



A British soldier of 131 Independent Commando Squadron, Royal Engineers, weathers the sandstorm 26 March 2003, in the northern Kuwaiti desert. Strong winds have blown virtually non-stop since Tuesday morning as British and US forces experienced their worst conditions to date. A massive electrical storm overnight doubled the problems with communications almost completely down at times. The conditions were worse than the huge sandstorm that hit the region exactly two weeks ago and showed little sign of abating this morning.

PHOTO: INTERNET

No knockout blow in week-old war

AFP, Washington

Failure to land a killer blow on Saddam Hussein and dread of heavy casualties in the looming Battle of Baghdad have dented America's hopes for a short, easy war with Iraq.

One week into the conflict, and despite a "shock and awe" bombing blitz of staggering force, the Iraqi regime still stands and US forces massing en route to Baghdad may face a heavy blood price to crush it.

But military chiefs in Washington are buoyant, as they plot a fateful clash with Saddam's Republican Guard, laying in wait for a vicious curtain of US armour.

They have only 20 US and 18 British deaths to show for a lightning invasion thrust deep into Iraq, almost to the gates of Baghdad, many of them in accidents of war.

War got off to a clumsy start, with fatal helicopter crashes, deaths in friendly fire and other attacks marring the initial assault.

Nonetheless, field reports put the Third Infantry Division less than 100 kilometers (60 miles) south of Baghdad, the US 101st Airborne moving up from the southwest and US Marines to the east.

"We've been at it now for less than a week, we're just about to Baghdad," said General Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

US forces act with total freedom in the skies, and a second front is opening, albeit slowly in northern Iraq.

But bypassing cities like Basra and Umm-Qasr have proved a sting in the tail, and British and US marines and infantry have battled Iraqi holdouts waging guerrilla warfare and a protracted struggle for the Euphrates river town of Nasiriyah provided an ominous

warning of the perils of urban warfare.

Early combat deaths and the sight of captured US personnel paraded on Iraqi television have provided a first test of US public opinion, and the resolve of an administration which has wagered its credibility on war.

Tears of the bereaved and the sight of yellow ribbons around trees in support of prisoners of war in an echo of the Vietnam era are easy fodder for ravenous 24 hour news coverage.

The war is unfolding in real time in every living room, in snapshot reports from breathless correspondents embedded on the front line.

From now on, the war looks set to be fought on Saddam's terms, as his best troops put up a ring of steel around Baghdad, and his spiritual home Tikrit.

"We're still, needless to say, much closer to the beginning than the end," Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld warned Tuesday, with questions that will define the conflict still to be answered:

- Might Iraq use chemical weapons?

- Will its troops lure US forces into bloody street fights in civilian areas?

- How will Saddam Hussein's most prized forces react to fierce US pressure?

- When will US forces discover the weapons of mass destruction which triggered war?

- Can the United States "liberate" Iraqis without causing mass civilian casualties?

Even so, some eve of invasion fears proved groundless.

Iraq's major oil fields, so crucial to its economic future, have been secured intact, with only a few wells set on fire and no "scorched earth" policy under way.

Egypt, KSA talk ways to end war

AFP, Cairo

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz held telephone talks on Tuesday on ways of ending the US-led war on Iraq, the official MENA news agency reported.

They "agreed to cooperate in order to activate the resolution" adopted by a meeting of Arab foreign ministers here Monday, "so that the unity of Iraq and the lives of its children can be preserved," MENA said.

The resolution adopted by the Arab ministers condemned the US-led invasion of Iraq and demanded

an "immediate and unconditional withdrawal" of British and US troops. Washington rejected the statement Tuesday.

The discussion between Mubarak and the de facto ruler of the Saudi kingdom came after talks here earlier in the day between the Egyptian president and Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal.

Prince Saud said after returning to Riyadh that Saudi Arabia had presented a plan to the United States and Iraq to end the war, without giving further details.

But unusually both countries denied receiving any Saudi peace

plan.

The UN Security Council is to meet Wednesday in an urgent public session to discuss the war in Iraq, at the request of the Arab League.

Both Saudi Arabia and Egypt came under immense US pressure to focus Monday's Arab League meeting on post-war reconstruction of Iraq, rather than the US-led invasion.

The Arab world has been bitterly split over the war, with the Gulf hosts of coalition troops facing strong opposition both from radical states and domestic public opinion.

West guilty of double standard: Jack Straw

BBC NEWS ONLINE

UK Foreign Secretary Jack Straw has said it is hypocritical for the West to demand Iraqi compliance with UN Security Council resolutions while appearing to hesitate over resolutions concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

He told the BBC that he himself had been guilty of double standards "to a degree" but he promised that a new international peace plan, the so-called "roadmap", was close to realisation.

It only depended on a new Palestinian cabinet being sworn in and the Palestinian parliament giving its approval, he said.

Straw said he understood concern in the Arab world about what he called "injustice against the Palestinians".

There is a real concern too that the West has been guilty of double standards," Straw said, "on the one hand saying the United Nations Security Council resolutions on Iraq must be implemented, on the other hand, sometimes appearing rather quixotic over the implemen-

tation of resolutions about Israel and Palestine."

On continuing Iraqi resistance, Straw said that at least some of the hostility encountered by coalition troops was inspired by this perception of double standards, though he added it was also rooted in fear of retaliation by the regime of Saddam Hussein.

"It's our responsibility, yes, to deal with Iraq but also, yes, to deal with the Israel-Palestine crisis," said Straw.

