



# IRAQ INVASION

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## Blasts rock Baghdad again after week of war

REUTERS, Baghdad

Waves of explosions rocked Baghdad overnight on Thursday as the Iraqi capital marked a grim week since the start of a U.S.-led war aimed at ousting President Saddam Hussein.

After a few hours pause, they resumed after daybreak with seven heavy blasts striking the southeast of the city about 8:25 a.m. (12:25 a.m. EST). Four more big explosions came from the same direction around 9:15 a.m. followed by two at 9:40 a.m.

More than 30 blasts had been heard around the city in at least four rounds through the night, keeping sleep-deprived residents on edge especially after up to 15 Iraqis were killed in a residential district on Wednesday.

Anti-aircraft fire could be heard during the latest 10 blasts, shortly before 4 a.m. (8 p.m. EST Wednesday) and almost exactly a week since U.S.-led forces began the war on March 20 with a dawn raid at 5:33 a.m. (9:33 p.m. EST).

The sky cleared during the night after sandstorms in recent days. After dawn, the day was bright and sunny.

Some of the overnight explosions were near the center of the capital, others around the fringes of a sprawling city that is normally home to five million people.

Many have left to escape the

blitz of bombs and cruise missiles with fears of an imminent battle for the city between elite Iraqi troops loyal to Saddam and US-led forces advancing from the south and already less than 100 miles away.

Up to 15 Iraqis were killed in a Baghdad street on Wednesday in what residents said was a US missile strike. It was the highest civilian death toll in any explosion in the city since the war began.

The United States denied that it had intentionally targeted the Shaab residential district in the capital, but the Pentagon left open the possibility that a missile or bomb had gone astray.

Other strikes in the past week have battered Saddam's palaces and government and military buildings. Washington and London accuse Saddam of hiding weapons of mass destruction, a charge he denies.

The first strikes on Baghdad a week ago hit Saddam's home in a targeted bid to kill the Iraqi leader. But Saddam has since appeared several times on television and ministers say he is still firmly in command.

As part of its defenses, Baghdad lit giant fires in oil-filled trenches on Saturday, casting a thick black pall over the city meant as a smokescreen to protect against the strikes.

But modern weapons are usually guided by satellite and so are

unaffected by the smoke.

At night, Baghdad residents are staying at home or in bomb shelters, emerging by day to buy food and to check on relatives and friends.

**AFP from Baghdad adds:** The US Central Command acknowledged that coalition fire may have been responsible, but stopped short of confirming the deaths, and accused Baghdad of placing military hardware in civilian areas.

Major John Altman, intelligence officer of the Third Infantry Division's First Brigade, told AFP the Iraqis were trying to reinforce Najaf -- 150 km south of the capital -- with thousands of crack Republican Guard troops from Karbala.

General Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of staff said a column of Iraqi vehicles heading from Baghdad to Karbala was attacked by US forces but did not elaborate on the size of the Iraqi detachment.

However other reports put the number of vehicles at up to 1,000.

The movement was reported after US army troops said they killed about 1,000 Iraqis in three days of fighting around the town and were poised to move on for a crucial battle in Karbala with the Republican Guard's armoured Medina division guarding the western approaches to Baghdad.

In the south, Iraqi tanks made a

surprise breakout of the besieged southern city of Basra late Wednesday and pushed on toward British positions under heavy bombardment, a British officer said.

Squadron Leader Simon Scott said he could not confirm the number of tanks involved, but reports accredited the column with more than 100 ageing Russian-built T-55s backed by artillery pieces and armoured personnel carriers.

"They came out of Basra heading southeast. We're not sure why. They're heading toward British positions on the Fao peninsula," Scott said from the allied command centre in Doha, Qatar.

The sheer courage of the Iraqi reinforcements impressed the US troops, who did not expect them to put up such a fight, Major General Buford Blount, commander of the Third Infantry Division told AFP.

"They are fighting very tenaciously and constantly attacking US forces."

And American troops suffered another setback Thursday morning, as dozens of marines were injured when their forces fired on one another around the southern city of Nasiriyah, a correspondent with the troops reported.

Several coalition troops have already been killed in "friendly fire" incidents since the beginning of the war a week ago.



A 101st Airborne Division soldier guards Iraqis intercepted Wednesday near the division's forward base in central Iraq.

PHOTO: INTERNET

## UNDP estimates \$ 30b for rebuilding Iraq

AFP, Washington

US companies should get a lion's share of juicy contracts for rebuilding Iraq after the war, much to the chagrin of their foreign competitors.

In a way, the rebuilding may represent a pot of gold: the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) estimates it will cost up to 30 billion dollars over the next three years.

The US Agency for International Development (USAID) has already opened bidding for eight major projects, ranging from infrastructure to public health.

