

Thousands flee battered capital

AFP, Baghdad

Hundreds of families fled Baghdad Tuesday morning, reported an AFP correspondent who saw cars heading mainly toward the east of the country.

Cars, trucks and minibuses were seen driving in the direction of the northern ash-Shaab district opening onto a highway leading east to Diyala, around 100 kilometers (63 miles) from Baghdad.

The vehicles were stacked with mattresses, kitchen utensils, beds and food.

Women and children could be seen in the cars fleeing intense bombing of the capital.

In the ash-Shaab (people's) district, where three people were killed by the US-British bombing Monday, Jabbar Keleish, his wife, their 10 children and daughter-in-law got into three cars for a drive to the perceived safety of Ghalbiyah to the northwest.

"We'd better go after the bombing," said Kheleish, 49.

A considerable number of residents appeared to be leaving the district, located near a strategic spot.

"I'm closing the house and leaving with my family for a safer place. I will come back every now and then to see if something happened," said Ali Rishek, 53, before driving away with his wife and their three children.

With smoke pouring out of his chief presidential palace compound under assault from US troops prowling the Iraqi capital, Saddam Hussein made a fresh appearance Monday in a bid to show he was still in charge.

The Iraqi strongman was seen on state television meeting with top military and political brass including his son Qussay, head of the elite Republican Guard.

Saddam has stepped up his appearances on television in recent days and even taken a well-publicized walk on the capital's streets to counter the mounting impression that his grip on power is slipping.

But it was not clear when or where the meeting took place.

Meanwhile, huge explosions boomed out over the main Republican Palace, a key symbol of Saddam's power, as US forces launched a raid into the sprawling riverside compound in the heart of Baghdad.

AFP reporters saw 10 US marines in full combat gear inside the palace, which has been pounded repeatedly since the US-led coalition launched the war 19 days ago.

US troops met with fierce resistance at the compound where dozens of black-clad Iraqi elite troops were seen running along a bank and entering one of the main buildings.

Amid heavy exchanges of mortar and rocket-propelled grenade fire, clouds of smoke covered the 2.5-square kilometre (one-square mile) palace, which houses Saddam's personal office and an underground bunker designed to withstand nuclear attack.

Lieutenant Colonel Peter Bayer, operations officer for the US army's 3rd Infantry Division, said US troops had "secured the main presidential palace" and another palace in the city center as well as a third near the airport.

But Iraq insisted it was still in control, with Information Minister Mohammed Said al-Sahhaf assuring reporters the invaders would be "massacred".

"They pushed forward some troop transporters and tanks, we have surrounded them with our troops," Sahhaf said.



PHOTO: NEW YORK TIMES

A US soldier walks through the wreckage inside one of Saddam's palaces which was bombed yesterday.

Civilian toll could backfire on US

WASHINGTON POST

International health organisations warned again yesterday that Baghdad's hospitals have been overwhelmed by casualties now that fierce urban combat has erupted across Iraq's capital, with supplies dwindling and medical personnel caught in the crossfire and unable to report to work.

The World Health Organization in Geneva reported that Baghdad hospitals were seeing 100 combat casualties per hour after a column of U.S. tanks made an initial thrust into the city, and that amputations were apparently being performed without sufficient anesthesia or morphine. WHO spokesman Ian Simpson said doctors and nurses who managed to report for duty at Baghdad hospitals were increasingly finding conditions untenable, with stocks of medicine and supplies -- badly depleted by 12 years of international sanctions -- vanishing in the crush of civilian and military casualties.

As the death toll climbs and human misery increases, so does concern that

the US military may be alienating the populace it says it is liberating, and fuelling anger in Arab countries and elsewhere. The WHO also warned that Iraqi civilian and military casualties will undoubtedly affect the psychological well-being of children, especially in light of the Iraqi military's heavy reliance on conscripts who often are fathers, uncles and brothers who wanted no part of war.

