

Iraqi leader everywhere, yet nowhere

AFP, Dubai

Saddam Hussein is everywhere in Iraq, beaming out from street corners and offices, newspapers and television screens, but he is also nowhere to be found, as his people can bear witness.

US and British intelligence trying to locate the Iraqi president, let alone determine if he has been wounded or even killed, face a foe who is a past master at deception.

Stories of multiple doubles, deep underground bunkers, decoy convoys and the like swirl around the Iraqi leader who has developed a legendary paranoia with personal security.

Given past reports of numerous coup attempts, the brutal violence of the Baath regime, and previous US efforts to target Saddam, his fears may be justified.

The snap bid to "decapitate" Saddam and his high command precipitated rather than prevented Gulf War II on Thursday.

An anonymous British official told the BBC he was dead, but US officials now seem to be groping in the dark again.

Hopes that surgical Tomahawk missile strikes at least injured Saddam receded after a series of statements from senior Iraqi officials that the president and his family had again escaped.

Repeated television footage of Saddam and statements attributed to him promising "victory" and urging Iraqis to resist to the death did nothing to help the US case, even if they are far from convincing evidence of his survival.

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said the "shock and awe" attack on Baghdad only began

Friday night after the administration failed to find out whether Saddam was alive and it was evident he was not going to quit Iraq.

US officials still believe Saddam is losing his iron grip and see him as vulnerable to attack either because of intercepted communications or spies in his inner circle, a message the first strikes were also intended to convey.

US intelligence has reported a marked decline in communications between the senior leadership and military commanders.

After the first firestorm, the question of Saddam's whereabouts remains at the centre of the conflict as the United States conceded there was "no concrete evidence".

Paradoxically, a huge personality cult in Iraq has raised Saddam to the status of everyman -- his smiling portrait dressed as a judge, a tourist,

a soldier or of course a benign president, stares down everywhere across the country.

Yet the only time Iraqis get to see their "great leader" move is in regular television footage from meetings with senior aides. Where or when such tape is recorded is never revealed.

After becoming famous for unannounced visits to his people, including simple villagers, public appearances have become increasingly rare -- the last was in January 2001 -- and he has not travelled abroad since before the 1991 Gulf war.

The 2001 appearance at a huge military parade in Baghdad saw Saddam fire off a shotgun held in one hand, defying rumours he was riddled with cancer and dying.