According to media reports, 900 million dollars would be earmarked for these projects.

On Tuesday, US President George W. Bush unveiled a supplemental budget request that includes 1.7 billion dollars for reconstruction projects in Iraq.

American companies could benefit from this bonanza.

"Non-American firms are not excluded" from the US govern-

ment's procurement process," USAID. "However, in the case of these eight proposals, we had a sufficient number of American firms to compete. This does not preclude an American prime contractor from choosing non-American subcontractors."

But foreign companies are likely to collect only crumbs, if British shipping company P and O could serve as an example.

"We did make a bid but we have been told that we were not successful," said P and O spokesman David Smith.

According to British media, many bids by British companies have been denied.

France, on its part, is "alarmed by reports that the Bush administration may award the lion's share of Iraqi reconstruction contracts to US firms," said The Wall Street Journal on Wednesday.

The Movement of French Entrepreneurs and France's Economy and Finance Ministry have just outlined their common position for rebuilding Iraq under the auspices of the United Nations.

## Iraq urges UN to halt war

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's ruling Baath Party called Thursday on the UN Security Council to put an end to the US-led military offensive and force a withdrawal of the invading forces.

"We do not expect any foreign country to rush to combat with us to defend our nation; this is our duty and we are capable of doing it," said Ath-Thawra daily, mouthpiece of the Baath.

"But we ask the Security Council and the international community to act seriously to put an end to the aggression and to pull out invading forces from our land immediately," it said.

It accused the 15 members of the Security Council of remaining "spectators" to the week-old war launched by the United States and Britain aimed at deposing Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

"Isn't the outbreak of the aggression a good justification for Security Council members to act seriously and effectively to stop it, to defend international legitimacy and an independent state that is a member of the United Nations?" it asked.

The Security Council was due to resume a public debate Thursday on the war in Iraq, with Russia supporting calls for a ceasefire.

In sessions on Wednesday, most speakers condemned the US-led military offensive, saying it was not authorized by the council and was likely to cause a humanitarian disaster.

In a new Iraqi lashing of Secretary General Kofi Annan, Ath-Thawra accused the UN chief of having "offered all facilities to the invading colonialists to pave the way for the invasion."

"These include the withdrawal of UN observers at the Iraqi-Kuwaiti borders and the pullout of (arms) inspectors from Iraq," it said.

The ruling party's daily pledged that Iraq "will come out victorious in this historical confrontation, and this victory will be the victory of the will of the Muslims, the Arabs and the free people in Iraq."

"It will be the victory of international law, freedom, dignity and law," it said.

The Security Council in November unanimously passed

Resolution 1441 which demanded Iraq comply fully with weapons inspections of face serious consequences.

The United States and its allies abandoned a push for a second resolution spelling out further action against Iraq after staunch opposition by France and Russia, which both hold veto power.

Meanwhile, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan urged the Security Council on Wednesday to put aside its differences over reactivating the oil-for-food programme in Iraq as a channel for war relief.

"I urge the five permanent members, in particular, to show leadership by making a concerted effort to overcome their differences," Annan said at the start of a two-day public council debate.

The meeting was the council's first in Iraq since the United States and Britain invaded last week after giving up their efforts to seek UN authority for military action.

"All of us must regret that our intense efforts to achieve a peaceful situation through this council did not succeed," Annan said.

Many people were asking why Iraq did not take a final opportunity to disarm peacefully, he said.

"At the same time, many people around the world are seriously questioning whether it was legitimate for some member states to proceed to such a fateful action now ... without first reaching a collective decision of this council," he said.

The invasion "has far-reaching consequences, well beyond the immediate military dimensions," he said.

Annan was the first of 63 speakers scheduled to take the floor. Council rules allow other speakers to add their names to the list after a meeting begins.

The debate was called at the request of the Non-Aligned Movement and the Arab League at the United Nations, which happens to be chaired by Iraq this month.

In a letter Monday, Iraqi ambassador Mohammed Al-Douri asked for an urgent meeting "with regard to halting the American-British aggression and the immediate withdrawal of the invading forces."

## 600 cruise missiles fired so far

AFP, Washington

The Pentagon said Wednesday that US troops had fired 600 Tomahawk cruise missiles and more than 4,300 precision-guided bombs in the first six days of the US-led war on Iraq.

Outlining some figures, the Pentagon said more than 250,000 US troops had been deployed in support of operations, as well as 40,000 mainly British and Australian coalition troops.

"Our ground forces are pushing north towards Baghdad and Al Kut," Major General Stanley McChrystal, joint staff vice-director of operations said Wednesday.

"We are more than 220 miles (355 kilometers) into Iraqi territory and have done it in over six days in spite of difficult weather," said McChrystal.

