



IRAQ INVASION

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Finding Saddam and his sons

US intelligence fails to track them

NEW YORK TIMES, Washington

Besieged by reports and rumours on the whereabouts of Saddam Hussein, a formerly covert intelligence operation in Baghdad turned into a wide-open manhunt today as military and CIA teams raced through barely secured neighborhoods of the Iraqi capital searching for any sign of Mr. Hussein, his two sons and other leaders of the Baath Party.

One unconfirmed report said that an entourage of security aides was trying to transfer a badly injured Mr. Hussein into Syria with his sons, Qusay and Uday. "We are getting scraps of intelligence saying that Syria has been cooperative in facilitating the move of the people out of Iraq and into Syria," Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld told a Pentagon news conference, without specifying that Mr. Hussein might be among those assisted.

Some United States intelligence officials seemed increasingly confident that Mr. Hussein had been killed in a bombing raid on Monday night that targeted a building where he was believed to be meeting with key lieutenants.

But officials said the CIA still lacked physical evidence or intercepted communications between senior Iraqi officials discussing Mr. Hussein's death. So as search teams in Iraq scoured government, financial, educational and

research institutions searching for evidence, intelligence analysts there and in the United States were still debating among themselves whether Mr. Hussein had survived.

Some intelligence officials were convinced that the rapid collapse of the institutions of government in Baghdad today came because word had circulated among his lieutenants that Mr. Hussein had been killed. Other analysts were more cautious, arguing that the collapse may simply have come because the rapid move by American ground forces into the capital had convinced the government's remaining leaders to flee.

Officials said it would still take more time to conclusively determine Mr. Hussein's fate, and might require DNA testing of remains at the site of the bombing. The frustrating experience of searching Afghanistan and Pakistan in vain for Osama bin Laden over the past year has prompted many officials to be cautious about making definitive statements about Mr. Hussein's status.

One concern is the existence of an extensive network of underground tunnels in Baghdad. It is possible that Mr. Hussein and a few key lieutenants have survived and are huddling underneath the city as the celebration above ground continues.

"He could be dead or in a tunnel," one official said. "He could be below ground either literally or figuratively." Another possibility is that Mr.

Hussein or his senior aides could have escaped to Tikrit, Mr. Hussein's hometown in north-central Iraq, still beyond the reach of allied ground forces. American aircraft have been bombing Iraqi forces in the Tikrit area, and American ground forces are expected to attack the area within the next few days.

American officials expressed hope that existing intelligence sources, along with the scores of Iraqi citizens who were approaching military units in Baghdad and to volunteer information, would lead American forces to Mr. Hussein and others.

Documents from the Iraqi Intelligence Ministry, the Special Security Organisation, and other elements of Mr. Hussein's security apparatus were of particular interest, to help gather information about weapons of mass destruction as well as to locate Iraqi officials.

American intelligence officials continued to eavesdrop on Iraqi leadership networks, although those circuits were all but quiet today, as some Iraqi officials seemed to be trying to disappear into the country's cities and villages in an effort to escape coalition forces. American military officials said that command and control of Iraqi military units had all but ended, and that there was little sign of organised resistance.

Arab media subdued by Iraqi elation

AP, Kuwait City

Some Arab journalists were subdued and others incredulous as they watched Iraqis cheering the fall of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's Baghdad.

"The surreal scene this afternoon was unthinkable until Wednesday," said Maher Abdullah, a reporter with Arab satellite television station Al-Jazeera. "Nobody could dream of it. If someone had told me this, I would have told him, 'Impossible.'"

At one point, Abdullah referred to a Saddam Hussein monument as a statue of "the former president."

One Kuwaiti Television presenter called the Iraqis' elation and their thanks to US-led troops who rolled into the capital a "slap in the face" to Arabs who had sided with Saddam.

Kuwait, which was occupied by Saddam's troops in 1990-91, had been heavily criticised in the Arab world in recent weeks for being the only Arab country that openly backed the US-led invasion of Iraq and for granting the United States use of its territory to launch the offensive.

On Abu Dhabi TV yesterday night, the anchor told his audience: "This may be the last time we bring you the reports under the headline, 'On the Front Line.' We wish you and the Iraqis a life without wars."

A headline from today's early edition of Egypt's al-Gomhuria newspaper said: "Saddam deceived the Iraqis and the Arabs, and Baghdad fell in seconds."

