

Ready or not Kirkuk, elections are on the way.

And ready this city of more than 800,000 may be, but just barely.

On May 17 Maj. Gen. Raymond Odierno, 4th Infantry Division Commander and Col. William Mayville, 173rd Airborne Brigade commander, announced the intention to nominate mayoral candidates no later than May 24 to the people of Kirkuk and to a group of international and local media.

The 'State of Kirkuk' address given by Maj. Gen. Odierno and Col. Mayville offered the city a look at where it had been, where it was and where it may be in the weeks, months and years to come.

"The [American] State of the Union address is a reflection of our achievements and of our goals," Maj. Gen. Odierno said. "We have titled today's brief, the 'State of Kirkuk' in hopes that you will reflect, as we do, on the conditions and the future of your city."

"We will assist you by helping you establish the foundation for democracy to grow. But make no mistake, American soldiers cannot do this for you," he said.

The first step, according to Odierno, will include a political convention of sorts, comprised of members of all ethnic groups. The convention will convene May 24th.

"This group will select 24 city council representatives," he said. "The council will be composed of local Iraqi leaders representing all of Kirkuk."

As the general made his comments, gunfire erupted outside the building.

"As you've stood here today, you've heard shots," he said. "Those are from a very small number of people. We cannot allow those few people to stop the progress of this great city. Coalition forces, along with the people of Kirkuk, refuse to allow a few people to dictate the future of this city. This is a great city with a great future and the people who are outside shooting, do not want that for the future of Kirkuk."

"They are holding on to the values of the old regime. The old regime is dead, they will not come back to Kirkuk," Odierno said, as the audience burst into applause.

He went on to say that Kirkuk's diverse population, which includes a large population of Arabs, Turks, Kurds and Assyrians, will serve as a model of peace and stability throughout Iraq.

Kirkuk, by no means a city deprived of natural resources, has an abundance of oil, water and agriculture.

"These abundant natural resources will provide you the means to move forward into a period of prosperity and unlimited potential. I believe that Kirkuk has a bright future," he said.

Col. Mayville then took the lectern and highlighted the city's individual achievements since the brigade arrived just over a month ago.

"Together we've accomplished many things once thought impossible," Mayville said. "When we first arrived, much of the city was without water, now the entire city has water. Much of the city was without power, now power flows to the entire city, allowing people to get on with their lives and reopen their businesses."

Whether by coincidence or pure bad luck, almost as if on cue, the power went out. Hardly an unusual experience in this city—even before the war began. While the timing was unfortunate, power does indeed flow through the city the vast majority of the time.

Mayville went on to highlight the creation of the multi-ethnic police force that works in conjunction with the soldiers of the 173rd Abn Bde.

"When we arrived here there was chaos in and around the city of Kirkuk," he said. "Today the police of Kirkuk, along with our own soldiers, help deter crime and looting and arrest those who break the law. It's a police force that we established together and it's a police force representing all the people of Kirkuk and protects all the people of Kirkuk."

"The future of Kirkuk now belongs to the people of Kirkuk," said Mayville.