



PHOTO: INTERNET

Evidence of overnight fighting for control of Saddam International Airport. A destroyed Iraqi aircraft lying on the turmac.

Airport to be used as 'superbase'

AP, Camp As Sayliyah, Qatar

For the US-led forces on Baghdad's doorstep, Saddam International Airport is potentially a massive military base for bringing in weapons and troops and channeling aid to the Iraqi people. Iraqi President Saddam Hussein liked the first-class air hub, complete with its duty-free shops, so much that he named it after himself. But on Friday, tanks of the 3rd Infantry Division rumbled through its entrance, past a tall portrait of the saluting Iraqi president. US forces occupied part of the complex and sealed

the entrance closest to Baghdad, although it was unclear how much of the airport complex was under US control. American strategists prize the airport's main runway because it is long enough at 13,000 feet to land the military's largest transport planes as well as civilian jumbo jets. It also has a second 8,000-foot runway, once used by Iraqi fighter jets, that could help speed the flying in of supplies. Its crowning appeal is proximity to the Iraqi capital. The airport is about 10 miles from the heart of Baghdad and is adjacent to the Radwaniyah presiden-

tial site, which served as Saddam's main residence. Flying in troops, armor and humanitarian aid to Saddam International will shave off hours, if not days, from trucking supplies north from other air bases further south. "This is a very large area immediately adjacent to Baghdad that you can just sort of move into, and American forces could congregate and regroup and gather themselves together and stage from," said John Pike, a military analyst with GlobalSecurity.org. Following the coalition strategy of leapfrogging supplies to the front lines

through captured Iraqi air bases, the first US supply plane landed Thursday at an airfield four miles from the southern town of Nasiriyah, where US Marines are still trying to root out resistance. The Tallil Airfield was overrun by the 3rd Infantry Division on March 22. But it took days for US troops to clear away the jumbles of wrecked vehicles and other barriers strewn around the strip by the Iraqi military to prevent its use. Setting up shop at Saddam International Airport could also take a while - mostly because the surrounding area is still not under US control. Lumbering C-130 transport planes

would make ideal targets for militia fighters or regular Iraqi army troops armed with anti-aircraft missiles. A military official at US Central Command in Doha said an airfield would be an important asset if coalition forces were assured of its security. The airport's wide open spaces could make it easier to do just that. Good lines of sight help defend troops camped in the shadows of Baghdad. The open land acts as a buffer between the air base and surrounding buildings where attackers could hide. The infield provides plenty of room to stockpile supplies, tanks and tents.

Where have Saddam's Republican Guards gone?

THE GUARDIAN, Washington

The last few days have been a cause of great bemusement to military experts. Three divisions of the much-feared Republican Guard were said to be lined up south of Baghdad, itching for a fight; and yet when US forces arrived the Iraqi troops largely vanished in front of their eyes. The war plan was alleged to have become bogged down; and yet in recent days the push north towards Baghdad has been quicker than anyone imagined. Saddam's regime, it was claimed, was poised to launch chemical and/or biological weapons as soon as the forces crossed the "red line" around Baghdad. That line has been crossed but there is no sign of such weapons being deployed. Whatever happened to the Republican Guard? "They didn't show up," Lieutenant-Colonel Terry Ferrell, a squadron commander in the US 7th Cavalry Regiment told the Army Times. He and other officers of the 3rd Infantry Division had expected a major confrontation with the Republican Guard's 10,000-strong Medina Division at the Kerbala Gap 70 miles south-west of Baghdad. The most serious skirmish came when the 3rd Division crossed the Euphrates at Musayib, but it involved only about a dozen Iraqi armoured cars,