Disappearing act by Iraqi leaders

REUTERS, Washington

As Baghdad fell from Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's control, covert CIA and military teams and surveillance devices set up to monitor top Iraqi officials reported that nearly all of them had disappeared. The Washington Post reported on Thursday.

CIA and Special Operations teams targeting the Iraqi leadership discovered that Saddam's Baath Party leaders, Republican Guard leaders, troops and high-level government officials were not at their usual posts on Wednesday, the report said.

"There was no sign of any leaders, anywhere," a senior US administration official was quoted as saying.

"All of a sudden, all communications ceased and the regime didn't come to work," a senior administration official told the newspaper.

Even Information Minister Mohammed Saeed al-Sahaf, who has turned up daily during the war and poured abuse on the Americans, failed to make an appearance.

Would-be leaders rush to fill political vacuum

TIMES ONLINE, Qatar

Iraq was transformed from a one-party dictatorship into a confusion of competing factions yesterday as ethnic, religious and tribal groups rushed to fill the vacuum left by the ousting of Saddam Hussein.

As American and British forces tried to impose order on the territory captured over the past three weeks, they were faced with the unenviable mission of running a deeply divided nation with no Iraqi leadership capable of assuming power in the near future.

Iraq's political map used to be simple and one-dimensional: the Baath party.

Yesterday it included two Kurdish factions controlling the north; a pocket of Baathist control loyal to Saddam around his hometown, Tikrit; US military authority in Baghdad and a string of central and southern cities; Iraqi opposition forces in al-Nasiriyah; an unknown militia in the city of al-Amarah; British military rule in the south, with an unknown tribal sheikh promoted to Mayor of Basra; and the new

US civil administration established in the southern-most port city of Umm Qasr.

To further complicate matters, exiled leaders and other groups, some of them supported by foreign governments, are planning to return in the coming days and weeks to stake their claim to post-Saddam Iraq.

Even the main coalition partners, the United States and Britain, are not agreed on the role of the United Nations and the composition of any future Iraqi leadership.

Senior Western diplomats gave warning yesterday that there was only a small window of opportunity to stabilise the country and establish a new Iraqi administration. They are clearly worried about a lawless hiatus undermining the military victory and are concerned about losing support in the Arab world. They also gave warning against expecting elections in Iraq any time soon.

The fate of the country will lie largely in the hands of retired US General Jay Garner, head of the Pentagon's Organisation for Reconstruction and

Humanitarian Assistance (Orha), the future civil administration of Iraq. Initially, his several hundred-strong force will lead relief efforts from their first base in Umm Qasr, under the command of the retired US General Buck Walters, who is in charge of the southern third of Iraq.

"Umm Qasr is the first corner of Iraq that is totally free," said General Walters, who likes to compare his team to the geriatric heroes of the comedy film Space Cowboys, who are brought out of retirement for one last mission.

The British also have a stake in the Orha operation, with half a dozen Foreign Office officials and army officers assigned to General Garner's staff.

In the coming days General Garner is expected to move his operations from Kuwait to Baghdad and other Iraqi cities. After dealing with humanitarian issues, such as the supply of food and medicine, they will try to restart the machinery of government. They hope to complete their mission in a matter of months.



After a short fire fight in Sayyid Muhammad, a few kilometers northeast of Baghdad, suspects are rounded up, stripped and interrogated by the US Marine Scouts of the Second Tank Battalion on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Pentagon in dilemma over when to declare victory

AFP, Washington

With the collapse of Baghdad and no visible signs of control from the Iraqi regime, the Pentagon could soon declare victory, without waiting to clear out the final pockets of resistance to US troops.

Due to the fluidity of the situation, the dilemma for US military officials will now be in evaluating the best course of action and will choose the right moment to present their recommendation to civil authorities.

Protocol would require that a formal declaration of military victory in Iraq be left to US President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

According to US officials cited by the Washington Post, the Bush administration has set out a procedure to determine the exact moment when victory can be declared, without necessarily awaiting the end of military operations. Dubbed a "rolling victory" -- just as

the start of the war was described as a "rolling start" -- the approach consists of evaluating progress of the offensive in terms as much psychological as territorial.

"The objective is not necessarily to take buildings or occupy areas," one senior military officer involved in planning for the war's conclusion told the Post. "It's the people. It's getting them to accept the fact that the regime is gone. That's the essence of the thing."

The "rolling victory" approach would come at an unknown moment when US forces are in control of "significant territory and have eliminated a critical mass of Iraqi resistance," the Post said.

