



IRAQ INVASION

DAY
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The Daily Star
DHAKA TUESDAY APRIL 1, 2003

A quiet night of air raid sirens and explosions

ROBERT FISK, Baghdad

On the roof of the al-Jazeera office in Baghdad, you could hear the missile coming. It swooped down out of the clouds of smoke south of the Tigris, hissed past the office and disappeared over the old Ahrar bridge. "Was that what I think it was?" the anchorman asked me down the line from Doha. Ah yes, indeed. It was one of those days. A few minutes later, chatting to the al-Jazeera staff in their waterfront villa, an old colonial home with wooden bannisters and beautifully crafted blue-and-white patterned floor tiles, came the sound of supersonic jets.

We looked at each other with that special intensity that members of the most successful Arab television channel do when they smell danger. Only 18 months ago, the Americans sent a cruise missile into al-Jazeera's office in Kabul, an attack for which the United States neither apologised nor explained. But Tony Blair was attacking the station last week for showing videotape of two dead British soldiers in Basra and, only a few days ago, who should turn up at al-Jazeera's Baghdad office but Taiseer Alouni, former manager of the Kabul office who was lucky to avoid the earlier cruise attack.

There was a shattering explosion, the villa shook and the station's duty reporter shouted "To the roof!" It tells you a lot about Baghdad and al-Jazeera that while sane men and women would head for the basement, they climb the stairs to look. Sure enough, a blast of grey smoke was funneling into the air on the other side of the nearest bridge,

speckled by a barrage of exploding anti-aircraft shells. Another day, then, in the modern history of Baghdad.

It had been a "quiet" night. The word has to be used loosely because there are no silent nights here, just long evenings of occasional air-raid sirens and mysterious explosions whose provenance is sometimes, and often never, discovered. Before dawn, the long rumble of B-52 raids far out in the desert reminds Baghdadis that the Americans are creeping nearer. Even after dawn yesterday, the USAF and the RAF had not finished. It was time to smash up a few more telephone exchanges.

Sure enough, the switching station opposite the Saddam medical centre was missiled out of existence. So was a larger exchange near the river. As usual, the blast broke open a dozen civilian homes and devastated shops, a shoe store, a computer service and Abu al-Harith's Take Away. A front gatepost carried the words: "The home of Abdulrahman Makhles Akhaldi, No 17." The house appeared to be deserted but if Mr Makhles returns, he will find only a couple of rooms still standing.

Baghdad is also a city of rumours, sometimes confirmed, often tantalisingly obscure. The Iraqi army has announced the arrival of Arab volunteers "seeking heaven", who have arrived from every Middle Eastern country to fight for Iraq. I would have doubted all this had I not met on Saturday three serious young men, all wearing leather jackets and khaki trousers and black berets who informed

me, seriously and with the sincerity of youth, that they intended to fight and if necessary die in Iraq. One was Palestinian, the other two Syrian, the first explaining to me that he was inspired by patriotism for the "pan-Arab cause" and by God.

Two more American aircraft have been shot down, the Iraqi army claimed. Again, scepticism is an essential response, as it is to more and more statements by the Anglo-American forces. Then there's the Baath Party official I meet as the American jets were sweeping back over Baghdad last night. "We shot down a plane over the Tigris and I saw the pilot bail out," he tells me.

He was from the Emirates, he was an Arab. When he landed, the people heard he was an Arab and started to beat him. He said he had an American female co-pilot who had also bailed out. She was captured later. True or false? Why on earth should Arabs be flying over Iraq in an American plane? Or was the pilot, if the story bears any relation to the truth, an Arab-American in the US Air Force? There are other stories of a Kuwaiti pilot also captured. Now the rumour is of up to 500 American prisoners-of-war, most of them taken into custody in the Najaf area. "They will be part of a political solution, if there is any," the Baath official says. Five hundred, I ask in disbelief? I do not accept this. But then I never believed that, 10 days after the start of this war, the Americans and British would still be fighting for Basra and Nassariyah and Kerbala and Najaf.



A young Iraqi girl looks up at a British soldier who is checking her father's identity papers, at a checkpoint in the southern Iraqi town of Basra, 30 March, 2003. US-led coalition forces have surrounded Basra where they are targeting members of Iraq's ruling Baath party.

