



IRAQ INVASION

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Thousands of people demonstrate by forming a peace symbol at Catalonia square in Barcelona against the US-led war in Iraq, March 26.

PHOTO: AFP

Arab world in turmoil

DEUTSCHE WELLE

With the streets of Arab cities again filled with anti-war protesters, fears are growing that the protests could push the entire region into crisis.

With the rise of Middle Eastern satellite news channels like Al-Jazeera and al-Arabia, many Arab countries now have access to far more information than their own, often heavily censored national media have supplied.

Both broadcasters have played a leading role in international coverage of the second Gulf War. On Saturday, Al-Jazeera viewers faced images of mutilated corpses and injured children in Iraq. The satellite broadcaster even aired footage of a decapitated child and a dead Iraqi soldier lying next to a white flag in a trench. Al-Jazeera also broadcast pictures of dozens of corpses in the Kurdish dominated northern Iraq. The deaths were allegedly fighters from the Islamic extremist group Ansar el Islam, who had been killed by American soldiers.

"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," a 50-year-old Egyptian housewife told Reuters.

Ironically, the new diversity of media is adding to the fury in the Middle East over US-led military strikes against Iraq, with viewers being faced each day with a barrage of macabre images from the

war that are often conspicuously absent from western coverage. Thousands have taken to the streets in massive and often-violent protests against the US war on Iraq.

In countries from Morocco to Oman, Arab populations have not only been expressing their anger at the United States and its closest ally, Britain, but also widespread dissatisfaction with their own political leaders. Many believe that Arab heads of state and the Arab League did not do enough to prevent a war.

Analysts are divided on whether the sometimes-violent protests could destabilise an already unstable region. But most believe that the tough security forces in the Arab states will manage to keep the popular fury in check.

In the Egyptian capital, the region's largest city with some 17 million inhabitants, 20,000 people took to the streets on Saturday calling for an end to the US and British-led fighting. Students from Cairo's Al-Azhar Islamic University burned the American, British and Israeli flags. "Oh Arab army, where are you?" they chanted, calling on Arab nations to send military support to Iraq. Riot police were out in force.

Thousands of Palestinians in camps in Lebanon called on Arabs to "boycott American products." "We're defending the people of Iraq with our blood," they shouted in protests.

In Gaza, too, some 10,000 Palestinians marched through the

streets holding pictures of the Iraqi president. "We are with you and the people of Iraq," they chanted.

On Friday anti-war protests deteriorated into violent clashes with police after the evening prayers. In many cities, Muslim clerics fired up their congregations with sermons denouncing the war.

Mohammed Saved Tantawi, the grand sheik of the historic Al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo, called for jihad -- holy war -- to support Iraqis. "Jihad in Islam meant to defend... those subject to injustice," he said. "We have to support and defend the people of Iraq."

"With all our heart and soul, we sacrifice ourselves to Islam," protesters chanted. Police beat back the 10,000 demonstrators with truncheons and water cannons.

In a rare statement, Egypt's Interior Ministry appealed to citizens to express themselves in an orderly manner by participating only in previously authorised demonstrations.

In another sign of how deeply entrenched anti-American sentiment has become in the Palestinian-controlled territories, one shop owner told the news agency AFP that he was selling as many as 200 Iraqi flags a day to customers. Flags of the countries that have taken a stance against the war -- Germany, France, Russia, China and more -- he said, are also flying off the shelves.

Jubilation turns to hate as aid arrives

THE GUARDIAN, Zubayr, Iraq

The young man wearing the brown shawl summed it up succinctly: "We want you to go back home. We do not want your American and British aid," he said, his eyes flashing with anger.

If the British humanitarian taskforce had any doubts as to the legitimacy of his claims, the sudden burst of gunfire from a nearby building left no one in any doubt.

The first attempt to deliver aid to the Iraqi people was, in all respects, a practical and logistical disaster. A convoy of vehicles, including two water tankers and as many Warrior armoured vehicles, had set off from the abandoned Shaiba airfield earlier. The intent was to deliver food and water to win over the hearts and minds of the beleaguered Iraqis.

As the convoy pulled up inside the town, however, a crowd of predominantly young men ran towards it. Fights and skirmishes broke out for bottles of water. Iraqis asked for food and cigarettes. And while a cordon was quickly created, hundreds rushed towards the trucks, overpowering the soldiers.

"We have had no water and no food," said Ali Abdullah, 50. He stood away from the crowd, stroking his beard and surveyed the scene intently as crowds of young men fought over the water.

"For five days now, we have been without electricity. Have

you brought some electricity?"