Defence Department officials have been loathe to estimate a total number of Iraqi military dead. But one senior Pentagon official estimated that between 2,000 and 4,000 Iraqi soldiers had been killed in Baghdad since Saturday. Many more, the official said, have undoubtedly been wounded.

US military casualties, by contrast, have been relatively light by historical standards for urban combat. Two soldiers and two Marines were killed in separate attacks yesterday, with six others reported missing and more than 15 wounded.

Those combat deaths were not included in an official Pentagon accounting that listed 89 US fatalities

through Sunday, including 73 Americans killed in action and 16 who died in accidents or other incidents since the conflict began March 19. Seven troops are reported missing in action, and seven more are being held by the Iraqis as prisoners of war.

"I predicted there could be anywhere from 100 to 5,000 coalition soldiers killed," said Michael O'Hanlon, a military analyst at the Brookings Institution. "I saw the number 100 as almost as implausible as 5,000. I am very struck that we are at the lower end of what I thought was a wide plausible range."

With the long-awaited urban battle for Baghdad underway, increasing the potential for civilian casualties, there has been no reliable estimate of how many Iraqi civilians may have died in the fighting.

An international antiwar consortium, led by Marc Herold, an associate professor of economic development and international affairs at the University of New Hampshire, estimates that between 877 and 1,050

civilians have been killed, based on news reports from Iraq.

But there is no independent confirmation of that number from government sources or major non-governmental organisations. During the war in Afghanistan, Herold's group was criticised for double or even triple counting of casualty reports.

William Arkin, an independent defence analyst said, "If your point here is to minimize civilian harm, you can't slaughter military people and think that you've evaded that issue. They all have families. If we leave thousands or tens of thousands of families without young men, we're going to pay a price in the postwar period."

Simpson, the WHO spokesman, echoed his concern. "It's very easy for the coalition to say we've only hit military targets, but you're still killing people, and people have families. If the aim of your military campaign is to win over the hearts and minds of the people, then killing large numbers of conscripts is not going to help."

Annan seeks European support for post-war UN role

AP, United Nations

Secretary-General Kofi Annan heads to Europe on Wednesday to seek consensus from Security Council members on a UN role in the reconstruction of Iraq.

Annan's trip to France, Germany, Britain and Russia will follow a summit in Northern Ireland between President Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair where the future of Iraq was a top agenda item.

The United States remains at odds with much of the council - including its closest ally, Britain - on what the UN's role should be.

The Bush administration says the US-led coalition fighting in Iraq must take the lead in running and rebuilding Iraq. The European Union wants the United Nations to be a major player.

Annan on Monday advocated "an important role" for the UN in rebuilding Iraq, stressing that only the world body

can bring legitimacy to the job. He also picked the day Bush and Blair met to introduce the Security Council to Rafaeuddin Ahmed, his new special adviser on post-conflict issues.

Ahmed is a former Pakistani diplomat who spent 30 years at the UN and rose to the post of assistant secretary-general. Since February, he has been working for Annan on a possible UN role in Iraq. His appointment officially makes him the focal point for discussions with council members and other UN states on a possible UN role.

During Annan's 90-minute meeting in his office with the 15 council ambassadors, the council's divisions over the war surfaced again.

The United States attacked Iraq without authorization from the council following strong opposition from France, Russia, Germany and China, which believed that Iraq could be disarmed peacefully.

US Ambassador John Negroponte said the United Nations won't be left out.

"I'm sure there's going to be a role for the United Nations and that's going to have to be further discussed," he said. "People shouldn't be surprised if the coalition is going to take the lead in Iraq, given the fact that it's the coalition that has basically sacrificed its blood and treasure to achieve the outcome that now seems to be inevitable."

France's UN ambassador, Jean-Marc de La Sabliere, expressed hope the Security Council can unite on a central role for the UN after the war. Diplomats also said Russia made clear that any post-conflict involvement in Iraq by the United Nations must not legitimize the war.

