

GI SPECIAL 6C21:

**THIS STUPID, WORTHLESS PIECE OF SHIT
LIT THE FUSE**



The traitor Cheney during his meeting with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in Baghdad, March 17, 2008. (AP Photo/Ceerwan Aziz, Pool)

**“The Security
Challenges Posed By
The Basra Militias “Have
To Be Addressed By
Iraq,’ He Added”**

World-Class Disaster In Iraq Brought On By A Murderous Idiot Traitor:

**Guess Who Pushed The
Collaborator Government To Go
To War With The Mahdi Army?**

**Guess Who Pushed General Betrayus
To Push The Collaborator
Government To Go To War With The
Mahdi Army;**

**Outcome: “The Recent Violence Now
Threatens To Upend Negotiations”
About Grabbing Iraq’s Oil Wealth**

In his visit last week to the Middle East, Vice President Dick Cheney held one-on-one meetings with Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish leaders in Iraq to speed passage of a law opening Iraq’s enormous petroleum reserves to more efficient production by global oil companies.

Last week, before the Maliki government began its offensive, U.S. Gen. David Petraeus said Mr. Maliki “is very keen on getting large Western corporations reengaged in the oil and electricity sectors.”

The security challenges posed by the Basra militias “have to be addressed by Iraq,” he added.

Mar 28, 2008 By Hassan Hafidh in Amman, Jordan, and John D. McKinnon in Washington, THE WALL STREET JOURNAL [Excerpts]

The battle for Basra marks the latest clash over the region’s biggest source of wealth: its oil reserves, comprising 9.5% of the world’s total, according to the BPBP Statistical Review, an industry bible.

Across the country, Shiite and Sunni militias routinely siphon away oil and petroleum products to sell on Iraq's black-market or smuggle overseas. The stolen oil reduces government revenue, but it also gives insurgent and militia groups a ready source of income -- officials peg the estimate at about \$5 billion a year -- helping to perpetuate Iraq's violence. U.S. and Iraqi officials have said the smuggling problem is only getting worse.

The violence and smuggling frustrate major Western oil companies such as Exxon Mobil Corp., BP PLC and Royal Dutch Shell Group

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The security challenges posed by the Basra militias "have to be addressed by Iraq," he added.

That "is something that the government of Iraq very much wants to see happen to increase production further and increase electricity production as well."

Recently, Iraqi oil officials have said they were close to awarding as early as next month a handful of limited, technical contracts to big Western oil companies. The contracts in discussion are designed to increase production at five of the country's prized oil fields by a total of some 500,000 barrels a day.

The recent violence now threatens to upend those negotiations.

The contracts are relatively small for companies the size of Exxon and Shell, and they don't allow for rights to reserves or control over development. Still, executives see them as a critical first step to establishing longer-term relationships in Baghdad in a time when new reserves are increasingly hard to find globally. They see more attractive opportunities once security improves and after Iraqi politicians agree on a legal framework for foreign investment in the petroleum sector.

Hopes had been raised amid recent improvement across the country. A temporary increase in American troops, a cease-fire by a key anti-U.S. militia leader and success co-opting one-time Sunni insurgents have all been credited with curbing violence.

That hope is now fading.

An Iraqi official with the South Oil Company, the state-run production company based in Basra, said Thursday that oil production and exports have slowed because of power cuts and the inability of workers to get to their work sites, all blamed on the fighting.

The official also said a major oil pipeline taking crude from Iraq's southern fields to its two export terminals in the Persian Gulf had been bombed amid the fighting, threatening to reduce exports "heavily."

Western executives have said they won't send employees into Iraq until security improves markedly.

"You'll see some limited initiatives to get a foothold in the country," said David Kirsch of PFC Energy, a Washington-based consulting firm.

"What you are not going to see though, we estimate, in the next 10 years are the conditions that allow you to do the really significant type of investments that could let Iraq hit its geologic potential of six million barrels per day."

Mr. Kirsch estimated the latest round of fighting has knocked down production by about 800,000 barrels a day.