The exercise had been beset with a number of difficulties from the outset. On leaving the nearby Shaiba airfield - a series of abandoned hangars, runways and outbuildings on the road to Basra - there had been innumerable delays as reports of violence filtered back from Zubayr. Earlier, there had been a delay in confirming security in the town.

Inside Zubayr, however, the distribution initially began with good nature. Young men joked with each other, smiled and passed around bottles of water. Within 10 minutes, however, an undercurrent of resentment flowed to the surface. The war, the bombing, sanctions and their cumulative toll all boiled over.

Ja'lid Ali, 25, the young Iraqi in the brown shawl, asked if any of the humanitarian aid was being provided by Americans.

"Take it back," he yelled, pretending to push it away. "We want the Americans to go back home. We do not need them here. Go back home. I do not need this."

Around him, his friends giggled. Not far away, people rushed out of earthen buildings and raced down a dual carriage-way. Ali, however, seemed to realise the irony only too well. "They bomb. And now they want to give water and food. How can they do both? How?" It was then that the gunfire erupted.

Earlier, the soldiers had been

optimistic but pensive. After enduring a rainy and windy night in the disused hanger at the Shaiba airfield, the convoy had been well intentioned. It was a curious sight: a line of trucks bearing much-needed humanitarian aid - aid that betrayed all the hallmarks of an occupying force, but aid nonetheless. The Iraqis, while initially jubilant, were quickly sceptical.

"I need electricity," said Moyed Abdullah, 33. "I need to power my house. See the electricity lines? They are not working; they have not been working for days. Do you bring any electricity?"

Around him, British and US soldiers struggled to control the crowds. Time and again, the Iraqis were pushed back - always, they seemed to slip in under the makeshift rope-line. After a while, it seemed, it was better simply to stand back and wait for the inevitable to happen.

The burst of gunfire from across the road finally stopped all attempts to supply the aid. As soldiers leapt into the jeeps, a Warrior turned round and took out the position the gunfire had come from. And with daylight fast fading, the humanitarian task force decided to speed back to its base at Shaiba airfield.

Tomorrow, they will undoubtedly try again to win the hearts and minds of the Iraqi civilians. And presumably tomorrow, they will encounter yet more resentment.

Anti-war movement vows to continue

AFP, Paris

Unfazed by the outbreak of a war in Iraq that it did all in its power to stop, the worldwide "peace" movement has vowed to keep up the pressure on US and British leaders, who it believes are slowly understanding the full horror of what they have unleashed.

A week after the start of hostilities, demonstrations continue to take place daily across the globe - with the most vocal often in the countries whose governments have sided with the US-led offensive.

On Wednesday alone there were protests in Spain and Australia, as well as Pakistan, Indonesia, Gaza, India, Chad and Thailand. On Tuesday Damascus, Beirut and Paris all saw demonstrations. Many more are planned for the weekend.

"You can still stop a war once it has started. Look at Vietnam," said Lindsey German, a leading figure in the Stop The War coalition in Britain. "I do not accept that just because the war has been launched we should all now be cheering for a quick allied victory."

The course of the first week of war has persuaded pacifists that their opposition was justified. They focus on the undoubted difficulties the campaign has faced - such as the growing casualty list and the absence of the much-predicted popular rebellion against Saddam Hussein.

"All the things we were told before the war have turned out to be lies. The troops are not being welcomed with open arms. It is not going to be a quick turnaround. And it is not going to be cost-free," said German.

Many in the anti-war camp also believe the western media - especially in US and Britain - is distorting what is happening by, for example, playing up military reports of an uprising Tuesday in the southern city of Basra for which there was very little hard evidence.

Anti-war demonstrations in each country or region take on a different complexion, with the common thread of deep anti-US sentiment.

In the Arab world, governments watch warily as the "street" erupts in one of its periodic licenced bouts of free expression, but as so often in the past the anger of the protesters masks an utter powerlessness to influence the course of events so close to home.

In Western countries whose governments have opposed the war - such as France - some of the steam has been taken out of the movement because of the lack of a target, and the protests are dominated by veteran anti-globalisers, and, increasingly, school and university students.

Countries with large populations of Middle Eastern immigrants have seen the protests take on a worryingly sectarian aspect.

In the US and Britain the "peace" movement has to contend with the charge that it is undermining the war effort, and the sharp rise there of support for the war once it broke out shows that many feel continuing their opposition would now be disloyal.

But organisers rebut the allegation that they secretly hope for bad news in the conflict so that they are proved to have been right.

More questions than answers

AFP, Nicotia

The US-led war to overthrow Iraqi President Saddam Hussein enters its second week with more questions raised than have been answered.