Annan will be in Paris on Thursday, Berlin and London on Friday and St. Petersburg, Russia on Saturday, his spokesman said.

Britain to appoint deputy for interim authority

THE GUARDIAN

Britain is planning to appoint a senior army officer to act as deputy to Jay Garner, the former US general appointed by the Pentagon to head an interim authority to control Iraq after the war.

Major General Tim Cross, who has been coordinating humanitarian aid to the port of Umm Qasr in southern Iraq, has been earmarked for the job, the Guardian has learned.

Gen Cross is a logistics expert and has previously organised refugee camps in Macedonia and Kosovo.

Officials from government agencies, including Clare Short's Department for International Development, are also being lined up to act as deputies to Americans in the Pentagon's Office for Restruction and Humanitarian Assistance, Whitehall sources said.



PHOTO: AP

Medics rush a man wounded in bomb raids into the emergency room of the Kindi Hospital in Baghdad yesterday.

Iraqi domestic television off air in Baghdad

RUETERS, Baghdad

Iraq's domestic state television went off the air in Baghdad on Tuesday as US troops advanced into the heart of President Saddam Hussein's capital.

Earlier, it had failed to broadcast a morning news bulletin and instead showed only old footage of Saddam being cheered at rallies and played patriotic songs.

US military indicated that they had targeted television transmitters in the Iraqi capital. "Clearly we would like to destroy Saddam's capability to disseminate lies," said Major Michael Birmingham with the US 3rd Infantry Division.

Local state-run Baghdad Radio also went off the air but after a 20-minute blackout it returned, broadcasting a diet of national music and songs in praise of Saddam.

"Saddam has confused his enemy, Saddam is ours and we will stay with him until we die, he is our Saddam and we will defend him unto death," were the lyrics of one song.

US officials say they bombed a building in Baghdad on Monday after intelligence reports that Saddam and his two sons may have been inside. It was not clear if they were hit.

Fate of 'Chemical Ali' remains a mystery

WASHINGTON POST, Marine Combat Headquarters

Since the first night of the war in Iraq, US commanders have been trying to find and kill Ali Hassan Majeed known as "Chemical Ali" for ordering the use of poison gas against ethnic Kurds 15 years ago. Time and again over the last 18 days, US forces have bombed and raided houses where they thought he was staying, only to turn up empty-handed.

Over the weekend, an informer told US-British forces that Majeed could be found at an office compound in Basra, the country's second-largest city then under siege by British forces. Majeed, a cousin of President Saddam Hussein and his military commander in the south, might have chemicals with him, the informer said. In swooped the F-16 jets, and the buildings exploded into fireballs.

Monday morning, British officers said they found Majeed's body.

By the evening, however, British forces said they believed Majeed might have survived the attack. But Defence Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld and



PHOTO: AFP

other US officials in Washington said they believed he was dead. Given Majeed's success in eluding his hunters, US officers in Iraq remained more cautious.

"Until they do a DNA, I'm not going to speculate," said an exasperated Col. Larry Brown, operations chief for the Marines in Iraq. "The guy has been like

Freddy Krueger -- we've killed him five times already."

Majeed has long been one of the most influential members of Hussein's inner circle and, according to human rights groups and opponents of the Iraqi government, one of its most brutal. In addition to leading the 1988 campaign in northern Iraq against the Kurds, in which an estimated 100,000 people were killed, Majeed also played a central role in suppressing the 1991 rebellion of Shiites in southern Iraq after the Persian Gulf War.

"There were concerted efforts to track him and kill him," said Lt. Col. Jamie Martin, the chief British liaison at Marine headquarters.

"We felt he had his finger on the button and if he said, 'Deliver chemical weapons,' chemical weapons would be delivered," said Lt. Col. David Pere, senior watch officer at the Marine headquarters.

"We felt if we could take him out, we would reduce the possibility of chemical attack. And two weeks later, there's been no chemical attack, and he's been on the run."