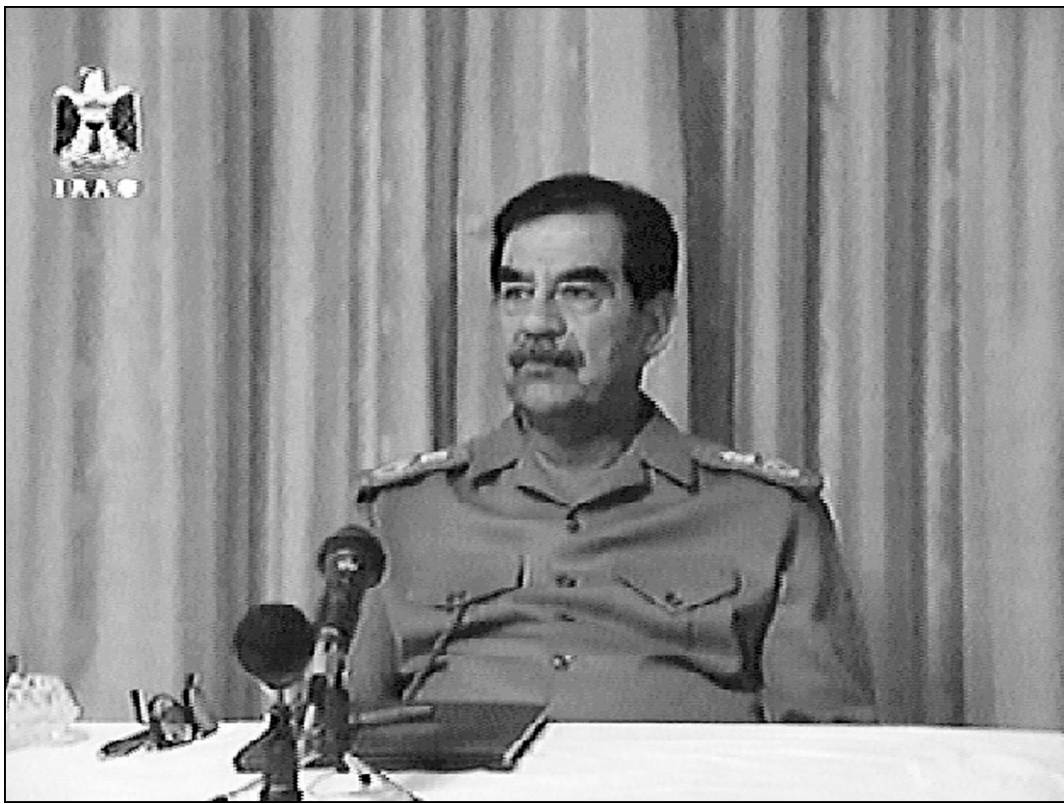


PHOTO: AFP

In this image taken off Iraqi television March 21 Iraqi President Saddam Hussein is seen speaking to an aide as his son Qusai (unseen) during a meeting believed to have taken place in Baghdad at an undetermined date.

Hacking of websites soars

REUTERS, London

As bombs continue to fall in Iraq, protesters and patriotic hackers alike have stepped up their war of words on the Internet, defacing hundreds of US and UK corporate and government Web sites, a security expert said.

"We've had reports of 800 defacements on Friday, which is ten times more than a week ago, which tells me groups are increasingly turning to the Internet to protest," said Mikko Hypponen, manager of Finnish anti-virus software firm F-Secure.

The messages run the gamut, ranging from words of support for American and British troops to anger over the military campaign. Victims vary from a US Navy Web site to the homepage for UK industrial products distributor Routeco,

www.routeco.com.

According to pictures captured on F-Secure's Web site, the Routeco home page carried a photo of protesters burning an American flag. Underneath the image, a message read: "Ohh YeaH Baby...Ur Site Has BeeN DeFaceD".

The Web site was back to normal by mid-day Thursday, a computer consultant for Routeco told Reuters.

The site www.seabornes.com, was also hit by war protesters, quoting the Koran. It also issued the ominous warning: "It's The New Era of CyberWar We Promised!"

Groups with a strong political bent increasingly have been using Web site defacement and crude hacking techniques as methods of protest.

Like graffiti, defaced Web sites are

considered little more than a nuisance. The message tends to get wide exposure, but the damage to the victim is minimal. Web site operators typically have the site restored within a matter of hours.

"This is the work of individual groups. We haven't seen any signs of state-sponsored network (intrusions)," Hypponen said.

Hypponen said security firms have been staffing up to handle the more damaging potential cyber attacks: email-based worms or viruses.

A new e-mail worm, dubbed Ganda-A, surfaced this week in Europe, purporting to show screensavers of US spy satellite pictures of Iraq or animations that are either patriotic or that mock President Bush.

UK govt's legal adviser quits over war

AFP, London

A senior legal adviser to Britain's Foreign Office has resigned over the legality of the government's decision to go to war on Iraq without a new UN resolution, the Guardian newspaper reported Saturday.

Elizabeth Wilmhurst, the Foreign Office's deputy legal officer, was understood to be unhappy with the government's argument that there was a legal basis for military action under existing UN resolutions, the Guardian said.

The Foreign Office confirmed that Wilmhurst, 54, a legal adviser for 30 years, had quit but refused to disclose the reason.

"We can confirm that the deputy legal officer has resigned. It is a personal decision and not for us to comment," a spokesman said.

Iran protests over violation of its airspace

AFP, Tehran

Iran lodged a diplomatic protest at the violation of its airspace by US and British planes, Iranian TV reported Friday.

