize it's going to be hard and it's going to be tough and we stick with the program that General Casey has laid out, we'll be successful.

SCHIEFFER: When do you think, General--you say they will be able one day to handle this themselves. Can you give us just some sort of estimate on how far along you are? When, for example, will we no longer have to have--take part in the ground war? Let's say we can still give them air support and supply support. But when do you think the Iraqi forces can take over the ground fighting? When will they be ready?

Gen. ABIZAIID: When they will be ready is difficult to say because a part of the insurgency is fueled by the political process. If we have legitimacy in the political process, if the Sunni Arab community participates in a way that's meaningful, if people view that process as being legitimate, we'll be able to more--to much earlier turn over responsibilities to Iraqi security forces.

SCHIEFFER: But you can't give us any estimate on when that will be? I mean...

Gen. ABIZAIID: Look, I...

SCHIEFFER: ...I'm not asking for a date on the calendar, just...

Gen. ABIZAIID: No, certainly. But, Bob, I would say that it's clear to me that by the middle of--the early part of spring next year to the summer of next year, you'll see Iraqi security forces move into the lead in the counterinsurgency fight. That doesn't mean that I'm saying we'll come home by then. We'll have to judge how they're doing, how the political process is, how the situation is abroad. Let's face it. You know, we've got a lot of insurgents that are coming over from the Syrian border. They're not pouring across. They're coming across.

SCHIEFFER: Well, who--give us--talk to us a little bit about that. I mean, how many are coming across? How large do we think this insurgency is now?

Gen. ABIZAIID: Well, the insurgency within Iraq is, as George Casey talked about at the congressional testimony, no greater than 1/10th of 1 percent of the population. At the high end, that could be as much as 20,000. I think it's less than that. There's probably about a thousand foreign fighters operating inside of Iraq and there's probably about 60 to 100 coming across the borders primarily from Syria.

LOGAN: The problem is it doesn't take a lot.

Gen. ABIZAIID: Yeah.

LOGAN: You don't need a lot of insurgents.

Gen. ABIZAIID: That's right. The other part of the problem is the people that come across are very dangerous because they come across with the notion of conducting a suicide attack. They come across with the notion that they're going to attack American forces and then they're given a mission to go kill innocent women, children and other Iraqi security forces, and I don't think they're necessarily prepared for that sort of thing. They get trapped. They get sent on these missions and they end up causing a lot of carnage, but in itself...

LOGAN: Can you seal those borders? Can those borders be properly sealed? Shouldn't they be already? What are Syria and Iran doing?

Gen. ABIZAIID: Certainly the Syrians need to do a lot more than they're currently doing. The Syrians have a very, very pervasive security apparatus. They should understand that allowing suicide car bombers and extremists with a hateful ideology to be established inside their country so that they can go mess around in Iraq is ultimately going to backfire on them. It's to their interest. It's to Iraq's interest to move against these people very decisively and to do it now.

SCHIEFFER: Well, when the Iraqi prime minister was here and he talked to the president, one of the things he said in the news conference afterwards, he said the borders must be made very secure. Is it possible to make those borders secure and how many troops would that take?

Gen. ABIZAID: The idea of how secure the borders happen to be has got to be put in some sort of proper context. Think of our own border with Mexico, for example. It's hard to have some sort of an impenetrable wall that's going to be successful out there. You need to be able to conduct good military operations but where we really need the help in that Syrian border area is to stop the primary mode of infiltration which happens to be...

LOGAN: Financing.

Gen. ABIZAID: That's right. And it happens to be centered in Damascus. And then people come from Damascus in a way that allows them to get inside Iraq sometimes with forged documents, sometimes with a lot of money for bribery, etc. These people are recruited on the Internet. They're young. They're idealistic. They think they're coming to fight the jihad. They immediately move on up into Damascus. They're met by facilitators. They're move to safe houses. They're given...

LOGAN: Moved through the mosques.

Gen. ABIZAID: ...false documents. They come across the border. They get married up with a bunch of other suicide bombers. They, up to the very last minute, are kept away from the suicide bomb. They're put in the car. They're sent on their target, and sometimes if they're a little bit shaky about whether or not they're going to explode themselves, they get somebody flipping the switch for them. So, I mean, this is one of the most cynical ways of putting young people that wanted to fight a conflict into battle that I've ever seen.

LOGAN: General, can we talk about that, you know, especially people coming across the border from Syria, and that area particularly has been aware the Marines have been operating significantly for the last few weeks, but since those particular Marines went to that area in February, they've been back into that region sort of eight times at least. So when we talk troop numbers, Marines on the ground seem to be stretched in that area. They can't be everywhere. They are able to disrupt but they can't stop insurgents from coming back. And then on the other hand, you look at troop numbers, you've got senators calling for a drawdown, you know, start bringing them home, reduce the numbers, and you have special operations commanders who are saying, 'We don't need a lot of troops. More troops is not the answer.' Those are the guys at the front line of this war, really at the front line, who are working strengthening the Iraqi forces so that they can run their own country. So what is the answer on the number of troops?