Shell said it is interested in helping with the development of the Kirkuk oil field in the north, discovered in 1927. BP said it is discussing the development of North and South Rumaila, Iraq's two big fields in the south. Iraqi officials said Exxon is eyeing the development of Zubair oil field in the south.

An Exxon spokesman said it "would be interested in participating" with the Iraqi government in developing resources, but added, "it would be premature to discuss any potential opportunity with Iraq."

Chevron Corp. and France's Total SA are negotiating over the West Qurna 1 oil field, according to Iraqi officials. A Chevron spokesman declined to comment on the negotiations, but said the company was "broadly supportive of a technical assistance program." Total declined to comment.

Echoing lingering concerns expressed by other oil executives over safety amid the violence, the Chevron spokesman said the company won't enter Iraq until there is "a security situation that will allow us to put people on the ground, and at this point we're still waiting for progress on that front."

MORE:

"The Omens Of Bad Things To Come Were Strengthened After US Vice President Dick Cheney's Visit To Baghdad Last Week"

March 25, 2008 Sami Ramadani, Guardian.co.uk [Excerpts]

Thousands of people are joining the protest marches and “sit-ins” in Baghdad as I write these lines. They are mainly responding to a call by leading anti-occupation cleric Moqtada al-Sadr in the wake of fierce clashes between the Sadr movement supporters and many thousands of occupation-backed Iraqi forces who began a major military campaign in Basra last night.

An urgent message this morning from an Iraqi trade union activist in Basra referred to resistance to the government forces in several Basra neighbourhoods and “savage” attacks against the resisters.

The message stressed that “security plan began in the same barbaric manner that the criminal Saddam had used”. This is a reference to the March 1991 uprising that began in Basra and which was brutally crushed by Saddam’s forces.

The demonstrators, in several areas of Baghdad as well many southern cities, held placards and chanted slogans against the military campaign in Basra, Iraq’s second biggest city.

Their most prominent slogan is “Kella, kella lil ditatoriya al-jedida”: No, no, to the new dictatorship.

Other slogans include: “No to the US”, “No to the occupation”, “Yes to Iraq”.

Sadr movement spokesmen made many announcements today pointing to a massive campaign of arrests against Sadr supporters across Iraq.

There is no doubt that the Sadr movement has not lost its popular appeal amongst the poorest sections of the people, who also happen to be the staunchest opponents of the occupation, just as they were amongst the Saddam regime’s most vehement opponents.

Their rebellions against perceived injustice are the signposts of Iraq’s major 20th century upheavals.

However, the attack does not come as a surprise to people in Basra, where tension has been rising for the past two weeks amidst rumours that Iraq’s main port of Um Qasr was about to be taken over by the Iraqi forces who would wrest control over the port, Iraq’s only outlet to the sea, from the port workers’ union, which is part of a coordinating committee of the province’s unions, led by the Iraqi federation of oil unions (Ifou).

The omens of bad things to come were strengthened after US vice president Dick Cheney’s visit to Baghdad last week.

Iraqis dread the outcome of visits by senior occupation figures to Baghdad, particularly visits by Cheney or former ambassador Negroponte, who is seen by many Iraqis as “the main architect of divide and rule policies and terrorist attacks on Shia, Sunni or Christian targets”.

They point to major sectarian attacks, including the blowing up of the Samarra Shia shrine, during or days after each such visit.

Following the bombing of the shrine, Moqtada al-Sadr himself accused the occupation of being behind the attacks - a position echoed by some Sunni clergy and secular forces. He later accused the US of sabotaging his attempts to unite with Sunnis.

There has been a recent escalation of a persistent campaign by the occupation and government forces against Sadr movement cadres and Mahdi Army recruits for the past year despite a ceasefire declared by Sadr last year and extended this year for a further six months.

Sadr's statement to his supporters this morning has a severe tone and accuses the government of serving the occupation and implementing its wishes. He called on people to stage sit-ins as a first step followed by "civil disobedience," and if the government did not respond by halting its military campaigns against the Sadr movement then he would announce a third step, adding a clear warning, "li kulli hadithin hadith" - meaning that for every event there will be an appropriate response.