"It's going to be a fairly nebulous situation," a civilian official of the Bush administration said.

On Monday, US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld cited other factors, Iraq's stabilisation, security of logistics and supply of humanitarian aid to

central Iraq, and the return of people displaced by the war.

Much will depend on how operations commander in Iraq, General Tommy Franks, views the situation.

Once US officials decide that most of the country is secure and that the Iraqi leadership has been eliminated or neutralised, Franks would recommend that his operations base be transferred from the Qatari capital Doha to Iraq itself.

There he would set up operations in the company of retired US general Jay Garner who will head to Baghdad to take the role of interim administrator once the shooting stops, Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said Wednesday.

"They'll move to the Baghdad area at that point that the Baghdad airport is sufficiently secured to take a number of civilians who are not in a combat situation ... as the war and the kinetics decline," Rumsfeld said.

Aid groups ask UN for access to Iraqis in need

AFP, United Nations

Top aid groups asked the UN Security Council on Wednesday to assure them free access to Iraqis in need of humanitarian assistance.

"We need to deal immediately with the access to the population," Kathleen Hunt of CARE International, the principal private aid organisation, said after the meeting.

During a closed-door session with the 15 members of the Council, the non-governmental organisations also stressed the importance of establishing as soon as possible a system for investigating violations of human rights in Iraq.

"The Council must establish as soon as possible a commission of experts to monitor human rights," Yvonne Terlingen of Amnesty International said afterwards.

"Beyond security, no limitation should be placed on NGO movement and they must have access everywhere," Mexico's ambassador and Council chair Aguilar Zinser said.



PHOTO: REUTERS

Marines secured the area around the Martyrs Monument as US forces moved into the centre of Baghdad.

Now anarchy in Basra

AFP, Basra

With no police or government to speak of and its basic infrastructure battered by war, the southern Iraqi city of Basra was Thursday sinking into anarchy, with rampant looting, murders and petty crime.

"Let's say I had a problem with someone in the past. Now I come with a gun and kill him. Nobody's there to do anything about it. That's the situation we're in," explained Aya, a housewife.

While most celebrated the end of Saddam Hussein, many here fear that Iraq's second city has been reduced to a town of thieves and criminals, with British troops either unable or unwilling to stop it.

"Even if we hated Saddam, with him at least people weren't out breaking the law because they were afraid of what would happen to them," said Hossam, who keeps a constant watch on his small general store, which he has shut down

for fear of looters.

After a two-week siege, British troops entered the heart of Basra on Monday. But residents say the violence has not ceased; only instead of settling, the worries are burglary and the settling of old scores.

"We're getting patients who were hurt in the looting, stabbed by their neighbors, hit by bullets in squabbles between members of (Saddam's) Baath Party and their rivals," said Muayad Jumah Lefta, a doctor at the city's largest hospital.

"The British are responsible for this," he seethed.

He said even the hospital was targeted, with the doctors themselves fending off the thieves until a group of British soldiers arrived Wednesday and took up a position on the roof.

British forces say they are doing all they can in a very difficult situation. They note that soldiers are fanning out to strategic sites across the city and

express hope the unrest will be under control within days.

The Royal Marines' Seventh Armoured Brigade has arrested several looters who tried to head out of the town with trucks packed with food.

The British troops already have to deal with bitterness in some quarters over the coalition bombing of the city.

In one incident, 10 civilians were killed when a bomb fell on the home of doctor Akram Hassan, according to residents.

"They didn't have any links with the Baath Party and they weren't in the military," said a neighbor of Hassan.

On a nearby road, dozens of women and children gathered water from a crater formed by a shell that hit the water pipeline.

"Usually this is just for doing laundry or for making tea after boiling the water. But drinking water isn't coming, so we have to drink this," said Shukria, a divorced woman who has four children.

"Where are the soldiers when we need water?" she said. "They look at people heaping up everything they can and they just laugh. It's awful."

Faced with the chaos, religious authorities have stepped in, issuing pleas over the mosque loudspeakers for the faithful not to steal "anything that belongs to the Iraqi people." Residents say a few of the looters have repented and handed back what they stole.

Near the port, the Iraqi ship Al-Jansaa is still smouldering from bombing. But that didn't prevent looters from climbing on board.

"They don't even know what they want to take. They're stealing for the sake of stealing. It's madness," said a resident who saw the scene.

Shukria, collecting her water, scoffed at the coalition's rhetoric of liberation.

"The British have only brought freedom to the thieves, not to the people," she said.