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Presenter: Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld

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DoD News Briefing - Secretary Rumsfeld and Gen. Myers

Rumsfeld: Good afternoon.

It was a special pleasure to welcome His Majesty, the king of Bahrain to the Pentagon. Our defense relationship has been a very strong one for over 50 years, and the relationship between our two countries stretches back some 100 years. I thanked him for his strong support for the global war on terrorism. He -- Bahrain understands the threat that Saddam Hussein poses to the region and the world, and was here to show solidarity with the president's efforts. The government of Bahrain has been a strong ally in this war, and their support is valued by the American people.

I certainly want to extend my deepest sympathies to the families of the crew of the Columbia who lost their lives over Texas on Saturday. Six of the seven astronauts were distinguished military officers, five from the United States. And all of the crew were outstanding public servants, courageous, extraordinarily well-educated and superbly trained. They boldly took risks on behalf of science and mankind, and we are grateful to them.

Two days before the Columbia fell to earth, a helicopter carrying four American servicemen went down near Bagram, Afghanistan. Their loss is felt every bit as deeply as that of the seven who did not return from space. Our thoughts and prayers go out to their families. They, too, will not be forgotten.

Finally, tomorrow Secretary Powell will speak to the United Nations Security Council about Iraq and the threat of weapons of mass destruction. In our country, in courts of law it has been customary to seek evidence that could prove guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. That approach, of course, is appropriate when the objective is to protect the rights of the accused. But in an age of weapons of mass destruction and weapons that can kill tens of thousands of innocent people, our goal has to be to take all reasonable steps to protect the lives of our citizens. That is a quite different task. What is being tested during this period is not whether the inspectors can discover something that the Iraqi regime is determined to hide; quite the contrary. What is being tested is whether or not, after more than a decade, Saddam Hussein will finally cooperate with the U.N. resolutions requiring his cooperation. Regrettably, the answer is more apparent every day as he continues to deceive and deny and reject those U.N. resolutions.

General Myers.

Myers: Good afternoon. And thank you, Mr. Secretary.

On behalf of all the soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, Coast Guardsmen, I would like to add our condolences to those of the secretary's. Of course we're all deeply saddened by the tragic deaths of the Columbia crew. Over the last hour or so, I think most of us have been watching the very moving ceremony in Houston, and it reminds us that all seven decided to venture into space and accept the risk of space exploration in order to help make this world a better place for all of us. Five were our fellow U.S. sailors and airmen, but whether military or civilian, all had dreams of a better future.

So to the families of Colonel Rick Husband, Captain David Brown, Lieutenant Colonel Michael Anderson, Commander Laurel Clark, Commander William McCool, Dr. Kalpana Chawla, and Colonel Ian Ramon, our prayers are with you, and we will miss them all.

And I would also add to the families of those four great soldiers that were killed just near Bagram Air Base, as well, our thoughts and prayers are with you as you go through your grieving process.

In operational news, more than 500 82nd Airborne soldiers continue to clear caves near Adi Ghar Mountain. This operation began on January the 27th, and thus far, the soldiers have cleared 58 caves, and 12 caves have been destroyed. As we reported last week, a number of detainees have also been taken into custody.

And finally, I want to express my gratitude to the American people for sending their online thank-you note to America's service members, thanking them for defending our nation's freedoms. To date, over 3.7 million people have taken the time to sign a note expressing their appreciation to the men and women in uniform at www.defendamerica.mil -- M-I-L -- and about 50,000 more are signing every day. I'd like to personally thank all of those who have taken the time to sign the "Defend America" note, and for expressing their support of our American armed forces.

And with that, we're ready for your questions.

Q: Mr. Secretary, I'd like to ask you about General Franks, the inspector general's investigation of allegations that have been made against him. Have you discussed any aspect of that with him at any stage? And do you have any concerns that the investigation could interfere with his ability to conduct his duties, particularly when he goes abroad for extended periods?

Rumsfeld: The answer to the first question is yes, I have discussed it with him. He is the one that informed me of the existence of the investigation.

Second, there isn't a chance in the world that it will have any possible interference with his role as the combatant commander in the Central Command. Tom Franks is doing a superb job for this country. And we are lucky to have him there. He is a man of great talent and skill. And he has my complete confidence and the complete confidence of the president of the United States.

