



Face of 'liberated'



PHOTO: INTERNET

An Iraqi woman and her children take cover with fear amidst fierce fighting in northern Baghdad yesterday.

Confusion in Baghdad

A city sealed off from the world

WASHINGTON POST, Baghdad

Some clambered on flowerpots. Others pushed impatiently against a door barricading the entrance. They thrust tattered business cards into the air, yellowed scraps of paper and pieces of newspaper, all with phone numbers beyond Iraq.

Crowds besieged the small, sand-bagged compound of the International Committee of the Red Cross today in the neighbourhood of Alwiya. In a city with no working phone lines, they had heard rumours -- true, as it turned out -- that residents could make a call for free to anywhere in the world. They had three minutes to sum up to their friends and relatives their lives at war.

"Every family has someone worrying about them," said Laith Hazem, 41, an electrical engineer waiting to call his brother, Luai, in Stockholm. "They worry about their lives, they worry about the danger they face."

Hazem waited on the sun-drenched sidewalk for hours to make the call. Rockets, antiaircraft guns and artillery thundered within a mile of the compound, far closer than during any day since the U.S.-led invasion began. With practiced understatement, he shrugged. "War is very dangerous," he said.

The ravages of war methodically advanced on many residents' homes yesterday. Ambulances careered through the streets with sirens blaring. Hospitals treated hundreds of wounded, civilians and soldiers caught in the line of fire on Baghdad's outskirts.

Through the day, the deafening sounds of battle built like a crescendo.

After days of an unrelenting exodus, the government declared that no one could leave Baghdad between 6 p.m. and 6 a.m., and the streets were deserted by nightfall. Phone lines that went dead because of US airstrikes last week remained down, and the government has warned of severe penalties if Iraqis are found with satellite phones it believes can be used for spying. A blackout has left swaths of the city without water and sanitation.

In a search for safety, some residents hauled blankets, mattresses and suitcases from the city's southern outskirts to neighborhoods closer to downtown. Many are without cars. A few braved the fighting to walk the streets, suffused with

soldiers, militiamen and civilians carrying rocket-propelled grenade launchers, rifles and heavy machine guns. Others waited in their homes, shrouded in darkness, hoping to hear word about relatives just miles away.

"Everybody has run away," said an elderly doctor in the upscale district of Mansour. "Everybody has run away from Baghdad."

"We've had enough. Really, we've had enough," he said.

The screech of planes caused a moment of suspense -- a deep breath as he waited to hear where the bombs had landed. The cadence of artillery fire sounded with monotonous regularity. At times, it was interrupted by the crackle of gunfire.

"We don't know when it's going to

end, this war," the doctor said. "I wish tomorrow."

Still, his resentment of Hussein's government was matched by his scepticism about US promises of liberation and democracy. He said Baghdad would wait and see the outcome, but predicted that the window of opportunity would be precariously brief.

"You don't want to be governed by foreign people," he said. "British, French, Americans, they're all the same to us."

"They'll say, 'Who's better, Saddam or the Americans?' " he said. "At least Saddam's from the country, and they're from the outside."

THE GUARDIAN, Northern Iraq

The controversial leader of one of Iraq's main opposition groups, Ahmad Chalabi, the head of the Iraqi National Congress (INC), has been secretly flown by the US military to southern Iraq.

Mr Chalabi and his entourage were last night on their way to the southern city of Nassiriya. They disappeared over the weekend from the mountain resort of Dukan, in Kurdish northern Iraq, where the INC had established a headquarters.

The move prompted fresh speculation last night that the Pentagon is grooming Mr Chalabi as a future prime minister.

Military officials at central command in Qatar declined to confirm that Mr Chalabi was in southern Iraq. But one American military source said: "You are going to start hearing a lot more about Iraqis working to rebuild the future of their country."

The White House is preparing to

unveil its civilian administrator, the retired general Jay Garner, who will take temporary control of postwar Iraq. Gen Garner is expected to give a press conference in Kuwait today. His main task is to prepare for what is being called the IIA - the Iraqi interim authority. It is scheduled to take over the government of Iraq after what is supposed to be a 90-day period of US military rule.

Prominent figures from the exiled opposition are likely to be included in the authority, though the US has become frustrated with their quarrels and is eager to use others from inside the country.

Plans for an Iraqi equivalent of the Afghan loya jirga envisage that 150 of the delegates, a majority, would be chosen from inside Iraq, and 100 from among the exiles.

Opposition sources say Mr Chalabi's ultimate ambition is to be prime minister but he has only been offered an advisory role in the finance ministry

under Gen Garner's administration. The offer of a post in the ministry was not made by Gen Garner but, according to sources close to the planning process, was imposed by the US deputy secretary of defence, Paul Wolfowitz, a hawk in the administration and one of Mr Chalabi's staunchest supporters.

Mr Chalabi's rise is strongly opposed by the CIA and the US state department.

His support comes mainly from Congress and the Pentagon - though Iraqi opposition sources say even sections of the Pentagon have become disenchanted because of poor quality "intelligence" from inside Iraq that he provided before the war.

Opposition sources say Mr Chalabi has been threatening to set up his own government in Iraq if Washington does not agree to his demands. One theory is that his transfer to Nassiriya, far from preparing him for high office, could be an attempt to bring him more firmly under American control.

Snapshot of war horror

REUTERS, Baghdad

Ali Ismael Abbas, 12, was fast asleep when war shattered his life. A missile obliterated his home and most of his family, leaving him orphaned, badly burned and blowing off both his arms.

