



IRAQ INVASION

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Explosions shake central Baghdad

REUTERS, Baghdad

At least five large explosions hit an area close to central Baghdad shortly after dawn on Saturday while further blasts shook the southern fringes of the Iraqi capital, a Reuters reporter said.

Correspondent Hassan Hafidh said the al-Mamoun telecommunications center, one of the city's biggest, was among the targets hit in the bombardment. It has been struck before during the 17-day US-led war to oust President Saddam Hussein.

"The bombing has been very, very intense. There are explosions to the southeast, the southwest and now near the center," he said.

Much of the city of five million has been without electricity since Thursday evening.

The overnight bombing appeared mainly to target the eastern approaches to Baghdad.

The air raids came a day after US soldiers seized the city's airport in the southwest -- their biggest prize yet in the war.

Hafidh also reported a curtain of thick smoke stretching from the southwest toward the northwest of Baghdad, a city of five million people.

"It's as though it was still night there. The smoke is very thick. I think they (the Iraqis) might be lighting more oil trenches," he said.

Iraqis lit oil trenches around the city at the start of the U.S.-led war to topple Saddam, hoping the smoke could throw guided missiles and bombs off course.

AFP adds: On Friday night, a missile crashed into central Baghdad and a plane overflew the capital and drew heavy anti-aircraft fire.

The missile struck the heart of Baghdad minutes after the southeastern suburbs came under intensive bombing, sending red streaks into the night sky.

President Saddam Hussein called on

Baghdad residents in a televised address to resist US forces closing in on the city, after the US military said it had seized Baghdad's international airport.

Information Minister Mohammed Said al-Sahhaf issued an ominous warning that Iraq would carry out a "not conventional" attack later against US troops he said were "isolated" at the airport.

Meanwhile, Baghdad was relative quiet Saturday morning after a night of loud explosions in what appeared to be a non-stop campaign of air strikes by coalition forces, according to Arabic news channel Al-Jazeera.

"The bombing did not stop ... Baghdad did not sleep last night," said the channel's correspondent.

But at 7:00 am (0300 GMT), a relative calm had descended on the city, which was engulfed in clouds of smoke. But unlike other days, few people ventured onto the streets to go to work and only a few cars were seen on the two main bridges that cross the Tigris.

The channel had said earlier strong explosions and anti-aircraft fire were heard at 4:45 am (0045 GMT) in Baghdad's center but could not say what the targets were.

Earlier, fireballs could be seen from Baghdad's southwestern outskirts, site of the airport US forces said they have captured, as warplanes roared overhead, according to an AFP reporter in Baghdad.

Bombs or missiles could be heard pounding Baghdad's outskirts relentlessly.

Coalition forces seemed also to have targeted a particular site in the capital's southeastern suburbs, from where a massive plume of smoke shot up into the sky. It was not clear what was hit.

On Friday night, a missile crashed into central Baghdad and a plane overflew the capital and drew heavy anti-aircraft fire.



PHOTO: AFP

Iraqi families desperate for news of PoWs

AFP, Umm Qasr

"Today I will again ask God to return my son to me," says Ismail Kazem, knowing his quest is virtually hopeless as he arrives at the only POW camp in southern Iraq the same way he has for the past 10 days.

His soldier son, 19-year-old Yodat, was taken prisoner as he defended the Euphrates River town of Nasiriyah, 200 km to the northwest.

"It seems as if he was surrounded and gave himself up," says Ismail, an ex-soldier, who adds that he doesn't even know whether Yodat is in the camp, which the Red Cross says is housing more than 3,000 prisoners of war.

Along with Ismail, many other parents, brothers, uncles or wives of Iraqis captured by US or British troops show up each day at the gates to this camp, where they wait in vain for hours under a punishing sun in hopes that someone will tell them the loved one they are seeking is inside and is okay.

Fadila left her five children to come to the camp.

"Four days ago they took my husband and my brother from our house in Al-Jabjuz. They are civilians. I swear they

didn't do anything wrong," she exclaims.