Q: Did he explain to you the circumstances of any of these allegations? Could you tell us what you --

Rumsfeld: I've answered the question, that we did discuss it. And I have every confidence in him.

Q: Mr. Secretary?

Rumsfeld: Yes.

Q: Can I follow up on that? You have issued a public statement of support for General Franks in writing, and you now say that you have discussed it with him and not a chance in the world it will affect his job. But as has been explained, you would be in the chain of command exercising any disciplinary action over General Franks if it was to come to that. So how is it that your written statement and the statement you made here just now is not of exercise of command influence or a conflict of interest on your part, given the fact the investigation has not come to you yet, you're -- you're coming to these conclusions in meeting with General Franks on this subject prior to the IG reporting to you?

Rumsfeld: I can't even conceive of how you could say there's a conflict of interest. But to go to the other portion of your question, I think our statement that was put out last evening specifically said that I have not been briefed on the investigation by the inspector general and I am not addressing that aspect of it. I was commenting on General Franks as an individual and the job he's doing in his current responsibilities. That is a separate matter. Needless to say, the implication that's raised when there's an I --

First of all, IG investigations are not uncommon. I've been here two years plus, and I see them fairly frequently, particularly for senior officers. I don't happen to see the ones for people that don't report to me, but I do see them, and they're not unusual.

Second, the expressions of confidence that I have indicated are exactly how I feel and are, I believe, in the statement quite clearly separate from the issues of the investigation. I haven't got a copy of it handy. But I think if one goes back and reads it, they'll see that.

Yes.

Q: South Korea?

You're positioning some additional combat power there. Is the 37,000 troops currently on the peninsula, U.S., adequate to defend South Korea in the current climate?

Rumsfeld: Well, we don't discuss deployments. And I haven't even seen anything in the paper that suggests that we're doing what you said. All I've seen in the paper is a statement that involved prepare to deploy, I think, or something, which is quite different from your question, if I'm not mistaken.

Q: Is the current U.S. troop presence in South Korea adequate to defend?

Rumsfeld: What we do as a country -- and maybe General Myers would want to comment on this -- but what we do as a country is attempt to be arranged around the world in a way that leaves no question but that we have the kind of capabilities to deter and, if necessary, defend the interests of the United States. Forces move constantly in different parts of the globe. The prepare to deploy, I would think, is not something that one ought to take as some sort of a major event. It is just a fact of -- the fact, the reality that from time to time we move forces around, and our purpose is, obviously, to serve the interests of the American people. That's why they make these substantial investments in the department.

Q: Mr. Secretary, on that line --

Rumsfeld: Do you want to --

Myers: Well, I would just say that in terms of the forces that we have in the Republic of Korea, combined with the forces that the Republic of Korea has as well, is a pretty substantial force. They face a potential force in the North that's large as well as you know reasonably well equipped, since most of the GDP that is generated by the DPRK is put into their military force. But if it ever came to any potential conflict -- and nobody's suggesting that, and I'm certainly not suggesting that -- but if it came to conflict, our forces in the Republic of Korea would be adequate to the task, that's for sure.

Q: Mr. Secretary, on that line, without getting into specific deployments that you are or not considering, do you believe that the North Koreans are seeking to take advantage of the U.S. focus on Iraq during this time?

Rumsfeld: I just don't know what motivates people. We are all able to read what they say and what they do, and then trying to climb inside the head of the leader of that country and say he's doing this for this reason at this moment is really not something that I try to do. What we try to do is to see that we can conduct ourselves in a way that we can deter and defend, if necessary, and also reassure our friends and allies that our capabilities are what they are. And -- but trying to speculate about why somebody would do something -- one, needless to say, given the flow of forces to Iraq, one has to be sensitive to the possibility that some might do that. But for me to suggest that I know that somebody has or might is really out of my field.

Q: And to follow up on the General Franks investigation, do you question the timing of this leak?

Rumsfeld: Again, I can't climb into people's heads and figure out why people do things. Needless to say, when someone phones in a question about someone's circumstance, it then begins a process. And that process leads to a -- as it should, leads to an investigation. And that investigations -- everything in this building tends to take a little too long for me. But investigations take a while, and I suppose it's because good people try to do them right and try to be careful. And so that process goes forward.