It remains to be seen whether support for Sadr's call for protest action will spread to areas outside those where the Sadr movement is traditionally strong.

Some of Sadr's previous tactics have been strongly criticised for being an obstacle to greater anti-occupation unity.

These tactics included on-off participation in the government and the Sadrists' presence in parliament (within the sect-based coalition list that won most of the seats in the January 2006 occupation-controlled elections).

Though his supporters have withdrawn from the government and the sectarian coalition, their tactics have partly contributed to the sectarian climate which they constantly criticise and regard as the main obstacle to unity, a unity that reached its heights during occupation attacks on Najaf and the first attack of Falluja when Sadr's pictures were held high by Sunnis in Falluja.

Meanwhile, there is clearly widespread support for his call and opposition to the government's actions in Basra amongst all well known anti-occupation figures, who have also accused the US-led occupation of backing the Iraqi forces in Basra and Baghdad by "using their air force against the people", according to Sheikh Jawad al-Khalisy, leader of the broadly-based Iraqi Foundation Congress, in an interview this afternoon with al-Baghdadia satellite TV.

Brain-Dead Suicide Generals In Command Of U.S. Forces In Iraq Order U.S. Troops To Die

Attacking The 60,000 Strong Mehdi Army:

**“Iraqi Army And Police Units
Appeared To Be Largely Holding
To The Outskirts Of The Area As
American Troops Took The Lead
In The Fighting”**

**“‘If There Were No Americans, There
Would Be No Fighting,’ Said Abu
Mustafa Al-Thahabi, 38, A Senior
Mahdi Army Member”**
**[Kiss The Cease-Fire, The Surge
“Success,” And Countless U.S. Soldiers’
Lives Goodbye]**

As President Bush told an Ohio audience that Iraq was returning to “normalcy,” administration officials in Washington held meetings to assess what appeared to be a rapidly deteriorating security situation in many parts of the country.

Mar 28 (Reuters) & By Sudarsan Raghavan and Sholnn Freeman, Washington Post Foreign Service & By Peter Graff (Reuters) & March 29 AP & Reuters & By Leila Fadel, McClatchy Newspapers

U.S. forces were drawn deeper into Iraq’s four-day-old crackdown on Shi’ite militants on Friday, launching air strikes in Basra for the first time and battling militants in Baghdad in heavy clashes.

U.S. forces in armored vehicles battled Mahdi Army fighters Thursday in Sadr City, the vast Shiite stronghold in eastern Baghdad, as an offensive to quell party-backed militias entered its third day. Iraqi army and police units appeared to be largely holding to the outskirts of the area as American troops took the lead in the fighting.

U.S. helicopters repeatedly fired into Baghdad's Sadr City slum and other areas where fighters are holed up.

"There have been engagements going on in and around Sadr City. We've engaged the enemy with artillery, we've engaged the enemy with aircraft, we've engaged the enemy with direct fire," said Major Mark Cheadle, a spokesman for U.S. forces in Baghdad.

The clashes suggested that American forces were being drawn more deeply into a broad offensive that Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, a Shiite, launched in the southern city of Basra on Tuesday.

Four U.S. Stryker armored vehicles were seen in Sadr City by a Washington Post correspondent, one of them engaging Mahdi Army militiamen with heavy fire. The din of American weapons, along with the Mahdi Army's AK-47s and rocket-propelled grenades, was heard through much of the day. U.S. helicopters and drones buzzed overhead.

Several Mahdi Army commanders said they had been fighting U.S. forces for the past three days in Sadr City, engaging Humvees as well as the Strykers.

"If there were no Americans, there would be no fighting," said Abu Mustafa al-Thahabi, 38, a senior Mahdi Army member.

American commanders said in recent days that their units were taking only a backup role in the offensive and that Iraqi forces were growing strong enough to shoulder the country's security needs.

Maj. Mark Cheadle, a U.S. military spokesman in Baghdad, said he could not make an accurate assessment of what the Post reporter saw without knowing the precise location.

