



IRAQ INVASION

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Allied troops control south Iraqi oilfields

Kuwaiti help sought to extinguish oilwells fire

REUTERS, Kuwait City

US and British forces on Sunday tightened their grip on Iraq's southern oil region and began assessing how to restart exports from fields holding more than half the country's oil wealth.

Only the northern oil hub Kirkuk remains out of their grasp, slowing Washington from its declared goal to safeguard the country's billions of barrels of oil reserves on behalf of ordinary Iraqis.

Their mission is viewed with widespread suspicion by many who see the war as a US bid to ensure cheap and steady supplies from the world's seventh biggest oil exporter.

How quickly oil starts to flow from what appear to be largely undamaged wellheads depends on the state of the delivery infrastructure -- yet to be assessed by a US-contracted team from Texas-based Boots and Coots International Well Control.

But the US military has said facilities handling 85 percent of the southern oilfields' operations are secure.

Before the war erupted, Gulf OPEC producer Iraq was exporting some 1.8 million barrels per day (bpd) under United Nations supervision. Nearly 60 percent of that volume was flowing out of southern oilfields.

For that reason, dealers will be

reassured by early reports that Iraq's Gulf export terminal at Mina al-Bakr, seized by British troops on Friday, is largely intact.

Damage at the fields appears to be similarly light. Teams of firefighters are moving in to douse a small number of oil wells still burning in the Rumaila field, the southern region's primary producer and feed for its Gulf export terminal.

"Thirty to 45 days, we'll have it all done," said the leader of the US team of contractors brought in by Washington to tackle the fire damage.

Latest US estimates peg the number of wellheads sabotaged by Baghdad at fewer than 10, a fraction of Rumaila's 500 wells.

Iraqi forces set fire to about 700 oil wells in Kuwait during the 1991 Gulf war, setting off conflagrations which took months to control.

Washington has also moved swiftly to win over Iraqi oil experts, vital to restoring Iraq's southern oilfields that contain billions of barrels of untapped crude.

A US military source said the process is already underway to arrange this, but declined to offer further details.

Success in the south has yet to be matched in the north, home to the Kirkuk oilfield -- one of the world's biggest and oldest.

Military officials said there is no evidence of sabotage at the 76-

year old oilfield, which can pump up to 900,000 bpd and contribute some 40 percent toward Iraqi exports.

AFP adds: US and British forces have requested Kuwaiti help to extinguish some oil wells in Iraq, torched as coalition forces advanced into the country, a Kuwaiti official said in remarks published Sunday.

Oil ministry undersecretary Issa al-Oun told Al-Watan newspaper that the allied forces have asked for assistance in putting out fires in the southern Rumaila oil field.

Oun, who did not say whether the request would be met, said the Kuwaiti oil sector is "fully prepared to carry out this mission," especially alongside foreign fire-fighting teams.

But forming and organising the teams would require some time, he added.

Oun said there was a strong possibility a Kuwaiti team would participate since huge quantities of oil have already created spills, which are an environmental hazard and will affect the field's strategic reserves.

The chief of Britain's armed forces, Admiral Sir Michael Boyce, said Friday that Iraq had set fire to seven oil wells in the south of the country.

A layer of thick smoke has been seen over Kuwait every day since the oil wells were set alight.

Baghdad in ruins



A statue of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein stands at the al-Fardous square as smoke billows from burning trenches filled with oil in Baghdad March 22.



Iraq's ruling Baath party officials look at the Tikrit museum 22 March 2003 that was hit the night before by a US missile. Four Iraqis were killed in the US-led strikes on Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's ancestral hometown, witnesses told AFP.



Smoke billows from burning trenches filled with oil in Baghdad. Fuel trenches were set on fire on the outskirts of Baghdad, ringing the capital with plumes of thick smoke. Baghdad was kept awake well into the early hours of today after the United States pounded the city with waves of air strikes that turned vast sections of the Iraqi capital into an inferno.

Arabs seethe watching destruction on TV

REUTERS, Cairo

Thousands of Arabs seething with anger about a heavy US-led bombing of Baghdad continued with their protest amid concern the demonstrations could threaten stability in the volatile region.

With live footage of the fiery explosions and burning buildings in Iraq beamed into most Arab homes, feelings are running high over what many consider a sinister plot to dominate the Arab world.

"Did you see all those bombs falling on TV? All the poor people? And for what? America wants to subjugate the entire region for the sake of Israel. They want to bring the Arabs to their knees," said 50-year-old Egyptian housewife Samia.

Some analysts say the widespread and sometimes violent anti-war protests, from Arab states in the Gulf to Morocco on the Atlantic, have the potential to undermine stability in a region described by one expert as a "cauldron of discontent."

But most say the tough security services in Arab states should manage to rein in the fury and ensure the protests do not threaten government control.

In Egypt, the region's most populous country with almost 70 million people, thousands of students staged anti-war rallies at universities on Saturday amid tight police security.

