

Battle for Baghdad looms

Convoy columns head for capital, two million in Basra face disaster; 200 civilians killed; another UK soldier dies; fierce fighting continues



STAR DESK

Massive columns of high-tech war machines are rolling across the desert towards Baghdad for a decisive showdown to capture the Iraqi capital of five million people.

The intention is clear -- skirt the towns where resistance is high and get the full force to the ultimate target: Saddam Hussein.

Jets rumbled above the Baghdad sky and heavy artillery pounded Iraqi forces positioned just outside capital. By tonight, US-British troops, now within 80 kilometres off the city, hope to establish control around Baghdad.

But a severe sandstorm has halted the advance and troops took cover under tanks and lorries.

Iraq remained defiant despite the looming threat and vowed to fight back. It said every town has six months' food and ammunition storage to withstand the onslaught.

US-British forces are still facing stiff resistance in Nassiriyah, Kirkuk and Karbala. But they are putting behind the hostile cities as soon as possible to head toward the capital.

In yesterday's firefight, another British soldier was killed in southern Iraq, taking to 20 the number of dead and missing British troops since the war started.

Baghdad air was filled with foreboding and people rushed out to meet their near and dear ones.

It was also a city of funeral.

Those who died in the last six days of attacks were laid to rest. Angry funeral processionists cursed Bush and Blair. Mothers wept and beat their chests in angst.

The mood was black.

Iraqis are now getting ready for urban guerrilla warfare inside the city, belying the US-British expectation of being greeted as "liberators".

Bars battle

In the second important city of Basra, Iraqi forces put up a fierce fight.

The joint forces are now avoiding the city and heading towards Baghdad although it has been

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STAR FILE PHOTO

Independence Day today

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The nation celebrates the 33rd Independence and National Day today, paying rich tributes to the three million martyrs and pledging afresh to build a happy and prosperous society for which they made the supreme sacrifice.

On this day in 1971, the unarmed Bangalees in the then East Pakistan burst into a flame to resist the Pakistani occupation

forces who unleashed the worst genocide in history to suppress them.

The peace loving people took up arms at Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman declared independence on March 26. Independence was earned on December 16 after a bloody nine-month war.

The government, political parties and different socio-

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Tanks and armoured vehicles of the American and British troops yesterday roll across the desert towards Baghdad for a final showdown to capture the Iraqi capital. Reports say the US-led troops are just 80 kilometres from Baghdad.

Mood changes as US finds war is not a video game

INTERNET, Undated

All of a sudden, brutal reality is kicking in. Before the Iraq invasion started, many Americans imagined the campaign in terms of Hollywood movies or the video-game abstraction of the television coverage of the first Gulf War -- that virtual reality in which we drop bombs and only the enemy dies, and off-camera at that.

But after the setbacks, guerrilla-style ambushes, downed helicopters and disturbing images of US soldiers dying or being taken prisoner over the past two days, the mood has changed abruptly.

"My God, this is getting much messier than I thought," was the reaction of one young Californian nursery school teacher Monday. Her colleagues all concurred.

Across Los Angeles, the mood was overwhelmingly one of consternation and just a little dread.

"I have a sick feeling about where this is all heading. They made us believe this would be a cakewalk, and now look what is happening," another woman, a writer married to an entertainment lawyer, said.

"This can only make the world hate us Americans more." In what is perhaps a sign of the times, she did not want to be identified by name.

It is hard to know exactly how representative such views are, especially

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Humanitarian disaster hangs over Basra

REUTERS, Geneva

Warnings intensified of a humanitarian crisis in Iraq yesterday as fighting in the south delayed entry of much needed aid and water grew short in the country's second city, Basra.

In New York, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan called for

urgent action to make sure there was enough water in Basra, a southern city of some two million people where temperatures grew

soar to 104 Fahrenheit.

And Russian President Vladimir Putin, whose country opposes the war, warned of a potential "catastrophe" in Iraq just as British Prime Minister Tony Blair admitted to parliament that Iraqi resistance in

Iraqi commits suicide attack, destroys tank

AFP, Baghdad

An Iraqi committed a suicide attack in the southern region of Fao overnight and destroyed a tank of the US-British alliance, an Iraqi military spokesman said yesterday.

"The first suicide attack was carried out this night," Hazem al-Rawi told a press conference in Baghdad.

The attack was carried out in the Fao peninsula which British forces say they have secured.

An Iraqi civilian "penetrated behind enemy lines and destroyed a tank", the spokesman said, without giving details.

There was no immediate confirmation of the report.



PHOTO: AFP

US marines yesterday check Iraqi civilians fleeing the southern town of Nasiriyah after fierce fighting there. Humanitarian crisis looms over Basra and thousands are reportedly moving near Iranian border.

Announcement

The offices of The Daily Star will remain closed today (Wednesday, 26 March, 2003) on account of the Independence and National Day.

However, in view of Iraq Crisis and readers' demand, The Daily Star will bring out a special 8-page issue tomorrow under special arrangements.

As a newspaper our first and foremost concern is our readers. Iraq is under attack and the US and British troops are closing in on Baghdad. Under these circumstances, we feel it is our moral and professional duty to keep our readers informed about the latest critical developments. Keeping the paper closed at this historic moment is tantamount to destroying our readers' confidence in our commitment to provide them our sincerest journalistic service.

The journalists' unions have requested that all newspaper staff be allowed to enjoy the day as a holiday. As a mark of respect to their wishes more than 90 per cent of our staff will enjoy the day as such, and we will publish our paper only with a skeleton staff.

-- Management

22,000 Iraqis move near Iran border: UNHCR

AFP, Geneva

More than 22,000 Iraqis have reportedly moved to an Iraqi town near the border with Iran, a spokesman for the UN high commissioner for refugees (UNHCR) said here on Tuesday.

Kris Janowski told reporters that, according to a report by the International Committee of the

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