



IRAQ INVASION

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Television: Civilian or military target?

BBC NEWS ONLINE

The bombing of Iraqi television raises the issue of whether a radio or television station in a country at war can be seen as a military target or whether it is purely civilian.

Does a station mainly given over to propaganda on behalf of a dictatorship lose its right not to be regarded as a civilian target?

The attack has been condemned by media organisations worldwide and justified by the US and UK military.

It is reminiscent of the attack on Serbian state TV in Belgrade in April 1998 in which 16 people, most of them television production workers, were killed.

And it did not come as a surprise following the use by Iraqi television of the pictures of American prisoners of war and the appearance by Saddam Hussein himself to rally his followers.

Last Sunday, the US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, enraged by the use of the POW pictures, said: "It would be highly desirable to have completely, totally ended their ability to communicate."

Attacks on purely civilian targets are outlawed by the Geneva Conventions.

Protocol I, Article 52, paragraph 2 states: "Attacks shall be limited strictly to military objectives." These objectives are defined as "those objects which by their nature, location, purpose or use

make effective contribution to military action".

This leaves open the possibility that civilians might be targeted if they are within or close to something which is a military objective.

Amnesty International, however, is in no doubt about the interpretation of the convention. It said: "The bombing of a television station cannot be condoned. It is a civilian object and thus protected under international law."

The same view is taken by other media groups. The London representative of Reporters Sans Frontières, Veronica Forwood, herself a former foreign correspondent, said that it was "completely unacceptable".

"We denounce it utterly," she said.

Index on Censorship, which monitors media restrictions around the world, joined the criticism. Its web editor Rohan Jayasekera said: "We've been here before with the bombing of Serbian TV and television in Afghanistan. These are civilian targets."

"It is the responsibility of the military to ensure that civilians are not targeted. There is no justification for this."

The general secretary of the International Federation of Journalists in Brussels, Aidan White, said that there should be an investigation into whether the bombing violated the Geneva Conventions.

"We have every reason to

believe this is an act of censorship against media that US politicians and military strategists don't like."

Governments responsible for such attacks tend to emphasise that the Geneva Convention allows attacks with "military objectives".

The justification therefore is usually that the television station is part of the "command and control" apparatus of a government, through which it issues calls to arms, as Iraqi TV has certainly been doing.

In the case of Serbia television it was also claimed that the station was inciting the population against Kosovan Albanians.

The Baghdad attack was part of a wider overnight bombing of communications targets and was consequently justified on those grounds. A spokesman for the US Central Command said: "These targets are key regime command and control assets."

The British Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon denied that the aim had been specifically against television. "Our targets are military command and control facilities. There was no deliberate attempt to take Iraqi TV off the air," he said.

Since the station is back on the air as is the other channel, a satellite station, it will be interesting to see if there is another attack to try to close them down.

However, the European Court of Human Rights rejected the case, saying that it did not have jurisdiction.



A statue of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein stands near the telecommunications center in Baghdad 28 March 2003 after it was hit by a US missile. Baghdad was rocked by fresh explosions today as US forces kept up the pressure on Saddam Hussein's regime, pounding the Iraqi capital in preparation for a final push and shoring up the northern front, where Kurdish fighters claimed key progress.

Thirst and fear drive thousands from Basra

TIMES ONLINE

Tired and frightened, some barefoot and bleeding, the people of Basra began to make their way across no man's land Thursday in search of water for their families.

Thousands of civilians, most of them men, simply walked out of the encircled city in southern Iraq to beg British Forces for water and to seek safety after almost a week of bitter fighting. None of them appeared to know anything of the attempted uprising which coalition commanders said had been suppressed three days ago.

British officers said that about 3,000 people had crossed a bridge south of the city by 10 am on Thursday, joining about 10,000 who had fled earlier in the battle. Reporters saw a steady flow of about 200 cross the bridge and found that although all of them pleaded for water, none had witnessed the reported rebellion.

"It's been pow, pow, pow all the time," Maklim Mohammad said as he trudged across the bridge. "I can't stand it. I'm nervous and I'm thirsty."

Another said: "We are very thirsty. Our families are very thirsty. Where can we find water? The British told us to go down the

road."