One of the few certainties is that the most powerful army in the world and its British allies have already unleashed an enormous bombardment of cruise missiles and ultra-precise bombs on Baghdad and other targets, as well as having deployed a force of many thousands of men inside Iraq.

But so far it has been no avail as it appears that Saddam and his principal lieutenants are not only still alive, having survived the onslaught on Baghdad, but are still in control of most of the country and showing little or no signs of wavering.

For the time being, it looks as though Washington's so-called "shock and awe" tactics are just not working.

The almost daily appearance of Saddam on Iraqi television screens, addressing his people in a strong, calm voice is a constant reminder to the Americans that they are a long way from winning the psychological war, which is every bit as important as that being fought out on the battlefields of southern Iraq.

Perhaps the only other certainty to have arisen is the massive blow war has dealt the world economy.

Far from injecting a much-needed shot in the arm to the world's stock exchanges, as many financial pundits confidently predicted, the past seven

days have seen a general air of stagnation following a headlong fall at the start of the conflict, with the price of oil remaining relatively high.

Horst Koehler, director general of the International Monetary Fund, told a German weekly that a world recession could not be ruled out in case of a protracted war in Iraq.

A week into the war, that remains perhaps the greatest uncertainty, the leading unanswered question - how long can the conflict actually last, considering that according to so many American military experts it should have been over in a matter of days.

The bulk of the coalition forces are still a long way from Baghdad, their progress hampered from the outset by aggressive and spirited Iraqi resistance, not to mention the appalling weather conditions which have seen sandstorms hold up the troops' progress.

Another question hanging in the air is the possibility of whether the coalition has the ability to eliminate Saddam and his entourage, as with each passing day his stature as a hero and a potential martyr grows as he is increasingly seen in the Arab world as a defender of the faith.

Equally uncertain is the impact the war will have on the general stability of the region.

Grassroots Arab opinion, already indignant over American backing for Israel against the Palestinians, is increasingly angry over the war, as much in Arab capitals friendly towards Washington, like Cairo and

Amman, as in those overtly hostile.

While the governments in Egypt and Jordan, for example, do not seem unduly threatened by public opinion at present, there is no indication how long the status quo will hold if the war starts to drag on.

There are questions, too, over just how the Iraqi people are greeting the arrival of American and British troops on their soil. Scenes of joy as the convoys pass have been rare enough and it remains to be seen just how the people of Baghdad will greet the "invading" forces come to "overrun" their capital.

Yet before they can consider storming the gates of the citadel, the coalition still has to encounter the fearsome Republican Guard along the road to Baghdad.

The Guard are the elite corps of Saddam's army and represent a serious threat to the allied advance. Under normal circumstances, they are a force to be reckoned with and if they think they have nothing left to lose they could be an even more formidable adversary.

Even then, once they are in the capital, the coalition forces could find themselves facing a long, drawn-out street battle before they get within sight of overthrowing Saddam. For he well knows that his own forces know the terrain and will hold an early whip hand when it comes to urban warfare.

Uday was a cheeky child

THE TIMES, London

Uday, the eldest son of Saddam Hussein, was a cheeky child who craved attention and spoke with a Yorkshire accent picked up from his English teacher.

Dinah Bentley remembers a cheerful 11-year-old whose accent

reminded her of home but she never encountered his father. "He didn't come to parents' evening," she says. "I was a bit worried that he would."

Mrs Bentley, from Huddersfield, also recalls how colleagues were alarmed when she disciplined him. Driven to al-Mansour school by a chauffeur in a Mercedes-Benz and surrounded by servants, Uday was a pampered, bossy child. His Iraqi teachers were too frightened of his father to keep him in

check and fellow pupils were wary of him. But Mrs Bentley says

she had no idea who the boy was.

"He was leaping about in class one day so I took him by a tuft of hair and sat him down. I said, 'We don't do this. I am teaching. You are learning. Now sit down.'"

"Another teacher, watching through the classroom window, was horrified. She said to me later, 'Do you know who that is? It's Saddam's son.'"

Uday took a rather different approach to the reproach. The next day he turned up at school with his hair cropped. "He had had it cut overnight. He just grinned and pointed at his head," Mrs Bentley said.

"He was not a highflier but he did his best," she added.

"He was always smiling a bit of a clown. Uday picked up a lovely Yorkshire accent from me he's probably still got it. It was nice because it reminded me of home."



An Iraqi woman struggles to carry a box of goods in the southern Iraqi city of Safwan March 26. British troops escorted three trucks with supplies donated by the Kuwaiti Red Crescent into Safwan where residents mobbed the trucks to get to the supplies.

PHOTO: AFP