He underlined that U.S. troops were playing a backup role in the offensive but that on a battlefield that is "360 degrees," it might seem at times that they were out front.

"If an Iraqi unit was about to be overwhelmed by an enemy, "of course we are going to assist."

Police said another U.S. air strike in Kadhimiya, a Sadr stronghold in northern Baghdad, killed five people, and air strikes in Sadr City later in the afternoon killed 12.

A British military spokesman said U.S. warplanes opened fire in Basra for the first time Friday, dropping bombs under guidance of U.S. or British controllers operating with Iraqis on the ground.

The U.S. military intensified its air strikes in Basra, targeting a truck carrying Mahdi Army fighters and a private home, killing eight and injuring seven, including two passing civilians, in the Mahdi Army stronghold of al Hayaniyah.

Later, U.S. aircraft struck twice more, in one case destroying a Shiite mosque with a U.S. missile. The U.S. military confirmed that 17 people were killed and 22 were

injured in air strikes in the city with AC130 gunships and other fixed winged aircraft.

U.S. jets dropped two precision-guided bombs at midday Saturday on a suspected militia stronghold at Qarmat Ali north of the city, British military spokesman Maj. Tom Holloway said.

Iraqi police said that earlier in the day a U.S. warplane strafed a house and killed eight civilians, including two women and one child.

A British military spokesman confirmed there were more U.S. air strikes in Basra on Saturday. At one house, a Reuters photographer filmed wrecked walls and blood pouring into a sewer after grieving relatives said a bomb had killed seven people.

In one strike before dawn, a U.S. helicopter fired a hellfire missile at insurgents firing from the roof of a building, killing four of them, Cheadle said. A Reuters photographer there filmed windows blown out of cars and walls pocked with shrapnel.

The U.S. military raised its profile in Basra still further, providing protection for installations including the palace where Maliki is housed, Iraqi Interior Ministry officials said.

Later in the day cars were engulfed in flames after an apparent air strike on a Sadr City parking lot.

An adviser to Iraqi security forces said “I think the government can’t win this battle without interference of Americans or British,” he said.

“I think the aid or assistance is on the way.”

As President Bush told an Ohio audience that Iraq was returning to “normalcy,” administration officials in Washington held meetings to assess what appeared to be a rapidly deteriorating security situation in many parts of the country.

“The key question now is what the United States is going to do,” said Joost Hiltermann of the International Crisis Group think tank.

“If it allows (the crackdown) to go forward the ceasefire will unravel and the U.S. will face the Sadr movement in its full power.”

MORE:

How Do You Know Your War Is Lost?

“Iraqi State Television Began Describing The Dead As ‘Martyrs’”

Mar 29 By Leila Fadel, McClatchy Newspapers

There were more U.S. air strikes in the Sadrist stronghold of Sadr City, and local officials said U.S. forces joined Iraqi security forces in clashes against Sadrists lasting hours south of Hilla, which lies south of Baghdad.

U.S. aircraft also fired munitions in Sadr City, New Baghdad and Shoala, the U.S. military said.

In Shoala, in the north of the capital, an air strike killed five.

Iraqi state television began describing the dead as “martyrs.”

Sunday In Iraq: Madhi Army Holding Ground Won In Basra and Baghdad: They “Openly Control Wide Swaths Of The City And Stage Increasingly Bold Raids On Iraqi Government Forces”



Mahdi Army fighters in Basra Saturday. Essam Al-Sudani/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

March 30, 2008 By JAMES GLANZ and MICHAEL KAMBER, New York Times
[Excerpts]

BAGHDAD — Shiite militiamen in Basra openly controlled wide swaths of the city on Saturday and staged increasingly bold raids on Iraqi government forces sent five days ago to wrest control from the gunmen, witnesses said, as Iraqi political leaders grew increasingly critical of the stalled assault.

Witnesses in Basra said members of the most powerful militia in the city, the Mahdi Army, were setting up checkpoints and controlling traffic in many places ringing the central district controlled by some of the 30,000 Iraqi Army and police forces involved in the assault.