PHOTO: AFP

War blocks main US defends war strategy, braces for tough battle

REUTERS, Kuwait

With the war in its 11th day, southern Iraq is still too dangerous for relief workers and, while what's happening in Baghdad may be clearer, little is known about the plight of civilians elsewhere, aid agencies say.

UN and private aid agencies are kicking their heels while UN security experts complete inspection visits to the south to decide whether it is safe enough for large numbers of workers to enter and tackle shortages of water and medical supplies.

But conditions are sometimes too volatile even for trips by seasoned UN experts, aid workers from private charities that tend to take their lead on security from the world body say.

"The water situation in Basra is reaching a critical level. These situations can easily develop into a real crisis," Cassandra Nelson of the non-government Mercy Corps told Reuters on Sunday, speaking of Iraq's second city. "But the humanitarian aid community and the U.S. military have not

reached agreement or consensus on how humanitarian movements should be made into Iraq and the insecure areas," she said. "This is a huge stumbling block to assisting the people."

Speedy delivery of aid is seen as crucial by both Washington and London, where officials hope that quick relief will persuade Iraqis to back their war to oust President Saddam Hussein.

Some aid workers say there is still time to avoid a disaster in southern Iraq, noting most families are believed to have enough food to last them until the end of April, when rations usually provided under a UN oil-for-food plan may run out.

In Basra, fighting is limiting water, electricity and medical supplies and forcing many civilians to flee.

British Major General Albert Whitley, who is helping arrange initial humanitarian relief, said he believed there was no humanitarian crisis in Basra, although there were problems with living conditions, especially with water and medicines, and that these problems had the potential to worsen.

AFP, Washington

US military leaders on Sunday defended their Iraq war strategy and warned of a potentially long and tough Battle of Baghdad.

Faced with the start of suicide attacks in the battlefield and press reports accusing Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld of "micro-managing" the Iraqi campaign, Rumsfeld and Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman General Richard Myers hit out at critics.

Rumsfeld denied reports he had rejected advice from military commanders to use substantially more troops and armour.

"I think you'll find that if you ask anyone who has been involved in the process from the Central Command, that every single thing they've requested has in fact happened," Rumsfeld said on Fox News television.

Rumsfeld insisted that the military plan, which he said was devised by Central Command chief General Tommy Franks, was "outstanding" and

that the critics had not seen it.

The defence secretary also insisted there would be no letup in the war, despite reports that there would be a pause while an aerial bombardment of Baghdad and Revolutionary Guard units surrounding the Iraqi capital were pursued.

Rumsfeld told ABC television there were "no plans for pauses or ceasefires".

However Rumsfeld and Myers warned that a long campaign for Baghdad should be expected.

"There are difficult days ahead. And to the extent the Republican Guard pose difficulties, which we expect them to, there will be dangerous days ahead," Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld told Fox News.

Myers said: "We have the power to be patient in this we are not going to hurry," he said. "We will be patient and continue to draw the noose tighter and tighter" around the regime of President Saddam Hussein in Baghdad.

The general said that about 50

percent of US air attacks Saturday was directed at Revolutionary Guard positions around Baghdad.

The US leadership has been put under renewed pressure by press reports saying that senior US military planners had accused Rumsfeld of "micromanaging" operations in Iraq and ignoring recommendations from military officials.

New Yorker magazine quoted one senior planner as saying: "He thought he knew better. He was the decision-maker at every turn."

Joint Chiefs of Staff had recommended deploying four or more Army divisions in the Iraq campaign, which Rumsfeld rejected, the report said.

Their plan also called for shipping by sea hundreds of tanks and other heavy vehicles -- enough for three or four divisions -- in advance, but Rumsfeld chose to rely on equipment already in Kuwait, which was enough for one division, the report said.



PHOTO: AFP

Soldiers of the 1st Parachute Battalion prepare to carry out vehicle searches for weapons in southern Iraq on Sunday. Paratroopers in Puma helicopters patrol the skies and are able to drop a platoon of men onto the road or desert track ahead of a car to facilitate the random stops.

British soldiers slam US 'cowboy' pilot

THE GUARDIAN, London

British soldiers injured when a US "tankbuster" aircraft attacked their convoy, killing one of their comrades, hit out angrily at the "cowboy" pilot today.

