



IRAQ INVASION

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Yemeni volunteer fighters and candidates for suicide attacks against US-led coalition forces gather at Palestine hotel in Baghdad. Some 40 Yemeni volunteers who came to Iraq to fight along with Iraqi forces were shown to the press by the Iraqi authorities.

The inoffensive offensive?

BRENDAN O'NEIL, Internet

US commanders say the war in Iraq is "historic," because never before has a military bombardment been so fierce yet so precise. But could the war be historic in another sense - by being the first politically correct invasion?

Behind the "shock and awe" bombing of Baghdad and the bloody clashes in the south, some in the American and British camps seem keen to ensure that the Iraqi offensive doesn't cause offence. They talk of their deep respect for the Iraqi people and encourage troops to honour Iraq's "cultural heritage."

In his address to the nation, President Bush said American forces were entering Iraq with "respect for its citizens, for their great civilisation, and for the religious faiths they practice." British Lt. Col. Tim Collins told his troops on the Kuwaiti border: "Iraq is steeped in history. It is the site of the Garden of Eden ... and the birthplace of Abraham. Tread lightly there..." Tread lightly? In army boots? While invading a nation and fighting a regime?

Commanders of Operation Iraqi Freedom have warned troops against flying American or British flags in Iraq.

"We will not fly our flags in this country," said Colonel Collins. "The only flag which will be shown in that ancient land is [the Iraqis'] own."

US Marines, after a heavy battle, removed an Iraqi flag from a port in Umm Qasr and replaced it with the Stars and Stripes - but were later told to take the American flag down, because it gave the wrong impression.

One US military official who'd heard about the American flag over Umm Qasr told The Times (London): "I thought, wait a minute, that's not what this is about." The Times reports that "American forces have been told not to fly the Stars and Stripes for fear of wrecking President Bush's carefully crafted message that America is fighting the Iraq war to liberate, not conquer." Troops have allegedly been told to avoid not only flag-waving antics, but also other such "displays of triumphalism."

And in keeping with the PC war, the US Navy apparently kept a close eye on the messages written on bombs before they are launched. During the Afghan campaign, sailors on the USS Enterprise wrote a homophobic message on a bomb destined for Afghanistan, leading to complaints from gay rights groups. Rear Adm. Stephen Pietropaoli warned

his men to more closely edit such "spontaneous acts of penmanship," and suggested that the Navy should "keep the messages positive."

But already, someone in the US Air Force has caused offense by writing a vulgar slur about the French on a bomb (aimed at Iraq, that is, not France). Senior American officers said the anti-French message "crossed the line" of acceptability, and promised to keep a check on soldiers' bomb scrawls.

No American flags, no American triumphalism, no offensive Americanisms on bombs - for all the global antiwar movement's claims that this war is America's attempt to "remake the world in its own image," it seems that some in the US camp want the war to look as non-American as possible.

Of course, there is a profound contradiction in these attempts to make the Iraqi offensive inoffensive. How can allied troops "tread lightly" when their task is to fight and kill? What is the point of having "positive messages" on bombs that are destined to destroy? And if Bush and his commanders respect Iraqi civilisation and culture, why launch an invasion that, by its nature, threatens such institutions?

Devastation en route to Baghdad

NEW YORK TIMES, near Hilla, central Iraq

It was possible to drive 30 miles north from Najaf toward Baghdad and not see a single living person other than American soldiers.

The roads were littered with the hulks of pickup trucks and taxi cabs that had been fired on by American forces. As for the occupants of several of those cars singled out as members of paramilitary forces loyal to President Saddam Hussein their bodies were sprawled on the ground nearby.

So it was that a swath of the Iraqi countryside along the Euphrates River, about 60 miles from Baghdad, was all but devoid of ordinary life on this beautiful spring day, as American troops from the 101st Airborne Division hunted down Iraqi soldiers and guerrillas in a relentless show of force. The battle for Najaf, 85 miles south of Baghdad, is not yet over, even as American forces have advanced northward.

Najaf has much value in the American campaign. It sits along a major supply route needed for invading American and British troops headed to Baghdad, and some American officers feel that its capture would send a message to other Shiite cities that Mr. Hussein's government is doomed.

Outside Najaf, soldiers from the 101st Airborne seized an airfield and a power plant. American military officials hope within the next several days to be able to turn over control of Najaf to leaders of the Shiite community, the major ethnic group.