all destroyed. "Where are they all hiding?" asked one soldier. From the reports from journalists and the accounts of coalition military officials, there is no one explanation of the guards' evaporation. First of all, it does look as if this was the part of the war the military planners got right. They did not foresee the ambivalence of the people and the tenacity of the Fedayeen, but they did believe the Republican Guard was not the elite it was purported to be. Furthermore, the Soviet-era T-72 tanks were hobbled by neglect and a lack of spare parts. Even dug among the palms and villages of the Euphrates valley they were easy targets for thousands of coalition bombings sorties. The rout was all the more comprehensive because the back-up divisions were ordered into the open. The Hammurabi were sent to the west of the city, the Nebuchadnezzar to the south, alongside the Medina, and the Nida to the south-east, in support of the Baghdad. Their tanks and armoured vehicles were destroyed as they moved. They are now thought to have splintered. The question now is whether the soldiers have slipped back into Baghdad, and whether they are still willing to fight from there. Surrendering officers from the Medina Division have said many of their troops fled to Kerbala, while the marines have tried to cut off

the Baghdad Division troops from pulling back into the city. Whether they are willing to fight in the streets will not be known until the first US columns enter. So the obvious question would be -- are US troops being lured into the city? From the very beginning US and British military planners said that Saddam Hussein would try and suck the invading troops into his capital. Iraq's military doctrine, noted Air Marshal Brian Burridge, commander of the British forces in Iraq, was based on the Soviet model of defence in depth. Saddam, he said, "is going for a Stalingrad siege. He wants to entice us into urban warfare". On the face of it, that kind of asymmetric, guerrilla warfare is the only way to fight a modern, well-equipped army. Street-by-street fighting could lead to heavy casualties on both sides. It is a prospect US commanders and their soldiers cannot relish. Unexpected resistance in other Iraqi towns, including Basra and Nassiriya, does not augur well. There were reports yesterday of forces loyal to President Saddam - an estimated 15,000 Special Republican Guard, Fedayeen, and Ba'ath party officials - setting up gun positions in Baghdad, many hidden or underground. Yet the loyalty even of his special security forces may not last for ever. US military commanders say they

have plans to avoid bloody streetfighting. They could adopt classic urban warfare tactics, taking control of the city of some 5 million people section by section. The nightmare explanation for President Saddam's bizarre tactics is that he is laying an elaborate trap to lure coalition troops into the streets of Baghdad, where he will unleash a cataclysmic biological or chemical weapons attack. "Once he knows his number is up, he may not give a damn about anything else," Garth Whitty, a defence analyst at the Royal United Services Institute, said. "That will be at the back of the mind of every soldier going into Baghdad." Someone was clearly orchestrating the movement of the six Republican Guard divisions as they wheeled to defend the southern reaches of the capital. In the last 24 hours, Pentagon officials have tentatively repeated the claim that the regime's nervous system had been seriously damaged. Within Baghdad, it will be far easier to coordinate a defence, even without radio communications. Runners can mingle with the civilian population, taking orders and messages from bunker to bunker, as demonstrated in famous sieges such as Stalingrad and Algiers. The only limiting factor is the troops' readiness to carry out orders.

Powell fails to clear air with allies

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Colin Powell late Thursday returned from a short tour of Europe where he breathed new life into US-Turkey relations, but failed to clear the air with other allies on the future of Iraq. The lightning, 48-hour trip to Ankara, Belgrade and Brussels marked Powell's return to the world scene after the mid-March, diplomatic stalemate at the United Nations and his eclipse by the Pentagon with the start of the Iraq war. Powell's main achievement was getting Turkey to agree to provide logistical support to US forces in northern Iraq, warming relations that froze on March 1 when Turkish lawmakers stopped 62,000 US troops from using Turkey to open a northern front against Baghdad. However, Powell was unable to get Turkey's pledge to keep its own troops out of Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq, a possibility that could raise regional tension and jeopardize the US-led war in Iraq. Ankara made it clear it needed nobody's permission for anything, but a Turkish official promised his country would "do everything in coordination (with the United States) and in a transparent manner." Powell's visit Thursday to Brussels, where he met with his counterparts from the European Union, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov, revealed the distance between Washington and its allies on the UN's role in Iraq's post-war reconstruction

Attack on airport

Baghdadis flee after 'night of hell'

REUTERS, Baghdad

Residents fled suburbs near Baghdad airport toward the city center on Friday, running from what one called a "night of hell" as US forces moved in. Cars loaded with blankets and possessions on the roof raced up the main highway from the airport as residents felt the 16-day-old US-led war had arrived in the capital. There was little sign of new military preparations, aside from groups of green-uniformed militiamen armed with automatic rifles manning barricades throughout the city. Most shops were shut and people largely stayed indoors, confused as reports -- not carried on state media -- percolated through that US troops had seized Saddam International Airport. US commanders told Reuters outside the city that the airport was indeed now under their control. "There was banging all night. It was a night of hell," said one woman, trembling after her drive from the airport district. "We saw that they have entered Baghdad, there were planes all night dropping bombs and there was shelling all night." She had stopped to buy bread at one of the few stores open on Friday morning -- the Muslim holy day.