But unlike the past two days, there were no initial reports of

violence or clashes with police.

In Damascus and Khartoum, police pushed back anti-war protesters trying to storm toward the US embassies.

"Bush and Blair are war criminals," and "Stop the war now!" chanted hundreds of demonstrators in the conservative Gulf Arab sultanate of Oman, where protests are rare.

"Bush is the new Hitler of this century. He won't stop until he has control of all Arab lands," one Omani student said.

In Bahrain, which hosts the US Fifth Fleet, protests also continued, and the US embassy stayed closed a day after hundreds scuffled with police outside the fortified building.

Amr Moussa, the head of the 22-member Arab League, said "no Arab with any remnant of conscience can tolerate" the bombing of Baghdad, once the proud capital of the Islamic world.

"The bombing and violence we're seeing on satellite TV should stir the ire of every Arab who sees it," said the secretary-general, who has warned a war against Iraq could "open the gates of hell" in the Middle East.

While many Arabs have little sympathy for Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, they say they are furious about the suffering the war is causing innocent Iraqis.

"I cried and cried because when I saw the bombardment, which is worse than anything you can imagine," said taxi driver Fouad al-

Nashed in the Yemeni capital Sanaa, site of bloody protests on Friday.

Many Arabs also blame their governments for failing to prevent the conflict, and accuse them of political impotence.

"I feel sad and hurt because there's nothing we can do. The Arabs are weak and America controls the situation," said Saudi Walid Musharraf, a 29-year-old accountant.

"Now everyone here hates America, and even some Americans hate the American government," he said.

In Gaza, where protesters have voiced greater support for Saddam himself, around 10,000 Palestinians marched through the streets holding pictures of the Iraqi president. "We are with you Saddam Hussein and the people of Iraq," they chanted. "With our blood and soul we will redeem you, Saddam!"

Some analysts say the war could pose an unprecedented challenge for Arab governments, who have been at pains to contain restive publics and convince them they did all they could to avert the war. States including Egypt, Jordan and Morocco have appealed for calm and moderation.

"There is the possibility of real destabilisation if the war continues for a long time and the war causes devastation and lots of civilian casualties," said Hassan Nafaa, head of the political science department at Cairo University.

US drops bid for Turkish bases

AFP, Washington

The United States abandoned a bid to launch an offensive into northern Iraq from Turkey Saturday amid a deepening rift that could spell serious trouble if the longtime NATO ally moves its own forces into northern Iraq.

The US Army's 4th Infantry Division was ordered to deploy to the Gulf, ending a weeks-long wait to go into Turkey to open a second front inside northern Iraq, a US defence official said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The United States still plans a northern front, but without access to Turkish bases to stage and resupply its troops analysts say it will be unable to move in heavy mechanised forces to bring pressure on Baghdad from the north.

Instead, it will have to rely on light infantry, special forces and Kurdish forces to mount a holding action in the north until it has greater control over other regions of Iraq.

Meanwhile, Ankara denied reports that 1,000 Turkish troops had moved into northern Iraq, but Washington fears that Turkey may

try to seize control of the north on its own have prompted blunt US warnings to stay out.

A Turkish military move into northern Iraq could spark fighting with Kurdish special forces and run afoul of US special forces operations, and it might draw in forces from Syria or Iran.

"We're going to have a northern front," said the US defence official. "They (the Turks) are going to have to stay out of the way."

He and other military officials said no large formations of Turkish troops have entered the country.

But large numbers of Turkish troops are dispersed along the northern border, officially to control the flow of refugees.

US military officials say the numbers are consistent with policing operations and note that over the years the Turkish military has gone in and out of the region in pursuit of Kurdish guerrilla groups fighting Turkish rule.

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said Friday that Ankara and the Turkish military had been advised that "it would be unhelpful if they went into the north in large numbers."

Will Saddam use chemical, biological arms?

AFP, Washington

The great uncertainty of the Iraq conflict is whether Saddam Hussein will resort to using chemical or biological weapons against coalition forces or his own people.

US President George W. Bush and many military experts are convinced the Iraqi regime possesses such weapons, and they say it is plausible Saddam could use them as a last resort once he sees that the end is near.

Bush and Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld have used public addresses in recent days to urge Iraqi officers to disobey any orders to use such weapons -- warning they will be prosecuted for crimes against humanity if they comply.

If Saddam has chemical or biological weapons and the ability to use them, "he is going to wait until the very end to use them," said Charles Pena of the Cato Institute, a Washington think tank.

"I don't think those weapons would be terribly effective against our troops" in the desert, Pena

said. But if intensive air strikes do not topple the Iraqi regime, combat in Baghdad will ensue, a scenario the Pentagon would like to avoid.

At that point, facing certain downfall, the Iraqi leader could use chemical or biological weapons in Baghdad, to "create a humanitarian crisis at the same time we are trying to fight the nastiest type of war there is, which is a battle in a city."