Why somebody during the course of that process would decide it was in their interest to call somebody from the press and make it available to them -- I have no idea why they would do that. (Cross talk.)

Myers: Perhaps I could comment on that.

Rumsfeld: Sure.

Myers: Let me just add to what the secretary, I think, has already said about the whole General Franks issue. First of all, the DOD IG is doing the investigation. I'm not privy to that and not a part of it.

But I would like to talk about the operational relationship that I have with General Franks, which is my role, and to help the secretary in his role in providing the resources and the sorts of things that General Franks needs to do his job. And I can tell you that -- irrespective of this investigation, that Americans ought to be very proud they have somebody like Tom Franks putting his mind and leading his people to plan for potential conflict in his area of responsibility. They could not be better served. And there's nobody that would not want their son or daughter to serve under a plan that he's put together, or under his command, in my opinion.

So I'm just talking on the operational aspects of it now. He's done a brilliant job, and I guess he will into the future as well.

Q: Mr. Secretary, Mr. Secretary, I know this is a sensitive subject, but I'd like to follow up on the point that -- the question that Barbara had. You say that you express full confidence in General Franks. You do -- you are the disciplinary authority for this. Is there a possibility that when you do see the results of the investigation and you do have a chance to look at it and judge it, that that could shake your confidence in General Franks or not? Are you saying that there's no way that your feelings about him as commander --

Rumsfeld: I see what you're saying, yeah. First of all, I'm not a lawyer. I've mentioned that previously. Indeed, I dropped out of law school. (Laughter.) How do I answer that? I feel that it was a moment, yesterday and today, when the question is

raised that it's perfectly appropriate for me, the individual who is the superior -- the civilian superior to General Franks in the chain of command, from the president to me to General Franks -- to express my full confidence in him as a combatant commander.

I recognize that I have a second responsibility, and that is to review things that come up through an inspector general process and make fair, balanced, sensible judgments about those. I certainly would do that in any case, regardless of who it was.

Q: Mr. Secretary --

Rumsfeld: But that process is in some percentage completed. It's not -- it's maybe midstream or close to three-quarters through. And it's not something that I wanted to comment on yesterday in my statement, and I didn't. And it's not something I want to comment on today, because I'm not knowledgeable about it, nor has the investigation been completed nor has it been brought before me.

Q: Well, Mr. Secretary, just to clarify that point, and then I have a question. The clarification is, should we draw from what you -- everything you just said that you think that the allegations are not of a serious enough nature to affect your confidence, no matter how the report turns out? Is that what you're saying?

Rumsfeld: My confidence was expressed in General Franks as a combatant commander, and I agree completely with General Myers, that he's doing a superb job for our country. I don't know what all the allegations are and I don't know what they'll finally -- which ones will be dismissed, which ones will be elaborated on and which ones might be sent forward to me, if any. And I've seen -- you know, as Adlai Stevenson said, I guess I'll jump off that bridge when I get to it.

Q: But within the military system of justice, sir, there is this whole doctrine about command influence, where superiors remain silent as long as cases are pending.

Rumsfeld: Mm-hmm. And I've remained very silent on the case. I've not commented on any aspect of it.

Q: Well, with great respect, sir, you said you met with him to discuss it.

Rumsfeld: I did not. I said he informed me of the existence of an investigation --

Q: Before the question -- you were asked, I believe, did you discuss it with General Franks, and your answer was yes. Perhaps I misunderstood. Was there substantive discussion?

Rumsfeld: No. He just informed me that there was an inspector general case, and he listed one or two of the allegations. And I said, fine, it'll run its course, thank you for informing me. And as I say, this is not unusual. I --

Q: That you get informed about --

Rumsfeld: That I get informed about these. I had one last week from --

Q: (About what ??)

Rumsfeld: Ha-a-a-ah! (Laughter.) Not a chance! And I must say, I hear of one of these, I'm going to guess, at least once a month of some sort. Most of them are finally dismissed in one form; some -- I shouldn't say "most" because I haven't added them up. Some end up with a lot of the allegations dismissed, and one or two corrected --

Q: Here's the question. Would it be appropriate for other senior military or civilian officers to issue statements of support to their subordinates if they learn of an IG investigation? I can't imagine you would approve of that. (Pause.) Why do -- I -- this is so awkward, but why do you get to do this -- (laughs) -- and no one else?

