

US exploiting mystery over Saddam's fate

BBC NEWS ONLINE

American officials are reported to be intensifying their psychological operations in Iraq in an attempt to raise questions in Iraqis' minds about whether Saddam Hussein is dead or alive.

According to a report in the New York Times, persuading Iraqis that Saddam Hussein may have died or become incapacitated is key to attempts to weaken the regime and hasten its collapse.

Many senior US officials - particularly in the military - believe that if Iraqis knew their leader was gone, they would capitulate. US forces in the field have been reporting back that most Iraqis seem to think Saddam Hussein is still alive and that this belief may be hampering attempts to persuade them to back the coalition.

Officials say they are now going to use radio broadcasts and other forms of communication to point out that the Iraqi leader has done nothing to prove that he is still in charge.

Earlier this week, US Government officials said they were still uncertain about the fate of the Iraqi leader or who in Baghdad was in overall control of Iraq's military forces.

CIA agents are reported to be in the capital trying to collect information that could prove whether the Iraqi leader is dead or alive. They are believed to be staking out presidential palaces, civilian residences and military compounds.

In the past few days, the administration has deliberately intensified its public questioning about Saddam Hussein's fate.

White House spokesman Ari

Fleischer and Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld have repeatedly noted he has failed to appear in public since the war began. They also mentioned his recent failures to make presidential addresses via state television.

Such briefings by Mr Rumsfeld and other senior officials are now being translated into Arabic and broadcast on Iraqi radio frequencies from US military planes.

"The fact that Saddam Hussein did not show up for his televised speech is interesting," the Defence Secretary said.

Appearing on television during the last Gulf War is said to have been one of Saddam Hussein's main mechanisms for maintaining a grip on his country.

In other remarks to be broadcast to the Iraqi people, Mr Rumsfeld referred to speculation that the Iraqi leader's family may have fled Iraq.

"The families of some of the leaders seem to be fleeing the country," Mr Rumsfeld said. "I think the Iraqi people have to have a sense that things are not going terribly well."

According to the New York Times, captured Iraqis have told Americans that such rumours about Saddam's family are spreading.

Experts who have studied Saddam Hussein, say the Iraqi leader is deliberately trying to create confusion about his whereabouts.

"He is a very clever and cunning man, and he knows that so many people around the world compiling his psychological profile believe he is hiding in his bunker or whatever. It could be a red herring," journalist Adel Darwish, who has met Saddam Hussein a number of times, told the BBC.

Kurdish Middle East expert Hazhir

Taimourian thinks Saddam Hussein will go to great lengths to keep a low profile.

"During the last war, he travelled around Baghdad by taxi and he slept in a series of humble houses," he told the BBC.

"This time, I hear, he may have opted for the desert around the town of Tikrit, north of Baghdad and his birthplace, disguised as a Bedouin."

Some analysts say Mr Rumsfeld's public questioning about whether the Iraqi leader is still in control of his country are designed to goad him into appearing in public so he could be targeted and killed.

But the Iraqi leader, who has long been preoccupied with personal security, rarely appears in public.

Intelligence experts believe the initial attacks on his bunker two weeks ago indicate there could have been an agent in his midst who disclosed his whereabouts.

And there are fears this could happen again. On Wednesday, the Iraqi Government ordered all Iraqis to hand in their satellite mobile phones to prevent Iraqis communicating with coalition agents.

"The concerned authorities have learned that there are some others who have been implicated in collaborating with the enemy and exploiting these phones for treasonous acts."

In the days leading up to the war, intelligence agents are believed to have bombarded politicians and military leaders with e-mails, text messages and mobile phone calls urging them to break with Saddam Hussein.



Two US Navy F/A-18C Hornets of the "Dambusters" Strike Fighter Squadron 195 with the USS Kitty Hawk fly over southern Iraq on a mission in support of 'Operation Iraqi Freedom', as seen from an S-3B Viking. An F/A-18C Hornet from the Kitty Hawk went down early April 3 over Iraq.

UN aid workers back in Iraq

AFP, Kuwait City

Expatriate United Nations humanitarian workers entered Iraq Friday for the first time since their withdrawal last month, a senior World Food Programme (WFP) official said.

An 11-person team from the WFP and the UN children's fund UNICEF, as well as representatives from the UN Office for the Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq (UNOCHI), were assessing humanitarian needs in the southern port city of Umm Qasr, the WFP's emergency coordinator for Iraq Russell Ulrey told AFP.

UN staff had carried out a security assessment in the area on Tuesday and Friday's trip was "the first visit by the humanitarian side," he said.

The final UN expatriate staff withdrew from Iraq on March 17 on the orders of Secretary General Kofi Annan on security grounds.