Troops wounded in Friday's attack accused the A-10 Thunderbolt pilot of "incompetence and negligence" while others privately called for a manslaughter prosecution.

The comments came as America's most senior military official vowed to make it his quest to stop future "friendly fire" tragedies.

General Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, apologised for the deadly error by the A-10 in southern Iraq.

He told BBC1's Breakfast With Frost: "It's the absolute saddest tragedy that any of us can experience."

"I don't think we have to live with situations like that, and one of my jobs has to be to ensure that we get the resources and the technical means to ensure that in the future this never, never happens again. And that will be my quest."

But the crews of the two British forward reconnaissance Scimitars

which were attacked by the A-10 could not contain their anger.

Lance Corporal of Horse Steven Gerrard, speaking from his bed on the RFA Argus in the Gulf, said: "I can command my vehicle. I can keep it from being attacked. What I have not been trained to do is look over my shoulder to see whether an American is shooting at me."

LCoH Gerrard, the commander of the leading vehicle, described to Patrick Barkham of The Times how the deadly A-10 attack began.

The pilot made two swoops. "I will never forget that noise as long as I live. It is a noise I never want to hear again," he said.

"There was no gap between the bullets. I heard it and I froze. The next thing I knew the turret was erupting with white light everywhere, heat and smoke."

He added: "I'll never forget that A-10. He was about 50 metres off the ground. He circled, because he can turn on a 10 pence."

"He came back around. He was no more than 1,000 metres away when he started his attack run. He was about 500 metres away when he started firing."

On the back of one of the engineers' vehicles there was a Union Jack.

"It's about 18 inches wide by about 12 inches. For him to fire his weapons I believe he had to look through his magnified optics. How he could not see that Union Jack I don't know."

Packed with hundreds of rounds of ammunition, as well as grenades, rifle rounds and flammable diesel fuel tanks, the front two Scimitars exploded into flames.

One of their comrades, Lance Corporal of Horse, Matty Hull, 25, was killed.

LCoH Gerrard also criticised the A-10 for shooting when there were civilians close by.

"He's killed one of my friends and he's killed him on the second run."

"To be honest, I think they are just ignorant. I don't know if they haven't been trained or are just trigger happy."

Trooper Joe Woodgate, 19, the driver of the Scimitar in which gunner LCoH Hull was killed walked away with holes in his bullet-proof vest and torn clothes.

"How come somebody who is a top-notch Thunderbolt pilot can't tell what a British tank looks like. I think someone in the Pentagon or somewhere needs to sort something out there."

So far five British servicemen have been killed by friendly fire and four in combat with Iraqi forces.

An American in civilian clothes

TIMES OF INDIA, New Delhi

A man wearing civilian clothes whom US officials described as secretary of defence Donald Rumsfeld appeared on television in Washington Friday evening to provide an update of the war in Iraq.

He was speaking to an audience of American men and women carrying notebooks and pens who claimed they were reporters. There is, however, no independent confirmation of that fact.

The following is an unedited transcript of the remarks made by the man said by senior Pentagon officials to be Rumsfeld.

Donald Rumsfeld: I want to begin with a warning to members of the Iraqi regime. Give up. If you resist us, we will kill you. Or force you to listen to a discussion between Christiane Amanpour, Ari Fleischer, Jamie Shea, Geraldo, Sir Jeremy Greenstock and me on why the Geneva Conventions don't apply to you.

If your soldiers attempt to fire upon our soldiers as they proceed to liberate Iraq from tyranny, you will be put on trial for war crimes. Also, do not attempt to use your TV stations to claim the war is going great for you, as America will not tolerate such a wanton violation of media freedom.

Finally, a word of caution for any journalist in Iraq who sends out reports misrepresenting the humane nature of our troops' humanitarian mission or in

other ways undermining the war effort. We will treat you as a target of opportunity. All hostile columns, whether in newspapers or on the battlefield, will be dealt with in only one way. You will be tracked and hunted down.

Gary, Daily Blah: We are seeing claims by Iraqi officials that 50 civilians in a Baghdad market were killed in a bombing. Could you...

Rumsfeld: Gary, Gary, just a minute, I am shocked, really really shocked. I don't think we should even dignify Iraqi claims in this way. Next question.

Jacques, Le Monde: But al-Jazeera is showing footage of dead women, children, old men...