Fighters were regularly attacking the government forces, then quickly retreating.

Senior members of several political parties said the operation, ordered by Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki, had been poorly planned.

“We don’t have to rush to military solutions,” said Nadeem al-Jabiri, a Parliament member from the Fadhila Party, a strong rival of Mr. Sadr’s party that would have been expected to back the operation, at least on political grounds. Instead of solving the problems in Basra, Mr. Jabiri said, Mr. Maliki “escalated the situation.”

In Basra, mortar shells rained down in the late afternoon on the area of the Presidential Palace and the Shatt al Arab hotel, where the assault has its operations center.

Groups of 10 to 12 militia members set up a dense net of checkpoints throughout the northern and western parts of the city, carrying out raids on remaining areas in the city center still controlled by government forces.

The government set up an Army recruitment center in the center of Basra. But anyone heading in that direction was stopped by Mahdi Army members, who questioned whether they were “Hakim’s people,” loyalists of the [pro-Iranian] Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, whose armed wing, the Badr Organization, is a prime rival of the Mahdi Army on the streets of Basra.

Few people were seen in front of the recruitment center itself.

“Unfortunately we were expecting one thing but we saw something else,” said Ali Hussam, 48, a teacher, who said that after Saddam Hussein the people of Basra had hoped for peace.

“But unfortunately with the presence of this new government and this democracy that was brought to us by the invader, it made us kill each other.”

Baghdad: “People Have Reached A Point That They Will Sell Their Refrigerator To Buy A Rocket Launcher To Shoot And Kill The Americans” 19 Tense Hours In Sadr City Alongside The Mahdi Army

The fighters also said they received neither support nor training from Iran, as U.S. military commanders allege. Their Iranian weapons, they said, were bought from smugglers.

March 29, 2008 By Sudarsan Raghavan, Washington Post Foreign Service [Excerpts]

The gunfire struck like thunderclaps, building to a steady rhythm.

American soldiers in a Stryker armored vehicle fired away from one end of the block.

At the other end, two groups of Shiite militiamen pounded back with heavy machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades. American helicopters circled above in the blue afternoon sky.

As a heavy barrage erupted outside his parents' house, Abu Mustafa al-Thahabi, a political and military adviser to the Mahdi Army of Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, rushed through the purple gate and took shelter behind the thick walls.

He had just spoken with a fighter by cellphone.

“I told him not to use that weapon. It’s not effective,” he said, referring to a rocket-propelled grenade. “I told him to use the IED, the Iranian one,” he added, using the shorthand for an improvised explosive device. “This is more effective.”

After nearly a year of relative calm, U.S. troops and Shiite militiamen engaged in pitched battles this week, underscoring how quickly order can give way to chaos in Iraq.

On this block in Sadr City, the cleric’s sprawling stronghold, men and boys came out from nearly every house to fight, using powerful IEDs and rockets.

From Thursday afternoon to Friday morning, this correspondent spent 19 hours on the block, including hours trapped by intense crossfire inside the house of Thahabi's parents.

During this time, the fighters engaged U.S. forces for seven hours.

They lost a comrade. They launched rockets into the Green Zone. At approximately the same time, rockets killed a U.S. government employee, the second American killed there this week.

In between battles, fighters spoke about politics and war. There was no sign of dread, or grief, or fear.

As the two sides exchanged fire, Thahabi's mother, Um Falah, clutched a Koran and began to recite a prayer to Imam Ali, Shiite Islam's most revered saint. Her eldest son, Abu Hassan, a Mahdi Army commander, was fighting this day.

"May Ali be with you," said Um Falah, who wore a black abaya and round eyeglasses. "I pray that all the bullets will not affect you."

Earlier that morning, Sadr City had been eerily quiet.

Cars moved slowly. Residents carried food and water, preparing for the worst. Piles of trash littered the streets, which was charred in patches from burning tires. On one road, two olive-green Stryker vehicles were parked.

Other roads were lined with roadside bombs, fighters reported.