"It was midnight when the missile fell on us. My father, my mother and my brother died. My mother was five months pregnant," the traumatised boy told Reuters at Baghdad's Kindi hospital.

"Our neighbours pulled me out and brought me here. I was unconscious," he said on Sunday.

In addition to the tragedy of losing his parents, he faces the horror of living handicapped. Thinking about his uncertain future he timidly asked whether he could get artificial arms.

"Can you help get my arms back? Do you think the doctors can get me another pair of hands?" Abbas asked. "If I don't get a pair of hands I will commit suicide," he said with tears spilling down his cheeks.

His aunt, three cousins and three other relatives staying with them were also killed in this week's missile strikes on their house in Diala Bridge district east of Baghdad.

"We didn't want war. I was scared of this war," said Abbas. "Our house was just a poor shack, why did they want to

bomb us?" said the young boy, unaware that the area in which he lived was surrounded by military installations.

With a childhood lost and a future clouded by disaster and disability, Abbas poured his heart out as he lay in bed with an improvised wooden cage over his chest to stop his burned flesh touching the bed covers.

"I wanted to become an army officer when I grow up, but not anymore. Now I want to become a doctor, but how can I? I don't have hands," he said.

His aunt, Jamila Abbas, 53, looked after him, feeding him, washing him, comforting him with prayers and repeatedly telling him his parents had gone to heaven.

Abbas' suffering offered one snapshot of the daily horrors afflicting Iraqi civilians in the devastating US-led war to remove President Saddam Hussein.

At the Kindi hospital, staff were overwhelmed by the sharp rise in casualties since US ground troops moved north to Baghdad on Thursday and intensified their aerial assault.

Ambulance after ambulance raced in with casualties from around the capital. Victim after victim was rushed in, many carried in bed sheets after the stretchers ran out. Doctors struggled to find them beds.

Staff had no time even to clean the

blood from trolleys.

Patients' screams and parents' cries echoed across the ward.

With many staff unable to reach the hospital due to the bombing, doctors worked round the clock performing surgery, taking blood, giving injections and ferrying the wounded.

Doctor Osama Saleh al-Duleimi, an orthopedic surgeon and assistant director at Kindi, said they were overloaded and suffering shortages of anesthesia, pain killers and staff.

Doctors who treated Iraqi victims of two previous wars say they are taken aback by the injuries they have seen. Most suffered massive trauma and fatal wounds, including head, abdominal and limb injuries from lethal weapons, they said.

"I've been a doctor for 25 years and this is the worst I've seen in terms of the number of casualties and fatal wounds," said Duleimi, 48, who witnessed the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War and the 1991 Gulf War over Kuwait.

"This is a disaster because they're attacking civilians. We are receiving a lot of civilian casualties," he added.

Washington says it has tried to minimise civilian casualties in its war to oust Saddam but doctors insist many of the victims are civilians caught in aerial and artillery bombardment.



PHOTO: INTERNET

A missile strikes an Iraqi army position near a Presidential palace in Baghdad yesterday.

Controversial opposition leader secretly flown in

THE GUARDIAN, Northern Iraq

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It's even harder to track Saddam these days

AP, Cairo

In peacetime, Saddam Hussein's whereabouts were top secret. In war, with the US military after his head, it's even harder to keep track of him.

The Iraqi president - or possibly a double - has been seen on state-owned television giving speeches, chairing meetings of top lieutenants and on one occasion greeting well-wishers on a Baghdad street. But according to the few sources in a position to know, he's likely spending most of his time underground.

Since the outset of the war, when cruise missiles hit a compound in Baghdad where Saddam was believed to be hiding, US and British officials have questioned whether he is alive.

An Iraqi dissident who for years worked very close to Saddam said the Iraqi leader was so obsessed with his security that very few people would know about his movements.

The exiled dissident said only two people were kept posted on Saddam's whereabouts - his younger son, Qusai,

who commanded the Republican Guard and was head of the president's security, and his private secretary, Abed Hameed Hmoud, a member of Saddam's Tikriti clan. Even older son Odai is thought to be out of the loop because he is considered to have a reckless nature.

During the 1991 Gulf War, the dissident said, Saddam stayed at private houses in several Baghdad neighbourhoods, dressed in a long robe and traditional checkered head dress. He would move around in old taxis or trucks, and used couriers to communicate with aides, the informant said.

Saddam reportedly uses doubles to keep people guessing about his movements. His rare trips abroad are not reported by Iraqi media until he lands at his destination.

Abbas al-Janabi, who worked as Odai's secretary until he defected in 1995, said that Saddam probably went into an underground bunker even before the US bombing started. He said that Saddam had a series of bunkers dug

in Baghdad to shelter him in emergencies.

Al-Janabi said that one bunker linked several of Saddam's palaces in Baghdad and had exits to downtown streets. Part of it was originally dug for a subway project that ran out of money, he said.

"They need sensors to find him," al-Janabi said from neighbouring Jordan.

German engineer Karl Esser said that he helped a company design a bunker under one of Saddam's Baghdad palaces near the Tigris River in the early 1980s.

The bunker Esser described is believed to have survived the 1990-91 Gulf War. Since then, the US has developed precision-guided "bunker-busting" bombs designed to penetrate deep into such reinforced concrete shelters.

But Esser doubted whether the Americans could breach the bunker, which had a ceiling more than 6 feet thick.