Most of those who show up here have a similar story, telling of how innocent relatives were "unjustly" taken prisoner. But when asked if perhaps the loved one in question might have belonged to Iraq's ruling Baath party or to a pro-Saddam Hussein militia, they respond with a nervous laugh.

"We don't want to talk about politics. It's too dangerous," says Ali, who has been coming every day for the past week to look for his nephew, who was captured near Iraq's second city Basra as he drove his taxi.

"We only want them to give us the names of those who are detained inside, know that they are alright and then leave," Ali says.

But that's the catch.

Each day at noon, a British captain, accompanied by an interpreter, explains to the assembled families and friends that the Red Cross has responsibility for these matters and that the military cannot give out the names of prisoners.

Unfortunately, the Red Cross still doesn't have an office in southern Iraq,

with officials crossing the nearby border each day from Kuwait on specific missions.

That means there is virtually no chance of getting any news.

"It breaks our hearts to see these people every day waiting for news, but the Geneva convention is clear with respect to this," says the captain, who is not permitted to give his name. "The Red Cross works in the field identifying and registering each prisoner, and it will get in contact with the families."

But the women, dressed from head to foot in black, their faces covered in the presence of strangers, don't understand. For days they have waited for hours in hopes of some news, as they gather round the captain, sobbing and trying to hand him little slips of paper with a name written on it.

Tamara al-Rifai, spokeswoman for the International Committee of the Red Cross, says the organisation is studying the best way to do its job.

According to the US Central Command in Doha, there are more than 4,000 Iraqi POWs, but the British government has said the number could be as high as 9,000.

US envisages limited UN role in Iraq

REUTERS, Washington

The United States on Friday night ruled out a leading role for the United Nations in immediate post-war Iraq and said Washington and its allies had earned top-status having given "life and blood" to the war effort.

Washington promised to include Iraqis in the decision-making process from the beginning, and said it hoped to get an interim Iraqi authority quickly up-and-running, possibly in parts of the country even before the government of President Saddam Hussein is toppled in Baghdad.

"It would only be natural to expect that ... having given life and blood to liberate Iraq, the coalition would have the leading role. I don't think anybody is surprised by that," President Bush's national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, told reporters.

She also made clear that the Pentagon would oversee humanitarian and reconstruction efforts, while other agencies play supportive roles. That puts the Bush administration at odds with Congress, where this week both the Republican-controlled House of Representatives and Senate gave the State Department control of the purse-strings.

UN involvement in post-war Iraq is expected to be one of the issues to dominate next Tuesday's meeting between Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair in Northern Ireland.

Blair is treading a tightrope between US plans for a predominantly American-controlled administration in the aftermath of the Iraq war and insistence from many European powers that the United Nations should be in charge.

While the White House is increasingly upbeat about the course of the US-

led campaign, Rice cautioned that it was impossible to predict "what difficulties lie in the future."

The White House said it would consider the war a success even if American forces failed to find Saddam, whose appearance on Iraqi television could prove that he survived the US bombing raid that opened the conflict.

While finding Saddam -- either dead or alive -- would be "helpful," White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said Bush's "definition of victory" was removing the current government from power and eliminating the country's alleged weapons of mass destruction.

If Saddam eludes US forces, he would join the ranks of America's most wanted, a list now topped by al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, whom Washington blames for the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the United States.

While putting the United States,

Britain and other wartime allies in the lead, Rice said the United Nations would have a part to play in post-war Iraq, particularly in the distribution of humanitarian aid and running the oil-for-food program which uses oil proceeds to help feed the Iraqi people.

She said the precise role for the UN "will be determined in consultations between the Iraqi people, coalition members and UN officials."

Rice said the decision to leave the United Nations in a largely supportive role was not aimed at penalising the world body for refusing to authorise war against Iraq as demanded by Bush.

"It's not a matter of confidence. It's a matter of what the conditions on the ground are and it's a matter of what will be needed to get Iraq back on its feet as quickly as possible," she said.