Rumsfeld: (Pause.) You know, maybe I ought to consult a lawyer. How's that? I haven't. And it was a matter where he came and told me there was an investigation. I hear of that one every week or two or three. I said, fair enough, thank you for telling me. And an article is written that is -- (pause) -- the result of a leak, which is not something that I think is fair to General Franks. And it struck me that to counterbalance that unfairness to him, I would say what I thought about him as a combatant commander. I think I did exactly the right thing. And unless someone tells me it's the wrong thing to do, I probably will keep right on doing it.

Q: So you are urging superior officers in the military to comment about the integrity of the people who are involved in the --

Rumsfeld: I'm not. Maybe we'll put it this way: the circumstances in this case are slightly different than normal, everyday, run of the mill situations. First of all, they're different because he is "newsworthy", quote-unquote -- made the second page.

Second, it's a period in -- where we're flowing forces, and he has enormous responsibilities. And if it -- and I suppose I would have to make a judgment about other cases. And I'm not in a position to give advice to other people as to how they ought to handle these things. And I'll have to think a bit about your question.

Yes?

Q: Secretary, does the United States have any contingency plan to take preemptive strikes against North Korean nuclear facility site?

Rumsfeld: We don't discuss contingency plans.

Yes?

Q: Just from the standpoint of management philosophy, does it trouble you that in an organization like this, enough people senior enough to be direct reports to you are the subject of IG investigations with the sort of routine regularity that you suggest? I mean, this has nothing to do with General Franks case.

Rumsfeld: Sure, okay. Good.

Q: This just sounds like a --

Rumsfeld: Yeah, they aren't all people that report to me. There are a very limited number of people that report to me -- the combatant commanders and the --

Q: Right. Understood.

Rumsfeld: Yeah. These are -- I'm involved in all promotions -- senior officer promotions to one star, to two star, to three star, to four star. And therefore, any time someone is getting ready to go where I'm going to recommend them to the president for promotion, and the president is going to recommend them to the Senate for confirmation, all of these things come up and, therefore, we look at them.

The same thing is true for people who are already in their positions, and they may not report to me, but the person who does report to me might come to me and say, "Heads up, Don. There's an IG on Joe Dokes who's doing -- who works for me directly, and he doesn't report to you."

So it is not as though there are a lot in that small universe of people who report to me, but there are -- it is not infrequent. I mean, it happens that these things come up.

Yes?

Q: Mr. Secretary, on a other legal matter, the government of Sweden this week asked the United States to either release or put on trial one of its citizens who is a detainee in Guantanamo. Do you have a position on that specific case? But more broadly, have you made any decisions to date about starting any trials of detainees?

Rumsfeld: I have not heard of that case -- that statement by the government. And I don't know the fact pattern.

There have been some detainees, people who have been arrested, who have been tried and prosecuted. And Walker, for example, was tried. And there have been people. There have been some who have been tried in other countries, as well. The ones that have been tried in the United States have been in the Article 3 courts, the normal judicial system. In terms of military commissions, we have not had a situation where the president has indicated that he wanted an individual tried by a military commission. As I've indicated earlier, the thinking that people who are arrested, captured, detained in a war zone and in a wartime circumstance would go through a normal process of immediate trial and all of that is not the way that it happens in wars. We have people who we are interrogating and gaining information about possible terrorist acts, and that process is, I am certain, saving the lives of Americans and our friends and allies. As that information is knitted together from other countries, law enforcement agencies, military officials, and it's all brought together we have been able to avoid and avert and disrupt possible terrorist acts.

And so there is not a rush to try. The purpose is not to punish people, as it is in a court of law; it is to gain information and try to prevent an additional terrorist act. These people are being treated properly and the process is going along and information is being gathered, intelligence information, and it's to the benefit of our country.

Q: Mr. Secretary?

Rumsfeld: Yes?

Q: North Korea has taken a number of steps whose logical conclusion, it would seem, would be testing a weapon and declaring itself a nuclear power. Do you think or hope that the prepare-to-deploy order might somehow affect that process, that series of steps? And if not, what, exactly, is it that you hope would be accomplished with that?