Gen. ABIZAID: We spend an awful lot of time trying to figure out what's the right number. But the number is an interesting mathematical equation. It has to do with Iraqi security forces, plus US security forces, plus other coalition security forces, plus the political dynamic that's taking place in the country. And so I talked to General Casey about this quite a bit. We believe that the current US troop structure is about right. But that wouldn't mean that if circumstances warrant that we wouldn't either bring it down or ratchet it up as necessary. But ultimately, it's not going to be American combat power that wins the insurgency. Insurgencies take a long time. The idea is to take Americans who are in the lead in the fighting of the counterinsurgency right now, and bring up Iraqis who are preparing, getting themselves up to speed militarily, bring them to the front. This move...

LOGAN: Same in Afghanistan, right?

Gen. ABIZOID: This move--same in Afghanistan. And this move will take some time, but ultimately it'll be successful.

SCHIEFFER: Do you think this war has made us safer, General?

Gen. ABIZOID: Absolutely I think this war has made us safer. Look, we are fighting the same people in Afghanistan and in Iraq, and our partners are fighting the same people in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan that brought us 9/11. We should never lose sight of that. These people will come at us and try to attack us any way they possibly can. And we've got to stay in the middle of the fight, in the middle of the Middle East, to give the broad majority of the people who are moderates a chance to win. We're trying to shape the equation for people in the region to win this fight.

LOGAN: Well, talking...

Gen. ABIZOID: The good people of the region.

LOGAN: Talking of the region, the greatest threat you see doesn't come from Iraq and Afghanistan, does it?

Gen. ABIZOID: I'd say the greatest threat I see comes from this ideology of bin Laden, Zawahri, Zarqawi. That is essentially anti-Islamic. It's more fascist than it is anything else. It believes in total oppression of human beings in a way that's quite remarkable. And it is a weak movement right now. We're putting it under a lot of pressure. The people in the region don't want it. If they wanted it they would have fought for it in Afghanistan where the Taliban were in power. But they didn't.

LOGAN: But it's being nurtured in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan still.

Gen. ABIZOID: It's being nurtured in certain places and certain mosques, and I think the governments throughout the region understand that this is a mortal danger. Everybody in the region's got to work against this. We are in revolutionary times in the middle of the Middle East. People that want a better life, that are looking for an opportunity for their children to have a better life know that it won't come from bin Laden, Zawahri and Zarqawi. They also know that they've got to take this fight and be in the front, not less.

SCHIEFFER: General, there's no question that public support for this effort in Iraq is fading in this country. Every poll suggests that. Does that concern you? How important is that?

Gen. ABIZOID: The public support for our troops in the field has always been important. It's always been important especially for American soldiers. They don't want to be looking over their shoulder wondering what folks back home are thinking. They want to know that people understand what we're fighting for, why we're fighting, and how we can win this thing. And it's a challenge for us to be able to talk about this most complicated region, this most complicated war and put it in the common sense necessary for folks back home to talk about it.

But it's clear to those of us that are in the middle of it. And sure, you can always find one or two soldiers in the field that might have a different view, but the vast majority of us that are in the middle of it know we are winning and know that it's better for us to fight abroad than to fight at home.

LOGAN: But do Americans have the right mind-set for this war?

Gen. ABIZAID: Americans need to be patient. They need to understand that as Iraqi security forces and Afghan security forces become more capable that they'll take on more of the burden. We don't need to have the same numbers of troops in the region now--that we have now 10 years from now or five years from now or even two years from now.

SCHIEFFER: General, thank you so much for being with us.

Gen. ABIZAID: Thanks, sir.

SCHIEFFER: Always a pleasure to have you.

Back in a moment to talk about the Supreme Court and what might happen there.

(Announcements)

SCHIEFFER: So it's a big week coming up at the Supreme Court. More decisions will come Monday. And also, we will find out perhaps if there are going to be some changes. The big question is whether or not the chief justice, William Rehnquist, will announce that he is resigning. Here to talk about it Jan Crawford Greenburg, who is the legal affairs correspondent for the Chicago Tribune and has followed this court very closely over the years.

So, Jan, I guess you're here with the answer. Is he going to resign?

Ms. JAN CRAWFORD GREENBURG (Legal Affairs Correspondent, Chicago Tribune): Well, that's what everyone's wondering right now in the White House and on Capitol Hill. Tomorrow all eyes will be on the Supreme Court because if the chief justice is going to make a public announcement from the bench, tomorrow his last chance. The justices end the term tomorrow, take the summer off. But that said, people who are close to the chief justice have cautioned me over the weekend that if he is silent tomorrow, we shouldn't read too much into it because they say it could be more in keeping with his style to just release a simple written statement in the days or weeks to come that he will, in fact, step down after suffering from thyroid cancer. He's 80 years old.

