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Sleeping Baghdad bombed at dawn

Iraq fires scuds on Kuwait; Saddam vows victory; blitzkrieg to come; Bush sees a 'longer, difficult' war



Explosion lights up Baghdad before dawn yesterday as the US launched a war on Iraq with air strikes on the capital, making good on threats of military action to push President Saddam Hussein out of power. An Iraqi militiaman, right, from the ruling Baath party flashes the victory sign in Baghdad after Iraqi retaliation by six Scud missiles fired on northern Kuwait.



PHOTO: AFP

STAR DESK

Cruise missiles and laser-guided bombs jolted a sleeping Baghdad awake as the US-led invasion campaign against Iraq began before dawn yesterday.

Baghdad woke up to the chilling air raid sirens at 5:35am local time as more than 40 Tomahawk missiles landed from US warships in the Mediterranean, the Red Sea and the Gulf.

Afterwards, B-2, B-1 and B-52 bombers droned over the city, dropping laser-guided bombs.

The pre-dawn sky lit up with Iraqi anti-aircraft tracer bullets. The barrage was unrelenting, coming in waves.

The US said the attack was a limited strike targeting Saddam Hussein and top Iraqi leaders who were holding a meeting at an undisclosed place.

A much bigger and comprehensive attack is on the way, which US President George W Bush said could be longer and more difficult than some predict.

Iraq also retaliated the invasion by firing at least four missiles into Kuwait. British and US military officials said they were Scuds. Pentagon said one Scud was intercepted by US Patriot missiles.

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Battle plan changed

AGENCIES, undated

It began more with a whimper than a bang. Last night's deadline for Saddam Hussein to flee Iraq came and went, and at first nothing happened. For almost two hours, CNN's cameras -- fixed on the roof of the information ministry in Baghdad -- showed undramatic scenes of traffic lights changing in the street below and occasional vehicles passing.

Shortly before 0300 GMT, there were flashes in the distance,

accompanied by anti-aircraft fire from the Iraqis -- though correspondents on the ground heard no planes. There was also a brief flurry of excitement when someone claimed the Americans had taken over the main Iraqi radio station but others who tuned in to listen found everything normal.

It turned out that President George Bush had not really meant to start the war last night but changed his mind when a "target of opportunity"

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Life goes low in city of peace

AFP, Baghdad

Ruling Baath Party cadres patrolled the otherwise deserted streets of the Iraqi capital Thursday after the United States launched strikes to end the quarter-century rule of President Saddam Hussein.

Clusters of officers wearing the dark green uniform of the Baath could be seen at every intersection in downtown Baghdad.

On the popular shopping street Saadun, party officers, some of them wearing helmets and clutching Kalashnikov assault rifles, were pacing the streets flanked by policemen in blue.

In front of public buildings, armed men took up positions behind sandbags.

Only Ihasan Salman could be seen in front of his shop.

"I normally open at 10 a.m. but today I opened at 6:30 just after the bombing," the 52-year-old hand-

bag salesman said.

"God rewarded me. I sold three today," he added with a smile.

Not far away on Karada Street, people clustered around the few bakeries that were open and left quickly, carrying the still-hot bread.

Three bombing raids in the early morning hours hit several sites. The sirens screamed in the sleeping capital at about 5:35 a.m. local time (0235 GMT), then the sky lit up with the bombing just as the sun was rising.

Two explosions came on their heels on the outskirts of this city of some five million inhabitants.

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Announcement

The Daily Star will be running special, four-colour four-page coverage on the Iraq crisis from tomorrow.

998 fly back home from Kuwait

RAFIQ HASAN

Nine hundred and ninety-eight Bangladeshis came back home from Kuwait in last two days, according to a control room at Zia International Airport.

Among them were 775 defence personnel who were stationed in Kuwait as part of the United Nations Iraq-Kuwait Observers Mission.

The remaining 223 are civilians. Thirty of them returned on Wednesday after the Korean Hyundai plant on the Kuwait-Iraq border closed temporarily because of the Iraq crisis, said sources in the Ministry of Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment.

All foreign workers, including the 30 Bangladeshis, have been given their overdue salaries and free tickets home.

Hyundai has assured its workers

that the plant would reopen once the situation normalises.

The Haji camp near the airport will be used for emergency shelter of war victims from the Middle East, but no returnees took facilities of the camp until yesterday, sources said.

"The flow of returnees is normal but the number will increase after arrival of other flights," said a control room official.

The government bears the cost of sending Bangladeshi expatriates returning from the Middle East to their home destinations.

The control room will help the returnees. Special coupons will be given to each returnee for free travel by train, bus and steamer. The government has already printed 10,000 such coupons. The returnees will need to fill in a registration form to get the service.

SEE PAGE 11 COL 7

Saurav pounces on Kenya

AFP, Durban

Saurav Ganguly produced a captain's innings of 111 not out as India made a commanding 270 for four in their World Cup day-night semifinal against Kenya at Kingsmead here on Thursday.

Ganguly, bidding to become the first India skipper to lead his country to a World Cup final since Kapil Dev's men won the title 1983, faced just 114 balls.

The left-hander reached his 22nd one-day international century in majestic form with his fifth and final six, off Martin Suji.

Ganguly's third hundred in the tournament meant only teammate Sachin Tendulkar, whose 83 took his record aggregate to 669 in this World Cup, had scored more than

the Indian captain's tally of 441.

It was Ganguly's second hundred against Kenya in two weeks, following the unbeaten 107 he made in India's six-wicket Super Six victory at Cape Town earlier this month.

Tendulkar and fellow opener Virender Sehwag shared a first-wicket stand of 74 after Ganguly won the toss and batted first in overcast conditions.

Kenya's hard-working attack lacked the pace to worry either batsman although many boundary-bound shots slowed up on an outfield subjected to two days of heavy rain.

But Sehwag, who made 33 in 56 balls, departed when he tried to turn

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AL's Kamran in Sylhet, BNP's Mujibur in Barisal win

STAR REPORT

The Awami League-backed incumbent mayor was unofficially declared winner in the Sylhet City Corporation elections.

The ruling coalition-backed mayoral candidate won the Barisal city polls yesterday.

Badar Uddin Ahmed Kamran fetched 54,932 votes against Four-Party Alliance-backed candidate and district BNP President MA Haque's 33,625 in Sylhet.

In Barisal, Mujibur Rahman Sarwar bagged 44,256 ballots leaving nearest rival Enayet Pir Khan of Awami League-backed Nagorik Parishad trail with 33,786.

Results of 76 of the 79 centres were available till 10:30 last night in Sylhet. In Barisal, counting in all 90 centres was finished. Sitting Barisal Mayor Ahsan Habib Kamal was placed third in the balloting with 20,889 votes.

Voting in the two city corporations was held for the first time.

Officials said the election was held by and large peacefully in all the 79 polling centres and the

voters' turnout was about 70 per cent.

There were allegations of false voting in most of the centres in Barisal and at many centres in Sylhet.

Sources said in many centres in Barisal votes were cast in "unusual haste".

They pointed out that about 33 per cent votes were cast by 10:30am at Kashipur Girl's School centre and about 50 per cent votes by 11:00am at Hatem Ali College centre.

But casting of votes in the main city polling stations was rather slow.

Minor clashes took place between supporters of ward commissioner candidates at some places, but the joint forces quickly brought the situation under control.

Justifying allegations of false voting and rigging, sources said polling agent of Ahsan Habib Kamal was forced out of A Kader centre at Kawmia and BNP leaders Shahin, Hiru and Biplob took control of it.