The protest, lodged with the British ambassador in Tehran and his Swiss counterpart, who looks after US interests in Iran, came after earlier reports that a bomb had fallen on Iranian soil, injuring two people.

The bomb dropped, by a US plane during the bombardment of Iraq, exploded near the southwestern town of Abadan, Iranian television claimed.

A government source refused to confirm the news, saying only that the authorities were investigating the cause of an explosion.

Qatar-based Al-Jazeera television earlier reported that the two were injured when an American bomb fell on a petrol depot in Iran close to the Iraqi border.

Anti-war rallies ripple across Asia

AFP, Jakarta

Demanding an immediate end to the US-led war on Iraq, demonstrators took to the streets of the Indonesian capital and other cities across Asia on Saturday as Europe braced for another day of protest.

Anti-war demonstrators vented their outrage over the heavy US bombing of Baghdad during largely peaceful protests in Australia, Bangladesh, Indonesia, New Zealand, Taiwan and Thailand.

Opponents of the war on Iraq were also returning to the streets of London by the thousands early Saturday and major anti-war demonstrations and rallies were planned across the United States for later in the day.

In Jakarta, the capital of

Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country, some 3,000 protesters picketed the US embassy, branding US President George W. Bush, British Prime Minister Tony Blair and Australian Prime Minister John Howard "terrorists" and "war criminals."

"We condemn the evil aggression against Iraq. Bush, Blair and Howard should be brought to the international court of justice as war criminals," the Muslim group, which organised the protest, Hizb ut Tahrir, said in a statement.

An anti-war protest was staged by some 1,500 people in Yogyakarta in central Java on Saturday, witnesses said. "America is not a global cop," read a poster.

Predominantly-Muslim Bangladesh was gripped by a

nationwide strike to protest the war and hundreds of protesters took to the streets of Dhaka.

Several hundred Islamic activists, carrying sticks and shouting anti-US slogans, gathered outside Dhaka's main Baitul Mukarram mosque and blocked a major road briefly by lying down, witnesses said.

In South Korea, protesters held up red cards reading "Stop War" and urged the South Korean government to cancel plans to dispatch non-combat troops to what they called an "unjustified" war.

Buddhist monks struck giant drums on a podium to console the spirits of victims of the war as a poem was read and entertainers performed on a stage outside the City Hall in central Seoul.

"Bush is the war criminal," human rights activist Park Won-Soon said over a loudspeaker to an estimated crowd of 2,000.

Thousands of demonstrators took to the streets in Australia on Saturday, bringing traffic to a standstill in several cities.

In the Western Australian capital of Perth, an estimated 10,000 people marched to the Esplanade to hear speeches by peace activists and union officials.

Across the country in Brisbane, a group of about 200 people broke away from a 3,000-strong protest rally to stage a sit-down protest in one of the eastern city's main thoroughfares.



PHOTO: AFP

A photo released on Saturday shows President George W. Bush (C) meets with his national security and communications advisors March 19 at the White House in Washington, DC, after authorising military operations against Iraq. From left are: Steve Hadley, Deputy National Security Advisor; Karen Hughes, special advisor to the president; Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Richard B. Myers; Dan Bartlett, Communications Director; Vice President Dick Cheney; Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld; National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice; and Secretary of State Colin Powell.

Debate over treatment of Iraqi prisoners

BBC NEWS ONLINE, Umm Qasr

Some Iraqi troops have already surrendered to US-led forces. Strict rules govern the treatment of PoWs, although not everyone can agree how they should be applied.

The sight of Iraqi troops waving white flags in surrender will offer encouragement to US and British military planners in the Gulf.

It seems several dozen Iraqi soldiers have already chosen to give up fighting.

A BBC correspondent alone reported seeing about 60 men emerge from their bunkers near the southern peninsula of al-Faw and surrendering to British commandos, on Friday morning.

Another 250 are said to have thrown in the towel in the town of Umm Qasr. However, Iraq has said the surrenders are being staged by the US using actors.