Umm Qasr is the only entry point for direct port deliveries into Iraq, and had been handling vessels carrying in food and other vital necessities under the UN-administered oil-for-food programme before the start of the US-led war to topple Iraqi President Saddam Hussein on March 20.

Al-Jazeera - only choice for Arab-Americans

REUTERS, New York

Perched atop a hillside road, the Khourys' red brick house in a New York suburb blends into a neighbourhood that's picture-perfect: green lawns, kids playing baseball and Old Glory fluttering in the wind.

But inside, something is different. The family's 36-inch television beams images that bring tears to Ray Khoury's eyes.

Khoury gets what he calls an "unfiltered" view of the Iraq war -- with vivid images of death, destruction and gore -- beamed by the controversial al-Jazeera network and other Arabic satellite stations. The picture he and thousands of other Arab-Americans are getting is a world away from the version most Americans see, they say.

"It's a shame. It's against the whole of humanity," Khoury, one of thousands of Americans whose parents hail from Jordan who live in Yonkers north of New York City, says of the war images.

Qatar-based al-Jazeera, called "the Arab CNN" and often broadcasting live from Baghdad, is seen by many Arab-Americans as more accurate than its American counterparts, though not without anti-American bias.

Arab-Americans say they like its fast-

paced Western-style coverage and see it as more balanced than some US networks like Fox News, whose reporters they say are just cheerleaders for the US side, demonising Iraqis.

"It's disgusting. It's not fair. They make it look like the US is winning with minimal casualties there," said Khoury, a restaurant manager. "The US media is not reporting the whole truth; people are getting hurt there."

Born and raised in New York, 34-year-old Khoury is comfortably American, but proud of his parents' Jordanian roots. The footage of the giant fireballs in Baghdad keeps him glued to his television and draws neighbors and relatives to his house where an American flag hangs over the doorway.

After Sunday prayers at the community's Greek Orthodox church, or at Khoury's house, over mint tea, pistachios and raisins, the discussion turns invariably to the barrage of news out of what they call "al bilad" (the countries) - the Middle East their parents left decades ago to live in America.

One scene shows the tiny bodies of Iraqi children supposedly killed by American bombs, another is of a woman in an Islamic chador sobbing, a third is of a giant American B-52 bomber, and a

fourth of giant fireballs lighting up the Baghdad night sky.

Watching the same footage, Nabil, a 52-year-old Jordanian immigrant who did not want to give his full name, became angry as President Bush and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld appeared on screen.

"Bush and Rumsfeld think they are gods. Do they want to police the whole world?," he shouted.

The perceived lack of objectivity of US networks is basically why Muhammad al-Sayed is booked solid installing the reception equipment for the Arabic television stations in the tri-state area of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut.

"The others show you stuff that will make your hair stand up," Sayed said. "It's unbelievable -- kids, three or four years old, the bombs shredded their bodies."

A 35-year-old Palestinian who works for the United Nations, was wary of using his full name, identifying himself only as Muhammad. He said it bothered him when attacks on US-led forces were called "terrorist attacks." The out-gunned Iraqis should be able to fight with any means available, he said.

Senate, House pass \$ 80 b for war funding

REUTERS, Washington

The US Congress by overwhelming votes on Thursday approved nearly \$80 billion to finance the war in Iraq, reward key allies, bolster anti-terrorism efforts and help struggling airlines.

The Republican-led House of Representatives and Senate passed similar versions of the emergency spending package that gives the Pentagon some \$60 billion to fight the war, after Republicans deflected most efforts by Democrats to add billions more to tighten domestic protections against terrorism.

The Senate vote was unanimous, while the House vote was 414-12.

In key amendments, the House backed President Bush by supporting \$1 billion for aid to Turkey which Washington is trying to coax to be a more cooperative ally in the war with Iraq.

On another vote, it passed a measure the White House lobbied against to bar money in the bill from going to companies in France, Germany, Russia or Syria to help rebuild Iraq as lawmakers said they should not get business from a war they resisted. The Senate bill did not have that measure.

Lawmakers intend to work out differences between the House and Senate measures, and send Bush a final bill by April 11.



PHOTO: INTERNET

On Highway 6, the road to Basra, a marine controlled a crowd of people fleeing Baghdad for the south.

A letter to America

MARGARET ATWOOD, International Herald Tribune

Dear America: This is a difficult letter to write, because I'm no longer sure who you are. I thought I knew you: We'd become well acquainted over the past 55 years. You were the Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck comic books I read in the late 1940s. You were the music I sang and danced to: the Andrews Sisters, Ella Fitzgerald, the Platters, Elvis. You were a ton of fun.