The new Palestinian Prime Minister, Mahmoud Abbas, must form a government within weeks.

Shortly before his appointment, US President George W. Bush said the roadmap for peace would be published once a Palestinian premier with real powers took office.

The roadmap, created jointly by a quartet of the United States, Russia, the United Nations and the European Union, envisions the launch of a Palestinian state by 2005.

Cheney's firm wins oil firefighting contract

AFP, Washington

The US army said Tuesday it gave the main Iraqi oilwell firefighting contract to a unit of Halliburton Co., a firm once run by Vice President Dick Cheney, without any bidding.

Kellogg, Brown and Root, a unit of Houston, Texas-based Halliburton, was handed the contract by the Army Corps of Engineers, which has been placed in charge of fighting the blazes.

The contract had not been put out to tender, said the Corps spokesman, Lieutenant Colonel Gene Pawlik.

Kellogg, Brown and Root (KBR) had already been asked by the Pentagon to draw up plans for extinguishing oil well fires in Iraq, Pawlik noted.

"It made the most sense to engage them in the near term as the company to get the mission done because they were familiar with the details of the fires themselves and what would be needed," he said.

The value of the contract would depend on the scale of the work.

The chief of Britain's armed forces, Admiral Sir Michael Boyce,

said Friday that Iraqi forces had set fire to seven oil wells in the south of the country.

KBR would claim the cost of its services plus two to five percent depending on how it executed the job, Pawlik said.

Shares in KBR parent Halliburton rose 54 cents or 2.68 percent to 20.66 dollars.

"KBR was selected for this award based on the fact that KBR is the only contractor that could commence implementing the complex contingency plan on extremely short notice," the company said in a statement.

KBR said it had teams of well control and engineering contractors preparing the initial phase.

The company was given a free hand to choose subcontractors for the work, the Corps spokesman said.

KBR chose Houston-based Boots and Coots International, with which it has a services and equipment partnership, and Wild Well Control Inc. as firefighting subcontractors.

President George W. Bush's spokesman, Ari Fleischer, said he did not have the details.

Blair flies to US to discuss war with Bush

REUTERS, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair flies to Washington on Wednesday for a war council with President Bush, eager to convince his ally that the United Nations must play a central role in post-war Iraq.

Washington said on Tuesday it was trying to determine what kind of role should be played by the UN, which is deeply divided over the war to topple Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

But Blair said he was confident the Security Council would come together to pass a second resolution on aid, reconstruction and a future administration for Iraq.

"It is common ground between us that the United Nations has got to be involved in post-conflict Iraq," Blair told a London news conference on the eve of his departure.

"I can assure you that it is our desire to ensure that the UN are centrally involved."

Blair will meet UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in New York after his Camp David talks with Bush.

But the Council is still haggling over restarting the UN oil-for-food program for Iraq, with the politics of war stalling agreement on a resolution.

Diplomats said Russia, France, China and Syria -- staunch opponents of the war -- were wary of a resolution that would have the United Nations coordinate efforts with US and British troops and thereby legitimize the military

action.

In Washington, Secretary of State Colin Powell said US officials were trying to determine "what kind of role should be played by the UN, what authorities are needed, how to do it in a way that will make sure that the gains of the coalition military action are harvested."

British Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon highlighted what a sensitive issue post-Iraq reconstruction has become, telling BBC Radio on Wednesday: "I am confident the United Nations will be involved. There may be a discussion about how precisely that will be orga-

nized."

But he insisted there was no fundamental difference of opinion between Washington and London. "The issue is how we best engage the United Nations and other international non-governmental organizations, as well as other countries currently not directly involved in the conflict." "But the key to this is finding the best way for the Iraqi people to govern themselves. After all, that is the purpose ultimately of this conflict."



PHOTO: AFP

Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair speaking at No.10 Downing Street in central London.

Tents all up but where are the Iraqi refugees?

THE STAR, ANN, Amman

The tents are all up ready for an expected flood of refugees crossing the borders to flee from the bombings.

Five days have passed since war began and one question begs an answer: "Where are the Iraqis?"

There are still no signs of them and some now believe they might not be coming at all.

"In the past few days, along these roads, I have seen only one-way traffic and all are heading towards Iraq."

"The Iraqis are all going home to fight. I don't believe there will be Iraqi refugees coming here at all," said a medical relief worker after returning from the Ruweisah camp in the Jordanian border town.

He said the Iraqis were tough people and could live on very little water and food.

Those crossing over into Jordan have only comprised Sudan, Somalia, Yemen and Egypt nationals working in Iraq.

Mercy Malaysia international relief manager Anita Ahmad said some relief organisations were now discussing the possibility that there would not be Iraqi refugees coming into Jordan.

"There is some talk of that now," she said.

During the 1991 Gulf War, two million people fled Iraq and almost half came through the Jordanian borders.

International aid and relief organisations, expecting a similar exodus, have set up camps at border

countries to provide medical and humanitarian help.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees emergency supervisor Douglas Oldman attributed the absence to "the inability of Iraqis to reach the border."

Questions have also been raised as to whether the Iraqis may have been prevented from getting to the border.

A UN officer said they did not expect a flood of refugees at this early stage.

"They just got their food rations not too long ago and so they do not want to leave that and their property behind," said Peter Kessler.

Report filed by The Star's team at the front: P.K. Katharason, Shahanaaz Habib and Brian Martin