Supplies of food, fuel and medicines have all been running low in Basra, a sprawling, dirt-poor city of an estimated 1.3 million people less than 30 miles north of the Kuwaiti border. However, it is water shortages that the inhabitants have suffered most after a treatment plant was badly damaged early in the battle for the control of the city.

It appeared last night that British special forces and M16 Intelligence officers had discovered that an interecne struggle within the Baath party in Basra was behind the eruption of violence. From information gleaned by special forces going in and out of Basra, it has emerged that Baathist officials were killed by their own party members after being accused of failing to prevent elements of the regular Iraqi military defecting.

The small uprising happened when the Baathists involved in the shooting of their own party members then carried out the summary murder of a popular al-Bazun tribal chief, a local Marsh Arab leader.

The first indication that special forces and Intelligence officers have been entering Basra to make contact with opponents of the Saddam regime emerged on

Thursday during a briefing by an American commander, Brigadier-General Vince Brooks, deputy director of operations. He said: "We have a number of sources that go in and out of Basra."

British Intelligence officers have also been questioning Iraqi citizens who have been coming out of Basra over the past few days. An authoritative source said it had been a challenge to acquire "human intelligence" because of the brutality of the Saddam security and political apparatus. Regime opponents told of having seen how Baath party members and the Fedayin had used summary killings to keep people on side.

As fears increased of an outbreak of disease, aid agencies and UN officials gave warning of a looming humanitarian disaster. Engineers from the International Committee of the Red Cross repaired the Wafa al-Qaed treatment plant in the city after receiving assurances of safe passage from the besieging British troops and the Iraqi defenders. They restored supplies to 60 per cent of homes, but more than 500,000 people still had no direct access to safe drinking water.

In small towns and villages south of Basra there were chaotic scenes as the first aid supplies

arrived, and at least one convoy was overwhelmed by healthy young Iraqi men who stormed the vehicles and made off with food and water intended for children, the elderly and the infirm.

Some angry Iraqis were even making clear that they saw the aid as a cheap way of winning their sympathies, snatching their large white food parcels, then yelling in English: "Now go back home."

After 12 years of airstrikes and a similar period of UN sanctions backed by Washington and London, many local people are clearly deeply hostile to the besieging troops.

As thousands fled Basra Thursday night, a few hundred Iraqis were trying to get back inside the ring of tanks, troops and artillery to be reunited with their families, and a group of about 150 men sat and blocked the main road north to the city when a British tank commander refused to allow them past.

"You must go away," the youthful Briton whose head poked from the turret said. "It's for your own good."

One old man shouted back in broken English: "Why are you here? This is Iraq."

US ambassador walks out of UN debate

AFP, United Nations

The US ambassador to the United Nations walked out of a Security Council debate on the Iraq war Thursday as Baghdad's representative was bitterly attacking the United States in a speech. The ambassador, John Negroponte, told reporters he was fed up with hearing "preposterous allegations" against the United States from his Iraqi counterpart Mohammed Al-Douri.

"I did sit through quite long part of what he had to say, but I had heard enough after what he had to say and did not hear anything new," he said.

Negroponte's spokesman, Richard Grenell, said, however, that Al-Douri had said something new, admitting for the first time that Iraq "invaded" Kuwait in August 1990.

"It's 13 years too late, but you have it on the record, the Iraqi ambassador saying that his country invaded Kuwait," Grenell said.

Before Negroponte left the chamber, the US ambassador hit back at the majority of the 85 speakers who took the floor during the two day debate, saying: "We disagree profoundly with those who avoid the central issue."

Iraq was to blame for the war because it had rejected demands, spelt out in a series of council

resolutions over the past 12 years, to strip itself of its weapons of mass destruction, he said.

"The coalition action is legitimate and multilateral," he said, rejecting the criticism that the United States and Britain had invaded Iraq without council authority.

While most of the 70 preceding speakers described the war as a violation of the UN Charter, condemnation by the 15 council members was in general more muted.

"Even in the midst of conflict, we must continue our collective efforts to search for ways and means by which peace can be restored," Pakistan's ambassador Munir Akram said.

The French ambassador, Jean-Marc de La Sabliere, did not even call for an end to hostilities.