"It was terrifying. Not just for the kids but for us adults," the woman said, adding that many of her neighbors in the Radwaniya suburb near the airport were also fleeing to take refuge with friends and relatives closer to the center. "It was one of the worst nights of bombing," said Rakid Abdel-Karim, who works in the bakery on the airport road. The city center itself was initially deserted but around mid-morning some life returned, as a few private cars ventured out and Baghdad's big red double-decker buses resumed services. There were some queues at petrol stations that were open. Most were closed because all electric power in the city went off overnight, but some stations used their own generators. In the early afternoon, explosions could be heard from the direction of the international airport. Elsewhere, it was hard to tell where there was fresh bomb damage. Air Force command headquarters, struck three days ago, appeared to have suffered a fresh hit. US-led forces said they had targeted the building in central Baghdad. It was not clear whether the power outage, which continued through the

morning, was caused by bombing or by the Baghdad authorities. The completeness of the blackout suggested it might have been done to conceal overnight Iraqi troop movements. The weather was hot and black smoke still drifted over the city from oil-filled trenches set alight on the outskirts in an attempt to thwart US-led air raids. State television was off the air for a while but later came back on, broadcasting nationalist songs in praise of President Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi army. The television said Saddam had ordered that all families whose houses were destroyed by bombardment be compensated within 72 hours. He also ordered generous payments to families of the killed and injured. State radio broadcast news bulletins quoting a military spokesman as saying Iraqi troops had destroyed 18 US tanks and shot down a fighter jet and two helicopters. There was no mention of fighting near the capital. On Thursday, the information minister dismissed that as "silly." The main newspapers carried confident headlines. "Victory is assured, God willing," said one, al-Qadisiya.

Moscow softens its anti-war rhetoric

AFP, Moscow

Russia "is working and will work with the United States" to resolve global problems and crisis situations, President Vladimir Putin said Thursday. "We have worked, are working and will continue to work to solve all problems, those of a global nature and crisis situations," Putin told reporters at his country residence at Novo-Ogarevo, outside Moscow. "We have a common interest in working together on all problems," Putin said, answering reporters' questions on the war in Iraq. "Our relationship is based on common principles. ... We have a special interest in ensuring world peace," he said. On ongoing US-Russian coopera-

tion Putin cited the recent ratification by the US Senate of last year's Moscow treaty under which the two countries' offensive nuclear arsenals are to be reduced by two thirds, and added: "Russia will soon do the same." However Putin stressed that Russia will not allow itself to be dragged into any of the world's unresolved conflicts. "Russia cannot afford to get dragged into any crises or conflicts, of which there are quite a few. I will do everything I can to avoid Russia getting involved in the Iraqi crisis in any way," he said. Putin reaffirmed Russia's view that the Iraqi crisis should be returned for discussion to the UN Security Council. Stressing that Russia's position has not changed, he said "the facts of the past few days have shown the correctness of this position. ... In the end,

analysis will show that this is not only in Russia's interest but also in the interest of the world in general and that of the United States." On Wednesday Putin said that "for political and economic reasons, Russia is not interested in seeing the defeat of the United States in Iraq, (but is) interested in bringing the Iraqi problem back to the United Nations." Russia has been one of the most outspoken opponents of the US-led war to oust Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, and has urged a diplomatic solution to the crisis within the framework of the United Nations. Putin has described the US drive to disarm Iraq by force even without UN approval as a "serious mistake," arguing that it could destabilise the entire Middle East.



PHOTO: AFP

Student protesters perform during an anti-war demonstration in Solo, Indonesia on Friday. Thousands of students held a demonstration against US-led attack on Iraq.