"Since March 20, our forces have fired more than 600 Tomahawks and dropped more than 4,300 precision-guided weapons," he told reporters.

Nearly 700 sorties were flown Tuesday alone, he told reporters. The Pentagon's main spokes-

woman Victoria Clarke said that 24 US troops had been killed since action started, and 19 had been wounded.

Clarke said that Washington had granted more than 100 million dollars to international aid organizations and was preparing direct food assistance to Iraq worth 300 million dollars.

As well as the 290,000 allied troops, thousands of others are ready to depart for the Gulf, including 12,000 troops from the 4th Infantry Division who start flying out of their Texas base Thursday to join the campaign.

McChrystal did not confirm information given on the CNN network that a thousand Republican Guard vehicles were headed toward An-Najaf in southern Iraq.

Najaf, some 150 kilometers (90 miles) from Baghdad, was the theatre of combat between members of the 3rd Infantry Division and irregular forces that left "hundreds" of enemy personnel dead and 30 enemy tanks destroyed, he said.

Other American sources in the region say that a thousand Iraqis may have lost their lives.



Iraqi men carry a white flag as they walk back home early morning yesterday after being stuck for days in the southern Iraqi town of Umm Qasr. Hundreds of Iraqis who work in Umm Qasr but live in the province have been unable to go home following fierce fighting in the southern port town.

PHOTO: AFP

## Where are the banned weapons?

WASHINGTON POST

President Bush pledged again to rid Iraq of "weapons of terror," but coalition forces have so far failed to find proof of Iraqi biological or chemical weapons a week after the start of the U.S.-led invasion.

Pentagon officials pointed to the discovery on Tuesday of Iraqi chemical protection suits at a hospital near Nasiriyah as evidence that Iraq's military had prepared for a chemical attack. Yet, the absence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction -- either in the battlefield or in caches uncovered by US troops -- has remained a notable feature of the military campaign so far, intelligence officials and weapons experts say.

Teams of weapons "hunters" acting on intelligence tips found no banned weapons yesterday during extensive searches of ammunition dumps near the port city of Umm Qasr. Earlier in the week, another team scoured a factory near Najaf that was initially thought to be a chemical weapons plant. Numerous other sites identified as likely storage areas for biological or chemical weapons were searched by Special Forces units in the

opening hours of the conflict, U.S. military officials have acknowledged. No unconventional weapons were found at any of the sites, the officials said.

The Bush administration has steadfastly maintained that such weapons would eventually be discovered. In his speech yesterday at McDill Air Force Base in Tampa, home of the US Central Command, Bush sought again to frame the Iraqi campaign as a bid to "prevent the Iraqi regime from using its hidden weapons of mass destruction."

But in recent days U.S. officials have faced questions from reporters and open scepticism from other governments critical of US policy toward Iraq. Secretary of State Colin L. Powell was confronted about the US failure to find weapons in an interview with an Abu Dhabi television reporter. Powell said he was "quite confident" that Iraqi weapons of mass destruction would be found, but "right now we're trying to finish these battles, and that's our priority."

Tuesday's discovery of about 3,000 chemical protection suits and an assortment of gas masks and chemical antidotes at the

Nasiriyah hospital appeared to bolster the administration's case, suggesting that Iraq was planning a chemical attack. Powell said the suits "must have been purchased because they thought chemical weapons might be present on the battlefield -- and the only ones who could deliver such chemical weapons would be the Iraqi armed forces."

But much about the discovered suits remained unclear yesterday, including how old they were and how the Iraqis intended to use them.

Weapons experts offered several explanations for the US failure so far to find weapons. Some speculated that Saddam Hussein had decided to hold in reserve his most lethal weapons for use as a last resort, and had entrusted them to elite units closest to him in the Iraqi capital. Others suggested the Iraqi president may have smuggled chemical and biological weapons out of the country for safe-keeping.

It is also possible that US officials far overestimated Iraq's weapons holdings. While Iraq is known to have possessed significant numbers of chemical and biological weapons before the 1991

war, much of its arsenal was destroyed by allied bombings or UN weapons inspectors. The recent UN inspections that ended earlier found no evidence of biological or chemical weapons, but inspectors also could not substantiate Iraq's claims that it had destroyed its stockpile.

Joseph Cirincione, director of the Non-Proliferation Project of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said the Bush administration had consistently emphasised the high end of UN estimates for the amount of weapons Hussein might still possess.

"It is equally possible that Iraq has very few biological or chemical weapons -- we just don't know," Cirincione said. "It could be that Saddam Hussein destroyed all or almost all of his munitions but left scientific teams and core assets intact so these programs could be quickly reconstituted later. In any case, the bar for President Bush is now very high: He has to deliver a large number of weapons to prove not only that Saddam Hussein was lying, but also that his weapons pose such an eminent threat that war is necessary."