SCHIEFFER: So he might actually wait and announce his resignation when the court is in recess.

Ms. GREENBURG: That's exactly right, Bob. So I think, of course...

SCHIEFFER: Or he may decide to stay on.

Ms. GREENBURG: He may. And, of course, tomorrow we're all going to be watching the Supreme Court to see if there's going to be a dramatic announcement from the chief justice, a public farewell after 33 years on the court. But if he's quiet, we can't assume that that means he's going to stick around for another year.

SCHIEFFER: What's the White House been doing to get ready for this?

Ms. GREENBURG: The White House has been making preparations for months. The chief justice announced in October that he was suffering from thyroid cancer, so they have looked at a list of potential nominees. They have conducted--my sources in the administration say they

have conducted interviews with leading contenders. They are ready if the chief justice does step down. That said, sources in the White House told me last week that they have not gotten word from the chief justice about his plans. So they are waiting to go see what he is going to do, and then they're ready to move, and they will move quickly if he does announce his retirement.

SCHIEFFER: Who would you say are the favorites to be named at this point?

Ms. GREENBURG: The White House has focused on a handful of federal judges, two here in this area. Judges Michael Luttig and Judge John Roberts appear to be leading contenders. Judge Roberts has been interviewed in recent weeks. The White House is looking very closely at them. A White House senior official has cautioned me, however, that they have not formally narrowed down the list to these two. Other people remain under consideration. And they're serious about being respectful to the chief justice, that they don't want to, you know, make an announcement or narrow it down to one or two at this point.

SCHIEFFER: What about Alberto Gonzales, the attorney general?

Ms. GREENBURG: He remains very much under consideration. Sources in the White House and administration have told me. But that is proceeding along a different track because the president's long-standing familiarity with him. They're looking at these federal judges. The attorney general has been involved in these discussions, has interviewed some of these candidates. His nomination or possible nomination is being kept off to the side, and that is going to be a personal decision by the president.

Interestingly enough, I think, a Gonzales nomination would go through the Senate. Democrats would support him. It's people on the right who would oppose the Gonzales nomination because they are concerned...

SCHIEFFER: This is--What?--because of abortion?

Ms. GREENBURG: The groups on the right, they're concerned that his views on abortion and affirmative action make him too moderate to replace the conservative chief justice and that the White House should wait and have him replace someone who is more moderate or more liberal, say a Justice O'Connor or Justice Stevens.

SCHIEFFER: What about Justice O'Connor. There has been some talk that she might decide to retire.

Ms. GREENBURG: We've seen that this week. This past week people speculated that she, in fact, is going to step down. Sources that I've spoken with over the weekend who know Justice O'Connor say they will be shocked if she retires before the chief justice. The White House would be shocked by an O'Connor announcement. All eyes at this point are on the chief justice, and all eyes tomorrow will be on Rehnquist to see if he's going to make that dramatic announcement.

SCHIEFFER: If you were going to make a bet, what would you bet?

Ms. GREENBURG: Oh, gosh, I would bet that we're not going to hear tomorrow, that we would hear something in the next couple days. The hype, the scene at the court, the anxiety at the court right now is so high. But that said, I spoke with someone yesterday who clerked for Rehnquist and has remained close with him, who said he's going to want to make a public

farewell, to say goodbye to the employees. He cares very deeply about this institution. So even the people who are close to him are equally divided at this point, Bob.

SCHIEFFER: All right. Thank you very much, Jan. We'll be watching with you.

Back with a final word in just a minute.

(Announcements)

SCHIEFFER: And finally today, when the president went to a school in Montgomery County not far from the White House last week to push his plan for Social Security reform, The Washington Post called it a town hall style meeting. Choir practice style meeting would have been more accurate. Once again, the president was preaching to the choir: an invitation-only crowd. Those who disagreed were made to stand outside. The White House could not say if the audience included any actual Montgomery County residents.

Like most of the president's proposals, Social Security reform is in deep trouble. The administration blames the Democrats, and that's part of it. But I think it has more to do with spending so much time preaching to the choir. This White House takes great pride in being resolute, in standing apart from the rest of Washington, especially those who disagree with them. But the votes were never there to pass the president's Social Security reform package, and everybody knew it but the White House. The administration has badly misread the public mood on the Schiavo case and stem cell research, and it's backed itself into a time-wasting corner on who should be UN ambassador.

I like politicians who stand by their principles, who refuse to bend to every kick and every poll. But it is hard to get much done when you spend all your time with the choir and lose touch with the rest of the congregation.

That's it for us. We'll see you next week right here on FACE THE NATION.