Nevertheless, if this is like the last Gulf War, many more prisoners of war are likely to be taken over the coming days or weeks. By the end of hostilities in 1991, the US Department of Defence reported taking 50,000 Iraqi PoWs.

Once a soldier has turned himself over, he may be in enemy hands, but his treatment is governed by interna-

tional law, namely the third Geneva Convention.

Some 189 countries have signed up to the tenets of the convention since it was drawn up 50 years ago. The principles establish basic humanitarian rights for all prisoners.

The Red Cross has responsibility for visiting prisoners and seeing that the capturing army is obeying the rules.

In the last Gulf War, surrendering Iraqi troops were often surprised at the humane treatment they received, says Chris Lincoln-Jones, a British commander at the time.

"At the moment of surrender they were often extremely scared because they'd heard from their officers that they would be shot by the enemy."

The emotion was such that British combatants were sometimes embarrassed by witnessing men collapse to their feet and start crying in front of them and "begging to be spared".

UK troops are well-versed in the rules for handling PoWs everyone from an infantryman up receives an annual refresher course. There is also a separate "ethics package" which sets out the sort of behaviour that is expected of British troops in combat.

Mostly these are respected, says Lincoln-Jones, who recalls an episode in the last Gulf War when an

opportunistic Iraqi, shielded by his surrendering colleagues, fired a rocket-propelled grenade which killed a British soldier.

"It was a heated and tense moment and the other Iraqis might have feared for their lives. But while the culprit was killed, the other men were left unscathed."

This time though, questions are being asked about the conduct of some troops after reports that some Iraqi soldiers are being forced to strip so they can be searched for concealed explosives.

The fear is that soldiers turning themselves over will turn out to be suicide bombers. Such an attack would have echoes of the revolt by Taliban prisoners held by American-backed forces in Mazar-e-Sharif, Afghanistan.

There was a bloodbath when prisoners, using concealed weapons, rose up against their captors.

British command in the UK refused to comment on reports of partial or full strip searching, but the idea appals Chris Lincoln-Jones.

"This would be extremely humiliating to a Muslim. It's possible to search prisoners without stripping them and you can pretty much tell if someone is going to try something."

Real-time reporting tips off commanders

AFP, Kuwait City

The real-time media coverage of the unfolding war on Iraq is both a showcase for modern news-gathering technology and a boon to US commanders adapting their plans to the changing situation on the battlefield.

Never before has the world been able to witness a conflict covered from so many angles within the forces of both protagonists.

With more than 500 journalists "embedded" with US and British troops and a few dozen holed up in Baghdad, Gulf War II has become the ultimate in real-time television -- and a fragmented window on very real violence.

The immediacy of the air strikes and invasion was most often brought to military strategists and commanders by all-news channels CNN and BBC World, as evidenced by the permanently on television sets.

"The media product is as useful as other information coming in," said one coalition military spokesman, British Lieutenant Colonel Neal Peckham, adding that his own media liaison office was constantly monitoring broadcasts.

But he cautioned that, while senior commanders were kept abreast with major breaking news, they in no way relied totally on those

reports.

Intelligence from their officers on the battlefield, satellite imagery, communication intercepts, aerial eyeballing by warplane pilots and commandos behind enemy lines all completed their picture.

"If a piece of information comes in and is current and real, then that can be fed into the news stream" to the generals, Peckham said.

That news stream itself was carefully filtered at several points, however, because "the danger with today's technology is information overload," he added.

"If you give a top commander too much information, he gets caught in the clutter as it were," he said.

Viewers and readers around the world, in contrast, were being flooded with a surfeit of information minute-by-minute. But much of it was disjointed, out of context, sometimes difficult to confirm and beset by glitches in the technology that made the constant feed possible.

Thus many live broadcasts from the journalists travelling with armoured units speeding their way across the Iraqi desert, for instance, often contained pixellated images from small cameras linked to satellites that resulted in blurry figures of tanks and sand.

Millions of birds in danger of war

AFP, Johannesburg

More than a million South African birds could find themselves in the dangerous Iraqi warfront when they head north for the winter, a media report said here on Saturday.