Rumsfeld: The -- I have no idea what anything we do might or might not have an effect. If you're asking was that some sort of a signal, the answer is no. What the United States was doing and will continue to do is to attempt to arrange our forces around the world in a way that we will be able to deal with any decision the president may make with respect to Iraq, continue to pursue our activities in Afghanistan, continue to do what we're doing in several other locations, in terms of training and equipping and assisting people, continuing the maritime interdiction activities that we're engaged in, and being arranged so that the world understands that in the event someone does think that it's an opportune time because the United States is focused on Iraq, that our force deployments and arrangements ought to lead to the proper conclusion that we are not single-minded, and that that deterrent effect is a healthy thing. But there's no particular signals going out.

Q: But you also said that it would perhaps reassure allies.

Rumsfeld: It does. There's no question about it. To the extent we -- where they feel a presence and they sense a possible danger because of the possibility of a conflict in Iraq that something else might happen, it's reassuring to people to see that we have capabilities that exist in a variety of different places in the globe.

Yes.

Q: Mr. Secretary, on Iraq, as you very well know, United -- Powell's going to be going before the United Nations tomorrow. The inspectors have found a 17th empty chemical warhead. I was wondering what your thoughts again are if he can present anything more than just circumstantial evidence, and again to elaborate what you've said before, that circumstantial evidence can be powerful.

Rumsfeld: Again, I mean, you all are -- have been watching L.A. Law or something too much. (Laughter.) I mean, circumstantial evidence --

Q: (Off mike) -- 10 years ago.

Rumsfeld: Is that -- 10 years ago?

Q: (Off mike) -- 10 years ago.

Rumsfeld: That's the last time I saw a TV program. (Laughter.)

Q: (Off mike) - It's in reruns.

Rumsfeld: Is it?

Q: Yeah.

Rumsfeld: All right. I apologize here.

(Off mike joking, laughter.)

Rumsfeld: I've been busy. I've been busy here. (Laughter.)

Myers: That's what I would say on that.

Rumsfeld: First of all, it would be inaccurate for people to take your question and think that it was correct. But it is not correct. The idea that all there has been is circumstantial evidence is false. I don't know what the technical definition of "evidence" is, but -- legally, but I do know that a good number of the things that have been released by the United Kingdom and by the United States already, let alone what the -- will be presented by Secretary Powell tomorrow morning, are evidence.

Now, someone could say, well, it's powerful, or it's less powerful, or it's weak, or it's strong. But it's evidence. And we -- I got a -- had a discussion with Senator Specter recently about that, who was a -- I guess a defense attorney and a prosecutor. And he described that process.

But we're not in a court of law, and I think that it's a misunderstanding. What's being tested, as I said, is whether or not Iraq is going to cooperate and provide the United Nations with its weapons of mass destruction and permit them to be destroyed. That is what the resolution is about. That is what the 16 resolutions are about. And this fixation that people have on the kinds

of -- this smoking gun business, I think, is a misunderstanding of what we're doing and what's going on in this world and what the nature of the threat is and what the danger is.

Q: Mr. Secretary, today in a broadcast interview, Saddam Hussein said, "There is only one truth: Iraq has no weapons of mass destruction whatsoever." And he went on to say, "I would like to tell you directly we have no relationship with al Qaeda."

Rumsfeld: And Abraham Lincoln was short.

Q: Would you care to respond directly to what Saddam Hussein has said today?

(Pause.)

Rumsfeld: How does one respond to that? I mean, he said that Secretary Powell's words tomorrow are going to be lies. He says that the photographs that will be shown will be doctored. That's what he does. That's what he does. And then the world's press spreads it around the world as though it's true. It's utter -- it's just a continuous pattern. This is a case of the local liar coming up again and people repeating what he said and forgetting to say that he never -- almost never -- rarely tells the truth.

Q: But he also challenged anyone who has any evidence to bring it forward. It was almost a response to what Secretary Powell said yesterday when he acknowledged the U.S. has no smoking gun.

Rumsfeld: If I were -- well, I guess there's no way to recast this whole issue, but the fixation on a smoking gun is fascinating to me. Go back to September 11th and think of trying to piece together facts and information in a way that you could stop that from happening and stop those 3,000 people from being killed and stop those airplanes from crashing into the Pentagon and the World Trade Center and Pennsylvania. There's no smoking gun in there! You get the smoking gun after the planes have crashed. It is a -- the people who keep repeating that are Saddam Hussein and his crowd and people who are chasing the wrong rabbit.