"Since he is a man who doesn't care about his own people what does he have to lose by engaging in that type of tactic," Pena said.

According to Philip Gordon, a military analyst at the Brookings Institution, units of the Republican Guard deployed in Baghdad identify closely with the Iraqi leader and "are fully capable of using these weapons."

"My guess is that once we are at that point, public opinion won't mean very much for Saddam Hussein, because he'll be desperate," Gordon said.

The use of chemical and biological weapon would make the

battle for Baghdad "very costly," he noted.

"The question is whether the Americans have another strategy going into Baghdad. The strategy could be simply sitting on the outside of the city, like a siege ... to avoid an urban battle."

Pena, noting that allied troops are "two or three days" from Baghdad, noted that "We are engaging in this attempt to cause the regime to collapse without having to go in and have a battle in Baghdad."

"So far it hasn't worked," he said. And, "at some point we will run out of targets" for air strikes.

"We cannot use our air power to level the city if we are liberating the civilians inside," he noted.

In the last instance Saddam Hussein could fire chemical artillery against US troops around Baghdad, and "I think we are rapidly approaching that scenario," said John Pike of GlobalSecurity.com, a military consulting firm.

"He is not a fool, he has a lot of these weapons," Pike said.

Attack was 48 hours old when it 'began'

WASHINGTON POST, Washington

When President Bush huddled with his senior national security team last Wednesday afternoon to consider fresh CIA intelligence that President Saddam Hussein and other key members of the Iraqi leadership were spending the night at a complex in southern Baghdad, the Bush team was aware of another, perhaps even bigger secret.

Under the official war plan, designated "OPLAN 1003 V" and approved by the president, the war with Iraq had already begun.

A little more than two hours earlier, at 1 p.m., Washington time, 31 Special Operations teams -- about 300 men -- began pouring under cover of darkness into western and southern Iraq. Joining smaller contingents of US Special Forces and CIA paramilitaries already in Iraq, the special operators fanned out to sever communications, take down observation posts and position themselves to prevent what the Bush administration most feared -- moves by the Iraqi high command to use chemical or biological weapons, attack Israel with Scud missiles or destroy the country's oil

fields.

Over the course of a three-hour meeting in the Oval Office Wednesday afternoon, the president and his senior national security advisers tore up this choreographed opening to the war. Acting on information presented by CIA Director George J. Tenet, the president ordered an airstrike and cruise missile attack on the Baghdad complex, called Dora Farm, in an attempt to kill Hussein and other senior members of the leadership.

The revision of the war plan on the fly on Wednesday, which was described by numerous well-placed government sources, fit a pattern established in January 2002, when Defence Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld and U.S. Central Command chief Gen. Tommy R. Franks began drafting the blueprint for war.

In his State of the Union address on Jan. 29, 2002, Bush declared that Iraq was part of an "axis of evil" -- setting the country on what, in hindsight, seems like an inevitable course toward war.

At about the same time, as the first phase of the war in Afghanistan was winding down following the ouster of the Taliban militia

from power, the president signed a secret intelligence order authorising the CIA to undertake a comprehensive program to remove Hussein. He authorised spending upwards of \$200 million to support opposition groups and expand intelligence collection.

The first CIA paramilitary team secretly began operating in Iraq in June 2002 to gather intelligence and meet with and support opposition groups. Eventually the CIA deployed additional paramilitary teams and established links with Iraqis throughout the country, including Baghdad.

On a parallel track to this covert operation, Rumsfeld, Franks and other civilian and uniformed Pentagon officials began work on the administration's top-secret war plan.

In August, Bush said in an interview that he had still not seen a military plan for Iraq that he believed would work. "A president likes to have a military plan that will be successful," Bush said.

Early in September, according to sources, Bush was presented with a feasible, credible version of OPLAN 1003 V, the first that he

truly seemed comfortable with. But at the strong urging of Secretary of State Colin L. Powell, the president decided to go to the United Nations to build more international support for disarming Iraq. Negotiations over a UN Security Council resolution to give Hussein a final chance to reveal whether he had stocks of proscribed weapons, and the UN inspections, would continue for nearly six months.

This "long diplomacy," as one source called it, gave Rumsfeld and Franks the time that in retrospect was necessary to deploy the necessary forces in the Persian Gulf region -- and to refine their war plan.

According to sources, the president was initially uncomfortable with this idea because he had said publicly that he would announce when he had decided to go to war.

But the military advantages of the Special Operations mission were significant enough that Bush used deliberately vague language Monday when he delivered his ultimatum for Hussein to leave Iraq by Wednesday. If Hussein ignored the demand, the president said, he would commence military action "at a time of our choosing."



A US Stealth 117 fighter lands at its base in Kuwait after its mission over Iraq 22 March, 2003. US and British warplanes pounded Baghdad around the clock upping the ferocity of their aerial bombardment as US Marines battled Iraqi forces on the outskirts of the southern city of Basra.