Shiites had been widely expected to rise up against Mr. Hussein, a Sunni Muslim who has frequently oppressed them, once the American invasion gained momentum.

But a combination of fear and uncertainty among the Shiite community, who suffered heavily in 1991 when they rebelled against Mr. Hussein and the United States left them to their fate, appears to have led them to a more cautious approach.

So, with each day of the war, the Americans have used more and more military power to carry out their missions, often inside Shiite-dominated towns, making for some grim realities in a part of the country where there had been little expectation of strong resistance.

Outside Najaf, major roads were closed off as the military enforced a blockade in response to a suicide car bombing on Saturday that killed four American soldiers. Entire towns were shuttered.

It was near Najaf, the American

Central Command said, that seven women and children were killed by American soldiers.

The 101st Division's artillery strikes today gave the air an odd feel, almost like the skin of a drum, as hundreds of rounds pounded off the clear, cloudless sky.

"I've got 30 cannons, and I'm shooting them all," said Lt. Col. Bill Bennett, commander of the 101st Division's artillery unit. "I never shot so much in my life. I need some more bullets."

The Americans swapped artillery rounds with the Iraqis, who were able to place some of their shells close enough to drive back a line of American vehicles on the road. Later, the American side supplemented the ground attacks with raids by Apache assault helicopters and Air Force jets.

A group of five Iraqis came out with their hands up; another man was killed while hiding in a bunker.

The prisoners were led to the side of the road, hands cuffed behind their backs, and their heads were covered with sacks, a tactic military officials say is meant to keep both the prisoners and their captors safe by making it hard for observers to identify soldiers in custody, and to keep the prisoners from knowing where they are being taken.

Fighting in deserts for passports!

AFP, Washington

Thousands of mostly Latin American soldiers fighting for the United States in Iraq will get more than just their pay: they will earn fast-track US citizenship, key to their "American dream."

Many of the nearly 15,000 military personnel of Latin American origin deployed in the Gulf area are US residents but not US citizens.

But thanks to a decree President George W. Bush signed in July, thousands of armed forces members on active-duty after September 11, 2001, as well as those who retired then or since then with honors, can apply for US citizenship immediately, Daniel Kane, spokesman for the Immigration and Naturalization Service, told AFP.

Normally, a non-US citizen who obtains residency must wait five years before beginning the paperwork for US citizenship. And in the armed forces that wait had been cut to three years.

But since Bush signed his order, a soldier with US residency can request US citizenship starting his first day on active duty, instead of waiting three years, Kane explained.

According to Pentagon data, 31,044 resident non-citizens were on active duty in the armed forces in April. Just over two percent of the total, most of them Latin American-born servicemen, are in the Marines and Navy.

Between July 2002 and February 2003, 5,441 foreign-born members of

the US military took up Bush on the offer granting fast-track US naturalization. Once US citizens, they can request residency, and later citizenship, for family members.

The INS did not offer a precise number of how many of those were from Latin American nations.

But the regional presence among US armed forces, just as in the rest of the US work force, is clear. Of the first US soldiers who died in combat, one was Guatemalan and two Mexican, and one is Panamanian and the other a son of Mexican immigrants.

US armed forces allow foreigners into their ranks only when they hold US residency, which allows them to work legally in the United States.

When the war on Iraq began, the US embassy in Mexico received hundreds of calls from Mexicans who said they were willing to fight in Iraq in exchange for citizenship, and diplomats had to clear up the misunderstanding, stressing US residency was a prior requirement.

"It is absolutely false that the US Army and Navy are recruiting Mexican undocumented workers offering them US citizenship," the Mexican embassy here said in a statement March 10.

Many US military jobs, including work in such areas as electronics, intelligence, special forces and on war planes, require US citizenship.

Small bombs resemble food packets!

REUTERS, United Nations

The UN children's fund UNICEF expressed concern on Wednesday that Iraqi children might mistake yellow food packets being handed out by US-led forces with small bombs with identical coloring.

"Confusing unexploded ordnance with food places children at huge risk of injury or death," UNICEF said, calling on the military to urgently change the color of the food packets.

A UNICEF statement said food packets known as "humanitarian daily rations" that were being handed out by the US and British forces in Iraq were wrapped in bright yellow plastic.

The color of the wrapping was identical to that of an air-dropped bomblet that UNICEF identified as a BLU 97.

A similar problem had arisen during the war in Afghanistan, where the US

military eventually changed the wrapping on food packets to blue, the UN agency said.