It is unfortunate that the test seems to be that -- for a lot of people -- when in fact, the test in the U.N. resolution, if people would read it, is whether or not Saddam Hussein is going to cooperate. And we know he's not. What has he done? He has filed a fraudulent, false declaration, that anyone who looks at it and reads it says is incomplete and inaccurate. He has refused to allow these inspectors free reign in that country. They often have more Iraqi intelligence minders encircling the inspectors than there are inspectors, by a factor of some non-trivial number. When they arrive someplace, they often are welcomed and expected. The people who the resolution requires be allowed to leave the country are not even allowed to be interviewed alone to see if they would like to leave the country. It is a -- there is a pattern that is clear of a lack of cooperation.

And if the test is a smoking gun, then the implication is that the test is not cooperation, the test is that these inspectors, these relatively handfuls of inspectors are supposed to go in there and find something he doesn't want them to find. How in the world can they do that? That is never what was intended, or they would have been called discoverers and finders, not inspectors. The only role they had was to go in and inspect what he offered up.

Yes?

Q: This is my first time in your briefing, my name is --

Rumsfeld: Welcome, we're glad you're here.

Q: My name is Mariella Egusquiza, I represent Televisa, which is the biggest Spanish television network. Since 9/11, you have (inaudible) -- and general, since 9/11, the United States has been working with your partners and allies to combat terrorism, to catch terrorists. But you've been cooperating in different levels. What about in the military level? I heard a lot about your cooperation with different countries in Europe and the Middle East. What happened in our region? I know that Canada already put soldiers in the border between the United States and Canada again, and there are some congress people that are trying to -- they're asking the president to send soldiers to the border with Mexico.

My question is, I'd like to know, if possible, what is the level of cooperation with the Mexican military, and if it's true that some Mexican officials -- I mean officers, are going to receive training, bioterrorism training, to respond to any biological attacks or something like that. Since we're in the same neighborhood.

Rumsfeld: Sure. I have not heard of any such training, but that does not -- that's not a definitive answer. I just don't know the answer to that question.

The United States government has a relationship with a number of countries in Latin America, in this hemisphere, and we do

a variety of things with various countries; some are at sea, in terms of interdiction; some are training, for example, in Colombia.

Q: But I'm talking about Mexico, since, you know, it's the closest partner to the United States. I mean --

Rumsfeld: The cooperation with Mexico tends to be, for the most part, with a variety of our domestic agencies; with the Department of Justice and with the Drug Enforcement Agency, and Customs, and Border Patrol, and those type of things. And they have a relationship that's been long-standing. And that's where the bulk of that has taken place, as opposed to the Pentagon.

Q: What about the military level, General?

Myers: We are -- we've had talks and we'll continue to have talks and --

Q: But is there more than talks?

Myers: Well, there certainly is from the Mexican side. Their military has been very aggressive in working with either our civilian agencies or on their own to stop the flow of drugs northward through Mexico into the United States, and they've done a tremendous job at that on those --

Q: But what about the terrorism front?

Myers: Well, as the secretary said, I think most of that work has been done by our civilian agencies. It's not just the military-to-military work.

Q: Thank you.

Q: Secretary, last year you, I think, quoted President Bush described U.S. relations with Germany as poisoned. Then the German --

Rumsfeld: I think that was someone else in the White House who said that. I think it came out of the National Security Council. I could be wrong.

Q: Then, when the German defense minister visited here, you declared the relations to be unpoisoned.

Rumsfeld: I'm a gracious person. (Laughter.)

Q: And now Germany is about to host a big international conference that's usually well attended by U.S. --

Rumsfeld: And I think I'll go.

Q: And you're going to go. How would you -- as you are about to go, how would you characterize U.S.-German relations? (Laughter.)

Rumsfeld: You're looking for a bumper sticker -- (laughter) --

Q: Will you be picking --

Q: Well, I ask also because it's expected that there will be a large number of protesters in Germany this weekend to greet you when you arrive.

Rumsfeld: Is that right? (Pause.) Well, I guess I'll have a little better sense of it when I return. Thank you very much. (Laughter.)

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