Outside Um Falah's house, Mahdi Army fighters gathered at both ends of the block. They stood against the walls, peering down the street.

Clashes were unfolding on an adjacent road. One group joined the fighting, but the others remained in place. Their job was to protect their end of the block.

Um Falah stood in the courtyard, her face lined with anxiety. But she continued her chores calmly. "I have gotten used to war, to all the battles in our lives," she said.

It was not the first time her son had gone to battle U.S. troops, and in her heart, she said, she knew it would not be the last. "I have sent my son on the right path," she said.

In their living room, her husband and Abu Mustafa sat on red carpets set with colorful pillows. The room was prepared for battle, with plastic windowpanes and drawn curtains. On the wall hung tapestries depicting Imam Ali and other Shiite saints.

Thahabi, slim and gaunt-faced, said that this time the Mahdi Army was not fighting only the Americans. The militiamen were also fighting their Shiite rivals -- the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq and the Dawa party, which run Iraq's government.

Thahabi said he believes the government launched an offensive in the southern port city of Basra last Monday to weaken the Sadrist forces ahead of provincial elections scheduled for this year.

He added that he thought Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who leads the Dawa party, was taking advantage of a cease-fire imposed by Sadr last August.

Iraq's government said it began the offensive to wipe out Shiite militias and criminal gangs in Basra. In recent days, however, the fighting has spread to other parts of Iraq.

“They know the Sadrists will win the elections,” Thahabi said of the government.

“So they are using the Americans against the Mahdi Army. People have reached a point that they will sell their refrigerator to buy a rocket launcher to shoot and kill the Americans.”

Three solemn-faced Mahdi Army fighters entered the living room at around 2 p.m., fresh from battle. “Akeel, son of Riad, just got killed,” said Abu Zainab al-Kabi. The room fell silent.

Kabi, 34, said Akeel had been planting a roadside bomb when he was shot multiple times by an American soldier. Akeel was 22 and had followed his father and uncle into the Mahdi Army when he was 17. The fighters took his body to the hospital morgue. If they could break away from the battle, they planned to carry Akeel's body on Friday to the southern holy city of Najaf, where the Mahdi Army has built a cemetery for their dead, whom they call martyrs.

“We are proud that he died,” said Abu Moussa al-Sadr, 31, another militiaman. “Whenever one of us dies, it raises our morale. It intensifies our fighting.”

“If we defeat them, we win,” Kabi said. “And if we die, we win.”

Over a spare meal of bread, tomato paste and vegetables, they said they had woken before dawn to make sure all their fighters were in position.

They ordered their men to check all the IEDs they had set and shared intelligence with commanders in other sections of Sadr City.

Suddenly, they heard mortar rounds being launched outside with a boom like the sound of a wrecking ball.

“This is to the Green Zone,” said Kabi. “These are gifts to Maliki's government.”

He and Abu Moussa al-Sadr both work for Iraq's Ministry of Interior, which runs the police and is widely viewed as infiltrated by the Mahdi Army.

They said that many police officers had defected from the government and were now fighting with the Mahdi Army.

The fighters also said they received neither support nor training from Iran, as U.S. military commanders allege. Their Iranian weapons, they said, were bought from smugglers.

They said they had been fighting only American soldiers and had not yet engaged with any Iraqi forces inside Sadr City.

They insisted that they were still obeying Sadr's cease-fire and would stop fighting if he gave the order.

"We are allowed to defend ourselves," said Abu Nargis, another fighter.

Around 3 p.m., it was time to leave the house. "We're going to the hospital to see Akeel's body," Abu Moussa al-Sadr said. "Then we are going back to fight."

A Larger Strategy

On the street, shortly after 4 p.m., another group of fighters were battling American troops. Militiamen jumped into the street, then quickly vanished.

The quick movements were a tactic.

Thahabi, standing outside his parents' house, explained that one group of fighters would direct a barrage of bullets at the Stryker to distract the soldiers while another group tried to slip a powerful roadside bomb under the vehicle and then detonate it.