In Afghanistan, both the food packets and the bomblets were dropped from US aircraft, while in Iraq only the bomblets were being air-dropped. But children can still confuse the ration and unexploded ordnance, because of their identical coloring, UNICEF said.

The BLU 97 - a canister containing 202 bomblets, each the size of a soda can - has been used by US forces in Iraq against heavily populated civilian areas, according to human rights group Amnesty International.

The bomblets scatter over a large area about the size of two football fields, and at least 5 percent of them fail to explode on impact, Amnesty International said.

The US military had no immediate comment.



TV crew dies in landmine explosion

BBC NEWS ONLINE

A cameraman working for the BBC in northern Iraq has been killed after stepping on a landmine.

Producer Stuart Hughes, who was working with Kaveh Golestan, was also injured in the explosion, but correspondent Jim Muir and a local translator escaped unhurt.

The incident happened when the four men were driving near the town of Kifri.

Mr Golestan got out of the car and stepped on to the landmine. He was killed instantly, a BBC statement said.

Mr Hughes, who is from Cardiff, suffered injuries to his foot and is being treated at a US medical unit near Sulaymaniyah.

Mr Golestan was a Pulitzer-prize winning freelance cameraman who worked for the BBC's Tehran bureau. "The incident highlights the dangers our news crews face all the time in Iraq. Be assured that their safety is always our first priority and that we are doing all we can to ensure their wellbeing."

Mr Golestan is the latest of several journalists to die reporting the war, now in its 14th day.

ITN correspondent Terry Lloyd was killed when the vehicle he was in was hit in what is thought to have been a 'friendly fire' incident on 22 March. Two of his colleagues are missing.

On Sunday, veteran Channel 4 reporter Gaby Rado was found dead in the car park of a hotel in Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq. It is thought he had fallen off the top of the hotel.

And an Australian cameraman, Paul Moran, was killed in a car bomb in the northern Iraqi town of Khurmala on 22 March.

Demand for news pushes web traffic to record levels

INTERNET

Traffic to news websites has continued to rise amid signs that users hungry for war reports and analysis are rejecting TV in favour of the internet.

According to web monitoring company Hitwise, traffic to news sites has risen by 6% in the past two weeks following the huge surge that greeted the outbreak of hostilities.

While audiences for 24-hour TV news services have dipped as the war progresses, user figures on the internet have continued to increase.

Guardian Unlimited continues to be the most visited newspaper website in Britain, with a 7% market share last week, followed by FT.com, the Sun's site, Times Online and the Telegraph's site.

The BBC and CNN have also reported a dramatic rise in the number of users visiting their international sites over the past three weeks as overseas users log on.

Unofficial figures show there were 150 million visitors to the BBC's 43 World Service sites during the final two weeks of March - more than double the corresponding period in the previous month.

"The increased traffic to our online services is a reflection of the current appetite for information and a heightened interest in international affairs worldwide," said Nigel Chapman, the deputy director of BBC World Service.

The BBC World Service's new inter-

national site, BBCNews.com, received more than 130 million page impressions in March, compared with 72 million in February. Figures for its Arabic site shot up 150% to more than 15 million page impressions.

CNN said there had been huge growth on its international websites with the highest ever traffic on CNNArabic.com and its international site.

The main CNN.com site has also achieved record usage figures. Some 78 million users logged on over the weekend of March 22 and 23.

Despite being forced offline by hackers for much of the Iraq conflict, the website of Arab news channel al-Jazeera has also boosted its popularity dramatically since war broke out.

According to Hitwise, the site has shot up 63 places in the news service rankings.

Web portal Lycos said "al-Jazeera" became its most searched-for term last week, generating three times as many search requests as "sex".

Al-Jazeera drew intense interest from web users in the west after it broadcast pictures of dead and captive US soldiers in Iraq. American television networks had decided not to air footage of the corpses.

Google, the internet's leading search engine, said the term "al-Jazeera" showed the greatest increase in the week ending March 31, although the company does not report absolute rankings of search terms.



A Russian police officer passes in front of a poster on a street in Moscow accusing US President George W. Bush of murder. The Russian foreign ministry said earlier Wednesday that it had delivered a formal protest to the US ambassador to Russia, Alexander Vershbow, after US bombs fell near the Russian embassy in Baghdad, endangering its diplomats there. (poster reads: Wanted for murder).