You wrote some of my favourite books. You created Huckleberry Finn, and Hawkeye, and Beth and Jo in "Little Women," courageous in their different ways. Later, you were my beloved Thoreau, father of environmentalism, witness to individual conscience; and Walt Whitman, singer of the great Republic; and Emily Dickinson, keeper of the private soul. Even later, you were the amazing trio, Hemingway, Fitzgerald and Faulkner, who traced the dark labyrinths of your hidden heart. You were Sinclair Lewis and Arthur Miller, who, with their own American idealism, went after the sham in you, because they thought you could do better.

You were Marlon Brando in "On The Waterfront," you were Humphrey Bogart in "Key Largo," you were Lillian Gish in "Night of the Hunter."

I won't go into the reasons why I think your recent Iraqi adventures have been - taking the long view - an ill-advised tactical error. Let's talk, then, not about what you're doing to other people, but about what you're doing to yourselves.

You're gutting the constitution. Already your home can be entered

without your knowledge or permission, you can be snatched away and incarcerated without cause, your mail can be spied on, your private records searched. I know you've been told all this is for your own safety and protection, but think about it for a minute. Anyway, when did you get so scared? You didn't used to be easily frightened.

You're running up a record level of debt. Keep spending at this rate and pretty soon you won't be able to afford any big military adventures. Either that or you'll go the way of the Soviet Union: lots of tanks, but no air conditioning. That will make folks very cross. They'll be even crosser when they can't take a shower because your short-sighted bulldozing of environmental protections has dirtied most of the water and dried up the rest. Then things will get hot and dirty indeed.

If you proceed much further down the slippery slope, people around the world will stop admiring the good things about you. They'll decide that your city upon the hill is a slum and your democracy is a sham, and therefore you have no business trying to impose your sullied vision on them. They'll think you've abandoned the rule of law. They'll think you've fouled your own nest.

The British used to have a myth about King Arthur. He wasn't dead, but sleeping in a cave, it was said; in the country's hour of greatest peril, he would return. You, too, have great spirits of the past you may call upon: men and women of courage, of conscience, of prescience. Summon them now, to stand with you, to inspire you, to defend the best in you. You need them.

UN wants freedom of movement in Iraq

AFP, United Nations

The United Nations said it opposes integrating its humanitarian work in post-war Iraq in the military planning of the US-British coalition, and is intent on retaining complete independence.

"A clear separation between humanitarian and military activities should be ensured," said a UN document released Thursday entitled: "General Guidance for Interaction Between United Nations Personnel and Military Actors in the Context of the Crisis in Iraq."

"This document is intended to provide practical guidance to UN personnel in their interaction with all military forces engaged in the Iraqi crisis, including Iraqi forces, those of neighboring countries, and forces of the US and its allies," it says.

It also provides "some initial guidance regarding relations with military forces that may also be organs of an occupying power in Iraq."

The document says UN humanitarian agencies "must retain the full control of UN humanitarian operations inside and outside Iraq."

"Agencies must ensure that their operational independence is guaranteed at all times," it says, citing freedom of movement, non-integration in military planning, and access to communications.

The guidelines instruct UN personnel not to fly the world body's light-blue flag at humanitarian aid facilities set up by occupying US forces.

UN personnel are also instructed not to use military escorts for humanitarian convoys or operations "except under

extreme circumstances" and only with prior permission from UN headquarters.

Collaboration with Disaster Assistance and Response Teams (DART) will also be restricted in view of their "mixed military and civilian characteristics," according to the guidelines.

"A clear separation between humanitarian and military activities must be retained between the functions and roles of military and UN humanitarian actors at all times," the guidelines say.

They warn that otherwise "the perception of neutrality and impartiality of the UN" may be compromised, jeopardizing staff safety and security.

Humanitarian staff are urged to "maintain a clear UN identity at all times" such as by travelling only in clearly marked UN vehicles, and by clearly marking office and relief supplies.

Similarly, UN personnel are not to wear any "uniform-like clothing."

Mark Malloch-Brown, administrator of the UN Development Program (UNDP) summed up the dress code as: "No vest or khaki slacks. I want UNDP people in jeans and T-shirt."

The guidelines also state that "UN personnel and agencies should not accept any armed guards for UN facilities and residence provided by belligerent forces."



PHOTO: AFP

This undated photo released by the US Central Command shows a Light Armored Vehicle from the Second Light Armored Reconnaissance attached to Task Force Tarawa sitting on top of a bridge in Nasiriyah, Iraq, as Iraqi civilians, with their hands up to show they are not hostile, pass by the vehicle.