The new Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance, headed

by retired Army Gen. Jay Garner and reporting to US commander Gen. Tommy Franks, will spearhead humanitarian assistance and reconstruction in coordination with nongovernmental organisations, Rice said.

"The Defence Department has been designated by the president as the lead agency. The other agencies are supporting agencies to the Defence Department's effort. It only makes sense because we are in a war," Rice said, moving to quell power battles pitting the Pentagon against the State Department over the lead in a post-Saddam Iraq.

The White House will press lawmakers in final congressional negotiations next week to give the administration the flexibility to shift billions of dollars in funding from the State Department to the Defense Department to oversee the reconstruction efforts.

Were Iraqis seeing a double?

BEN MACINTYRE, The Times

In an astonishing piece of political theatre, Saddam Hussein or someone who looked very like him was shown strolling through the burnt streets of downtown Baghdad yesterday, for all the world like a politician on an election walkabout rather than a despot facing destruction in a half-bombed city ringed by American troops.

He kissed babies, he slapped backs, he grinned for the cameras and he acknowledged the cheers of an over-excited, cheering crowd with a raised fist.

Time and again, the cameras of the Arabic news station al-Jazeera zoomed towards smoke rising in the distance, from bombs or oil fires, in wordless proof that, whatever the doubts about earlier Saddam footage, these images were taken after the war began. The man in battle fatigues, with red and yellow epaulettes, holstered pistol and green cravat, had Saddam's rolling walk, the bulldog features, a paunch and the trademark black beret.

If this was Saddam, his appearance to inspect bomb damage and prove that he is still alive, with US spy planes scrutinising every square inch of the city, was a wild gamble, an act of brazen chutzpah and stark defiance. If

this was a double, it was a flawless performance, a study in insouciance.

"How are you?" he was heard to ask.

"May God protect you, President," said one Iraqi man. The crowd was in no doubt. They surged forward, waving guns in the air, fists raised, chanting: "With our soul and blood we sacrifice to you, Oh Saddam". They tried to kiss him, and he gave an "aw-shucks smile" that was at once politically expert, and chilling.

Forensic Saddam-watchers will pore over these new images for proof, or otherwise, of their authenticity. But one thing appears clear: there is more than one Saddam at large.

For a 64-year-old man, yesterday's Saddam seemed remarkably athletic; the jowls that were visible in his first televised appearance have gone, and the moustache has turned from grey, to black, and back to grey again; the belly, while considerable, seems rounder. In one address he reads slowly with thick reading glasses; in the next, he reads faster without them.

If the pictures were genuine, this was Saddam's first public appearance for two years, yet the entire display was framed, for Arab opinion, to look like a man who had popped out of his palace for a stroll, only to be besieged by well-

wishers.

A woman rushed forward with a curly-haired baby and thrust it into his arms. The child looked surprised. So, for a split-moment, did Saddam, but then with practised ease reminiscent of an American presidential candidate, he kissed the baby and raised it skywards.

According to one report, a crowd assembled in the area where the footage was filmed last Friday. Perhaps the spectators had been recruited in advance, but the crowd swelled swiftly to several hundred.

Two women clutched one another, as if spotting a film star in the street, and pointed. A traffic jam formed, cars hooting wildly. Saddam leaped, with an agility surprising for a man with a painfully slipped disc, on to a low platform, to accept the increasingly hysterical shouts of adoration, familiar from so many films of orchestrated Saddam-worship. An armed guard blocked a clear shot, should a sniper be lurking.

And then Saddam, or his double, strolled nonchalantly down the street, the cameras cut away, and the man in the military uniform vanished.

He had said almost nothing, but his message could not have been louder.



PHOTO: AFP

Picture released by the official Iraqi news agency (INA) shows Iraqi President Saddam Hussein waving to supporters during a tour in the residential neighborhood of al-Mansour in Baghdad on Friday.



PHOTO: AFP

A British soldier stands guard close to Iraqis demanding access to POWs at their base in the southern Iraqi town of Umm Qasr April 4. Several family members of Iraqi soldiers missing in action came today to the base for information about their relatives.