Rumsfeld: Look Jack. I have seen footage of what purports to be individual Iraqi bodies that appear to be lifeless in one way or another but assuming it was one of our precision-guided, laser-designated munitions which are so accurate they are absolutely safe and humane, I would not jump to any conclusions about who those women and children are just because they are seen wearing what seems like civilian clothing. We are dealing with a very vicious regime that could easily stoop to putting civilian clothes on these individual Iraqi bodies that may or not be lifeless as the case may be.

General Myers: And if I may just add to what the Secretary has said, as the Secretary said yesterday, the day before

and the day before, and other secretaries said during the Afghanistan, Kosovo, Somalia and Vietnam humanitarian missions, when similar reports of so-called civilian casualties came in, the United States does not target innocent civilians. They may get killed in large numbers, but not because we target them.

Jim, CNN: Do you think the Saddam regime could have bombed the market themselves in order to make us, I mean, the coalition for freedom look bad? Do you think that's at all possible?

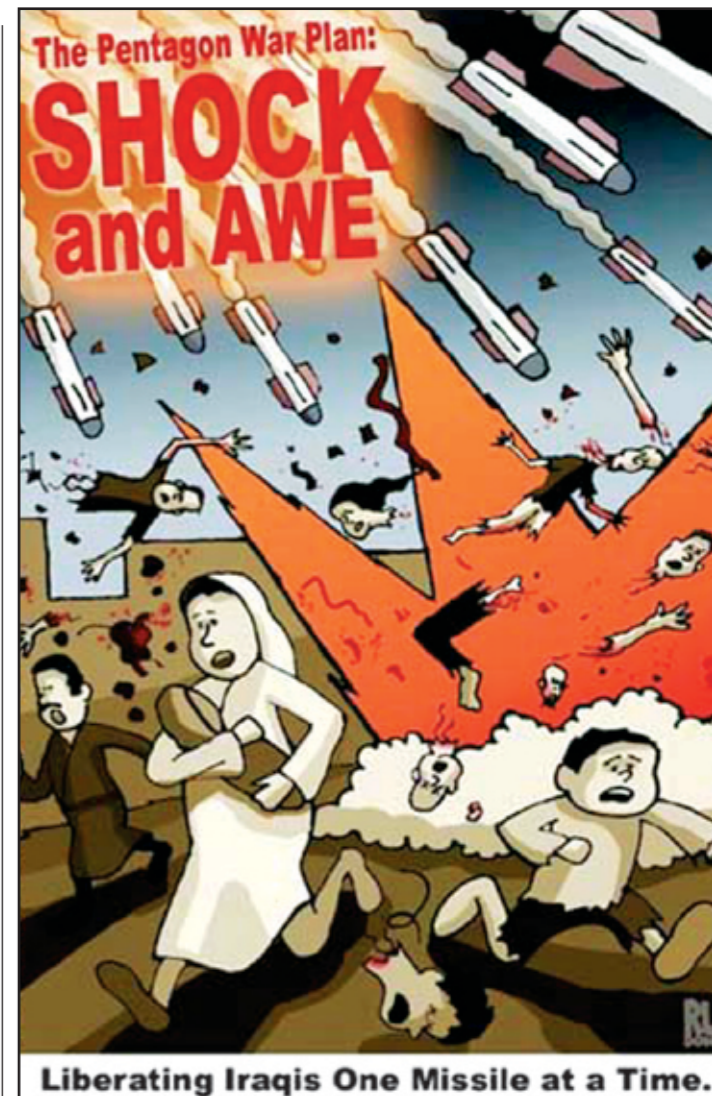
Rumsfeld: That's a very good question, Jim, and I want to thank you for asking it. The short answer is yes, it's not only possible, it's highly probable. In fact, we have intelligence reports that I am not at liberty to disclose that Saddam has pre-recorded hundreds of hours of videotape and is now planning to blow himself up so that his tapes can be played and he can appear as invincible before the Iraqi people.

Johann, Der Spiegel: But last week the Pentagon was saying Saddam Hussein might already be dead.

Rumsfeld: John, as far as we know, he is either alive or dead. It could really be one or the other. But these are intelligence issues that I would rather not get into.

(Muffled voices from the back of the room)

(Transcript ends)



Liberating Iraqis One Missile at a Time.