The Johannesburg-based Saturday Star said the birds, which are accumulating fat as fuel for their long journey, will be flying through Iraq from now until May, before fanning out to their breeding grounds in Asia.

Les Underhill of the University of Cape Town said the South African bird ringing unit recovered two birds ringed in South Africa in Iraq.

Underhill said a steppe buzzard, ringed near Bredasdorp would have been on its way to its breeding grounds in southern Asia.

"The other was a curlew sandpiper, ringed at Langebaan lagoon, which would have been about halfway to its breeding grounds, which lie in the northeast edge of the Taimyr Peninsula, in the tundra of Siberia."

Underhill said these two recoveries were representative of millions of birds which migrated through Iraq and the West Asia.

He said the bird ringing unit database contained hundreds more recoveries of birds in this general area ringed in South Africa.

Underhill said the Iran-Iraq war from 1980 to 1988 and the 1990-1991 Gulf War were destructive of bird habitat.

"One of the main battlegrounds of the Iran-Iraq War was of the Mesopotamian marshes, one of the most important bird areas of the West Asia. Vast areas of reedbeds were burnt and wetlands were drained."

Migration was not a continuous route along which birds could feed.

"People should rather picture a series of stepping stones which are linked by 'hops' of varying lengths. The destruction of one critical refuelling site leads to the loss of a migration route and the loss of a population breeding in one area of the world and migrating to another."

Propaganda war on TV?

AFP, New York

For the first time in history, television networks are carrying simultaneous broadcasts of an ongoing military offensive, but a new and more subtle form of disinformation may lie behind the "live on TV" spectacle of war in Iraq, some experts fear.

For the past two days, viewers around the world have had access to real time images of fighter planes launching sorties from US aircraft carriers and blinding explosions as cruise missiles pound targets in Baghdad.

They have seen columns of tanks and armoured carriers advancing relentlessly across the desert scrubland as the US-British invasion force fans out across southern Iraq.

While presenters go into raptures over the stream of images from the front-line, the New York Times noted Friday that the television networks had carried more live war coverage in 24 hours than in the whole of the 1991 Gulf War.

It has all come about thanks to the invention of the videophone, a telephone system which can transmit images of mediocre but broadcastable quality, and the decision of the Pentagon to allow

some 500 journalists to accompany combat troops.

But US media-watchers and campaigners for impartial reporting are concerned that all may not be what it seems.

"It's a total orchestration. They know that television needs pictures, characters. It's about story-telling, it's Hollywood," said Danny Schechter of the internet site Mediachannel.org, which specialises in scrutiny of the media.

"This is a new level of manipulation, that conceals its own intention."

"The Pentagon is running the public relations in this war they way it would run a political campaign. And the whole idea of a political campaign is always create photo-ops, action situations in which your candidate looks good," he said.

"You identify with the troops, with their problems, and therefore you identify with the mission. They don't question the mission anymore."

Schechter's comments were echoed by Rachel Coen, an analyst with Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), an NGO which monitors the media and its activity.

Coen acknowledged that tele-

vised coverage of the conflict in Iraq was turning up new information, but she warned that appearances can be deceptive.

"Seeing the picture of a tank rolling into the desert may give the viewer a feeling that they have an inside track to the war and know the inside scoop, but in reality, it doesn't convey very much information," she said.

The danger, Coen noted, is that such coverage allows mainstream networks to generate hours and hours of exciting battle footage without really addressing bigger picture about the war.

"Humanitarian issues, international legal issues, political issues, all the major important questions that we really need journalists to address," she said.

The last two days have almost turned into a conduit for military information, which is really disturbing."

Coen fears that the US public will be able to sit at home and feel that they have all they need to know at their fingertips, when in fact the access granted by the military provides "superficial, patriotic images of our troops doing their job."



PHOTO: AFP

An Iraqi woman stands next to the closed door of CNN office in Baghdad March 22. The US news channel said on Friday that its team in Baghdad had been ordered out of the country.