"Our chief concern today is for the fate of the civilian population in Iraq. That is why we hope the military operations will be as quick and cause as few casualties as possible," he said.

Like other members, he said the council should quickly adopt a resolution to reactivate the oil-for-food programme, which was suspended on March 18, when Secretary General Kofi Annan ordered all UN international staff to leave Iraq.



UN Secretary General Kofi Annan (R) meets with British Prime Minister Tony Blair at United Nations headquarters in New York March 27. Blair held talks with Annan at UN headquarters on pressing humanitarian issues arising from the war in Iraq.

Blair for UN-backed govt in Iraq

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair said on Friday he favoured the formation by the United Nations of a representative government in post-war Iraq.

"Now what we need to do is to try and make sure that we have as representative a system of government as possible and that's something we need to work out with the UN," Blair told BBC radio in an interview.

"That is why we agreed -- myself and (US) President Bush, (Spanish) Prime Minister Aznar at the summit that we had in the Azores -- that not just the humanitarian element but also the civil administration in Iraq should be governed by UN resolution."

Blair is seeking more United Nations involvement in reconstructing Iraq than Washington may be ready to allow.

The British leader is pushing for a UN resolution giving the international body the lead role in running post-war Iraq and supplying humanitarian aid.

But the administration of US President George W. Bush, distrustful of a politically divided and bureaucratically slow United Nations, reportedly wants Iraq ruled under the direct control of its military, even if it sees a role for the

UN in distributing humanitarian aid.

Blair met Bush on Thursday for talks on a post-war Iraq. The British press said on Friday he had failed to convince the US leader of the need for a leading UN role in post-war Iraq.

Meanwhile, British Prime Minister Tony Blair and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan on Thursday discussed the humanitarian emergency caused by the US and British invasion of Iraq.

Blair flew into New York after summit talks with President George W. Bush at the US presidential retreat at Camp David and met Annan for a total of 50 minutes, half of the time in private and half with aides.

Minutes before Blair entered Annan's office, it was announced that members of the Security Council had agreed on a draft resolution to reactivate the programme, which was suspended when Annan ordered all UN staff out of Iraq last week on the eve of war.

Blair and Annan "welcomed the progress achieved on that front," Annan's spokesman's office said.

It said the two men also "reviewed the next steps in the search for a peace agreement between the Palestinians and the Israelis."

US press slams Bush's war strategy

AFP, Washington

The US-led war in Iraq has run into trouble because of miscalculation, too much restraint and failure to assemble an overwhelming force at the outset, two leading US dailies said Friday.

Allied forces are having difficulty reaching Baghdad because "the Bush administration misread the Iraqis," The New York Times said in a military analysis.

Confident that Iraq would opt for an "urban-centric" defense around Baghdad, "what the Pentagon did not understand was that the Iraqis planned to expand that strategy to include Nasiriya, Najaf, Samawa and other towns in southern Iraq."

The other reason the war has been so vexing, the analyst said, was that "the Pentagon did not gather an overwhelming force to start the campaign."

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and his aides relied too much on high-tech military gear, thinking that "small, mobile but potent forces ... are the wave of the future," the analyst added.

"But airplanes do not hold territory," and now the allied force is stretched too thin and "faces the prospect of a longer war."

"The most important lesson we've learned in the first week of

the Iraq war is that it's harder to kill a regime than it is to defeat an army," wrote The Wall Street Journal.

The effort, the editorial said, has been "defined by restraint," while the Iraqi forces have resorted to "grotesque tactics" of terrifying their own people into fighting, and a "strategy of disguise, ambush and delay."

Recalling some expert's advice that "Arab cultures despise weakness in an adversary above all," the Journal suggests that the Iraqis "will only be impressed now if they see that the US will wage this war with everything that is needed to prevail."

"If civilians die because they were placed in front of military targets, the moral responsibility for their harm will rest with those who put them there," the daily said.

"While in the near term we are likely to endure some nasty TV images, in the long run this US determination will save both Iraqi and American lives."

In a separate editorial, The New York Times said the United Nations "should become the overall trustee of Iraqi sovereignty in the period before Iraqis themselves resume control."



British tank and APC crews wait on the front line at Basra, 27 March 2003.