A father of four who studied psychology in college, Thahabi wore olive pants and a blue sweater, looking more like a professor than a militia adviser. He spoke in a slow, measured voice and clutched three cellphones, each using a different network. When the Americans drive by, they usually jam the signals of the main cellphone provider, to neutralize use of the phones as bomb detonators.

The fighters' larger strategy, Thahabi said, was to draw pressure away from the Mahdi Army in Basra. He said that many Iraqi soldiers fighting in Basra had families in Sadr City. "They will be worried for their families. They will fear what will happen to them. It's about reducing their morale."

Moments later, Thahabi received a phone call. "The whole block has been surrounded by the Americans," he said, stepping back inside the house.

Firing on the Green Zone

At 5:25 p.m., the Mahdi Army fired at least 10 rockets from near the house, each with a loud swish. Within 20 minutes, four more were launched.

At approximately the same time, U.S. officials said, 12 rockets landed inside the Green Zone, killing the U.S. government employee.

The rocket launches were followed by heavy gunfire directed at the Stryker.

“We have to keep the Americans nervous, on their edge,” Thahabi said. “We can’t make it easy for them.”

Soon, fighters informed him that there was an American sniper on a nearby roof. After a silent pause, fighters sprayed a burst of gunfire at the roof of a house; bullets tore into the wall. Silence again. A few minutes later, more gunfire headed in the direction of the fighters.

The Americans were still around.

“They are facing heavy resistance,” said Abu Nargis, who was staying at the house. He carried his baby daughter. “They will raid the area tonight.”

But by 7 p.m., the Stryker had left.

At 9:05 p.m., Abu Nargis received a phone call. He said he had been told that a police commander with 500 policemen would stop working with the government and join the Mahdi Army.

At 9:09 p.m., screams tore through the street. A woman in a black abaya was walking toward the hospital, wailing: “My mother! My mother!” Her house had been hit, but it was not clear by whom. Seconds later, ambulances and police vehicles drove past the house as an unmanned U.S. drone flew by. The ambulances and police vehicles drove back, carrying dead and injured.

There was more gunfire. At 10:35 p.m., Abu Nargis received another phone call.

“The Americans are gone. Even the snipers,” he said.

He headed to his bedroom. “I have to go and check on my daughter,” he said. “She’s afraid of the gunfire.”

The next morning, Kabi was standing on a nearby street with a group of fighters, including two boys who looked no older than 13. They were getting instructions from an older fighter, who clutched an AK-47 assault rifle. They looked weary, as if they had stayed up all night.

At the edge of Sadr City, four Strykers rolled by. A white car waited patiently for the convoy to pass, then drove out.

A wooden coffin was strapped to the top.

Basra:
**“The Area Is Now In The Hands
Of The Militias, And There Is No**

Army Except Some Of The Helicopters That Fly Around”

Collaborator Defense Minister Jassim Says “His Forces In Basra Had Been Caught Off-Guard By Their Foes” We Were Surprised By This Resistance And Have Been Obligated To Change Our Plans And Our Tactics”

Mahdi Army Division Commander Says Their Forces “Are In Full Control” Militia Fighters Have Painted Slogans And Photographs Of Sadr On Captured Vehicles

Silly, Weak, Stupid Collaborator Prime Minister Cancels His Deadline To Surrender Or Else

Alaa Abdul Samad, an educational supervisor who lives in the Mahdi-controlled Kibla neighborhood a couple of miles south of the city center, said he had not seen any official army vehicles during the assault.

The Mahdi army “have controlled even the Kibla police station and taken all its weapons,” Mr. Samad said.

Mar 28 By Aref Mohammed (Reuters) & By JAMES GLANZ and STEVEN LEE MYERS, New York Times & 3.29 AP & By Damien McElroy, Foreign Affairs Correspondent; Telegraph Media Group Limited & BBC & Reuters

The Iraqi government's lack of success in Basra was highlighted when the Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki, extended a deadline by 10 days for Shi'ite militia loyal to cleric Moqtada al-Sadr to give up their weapons, and offered them cash to do so.

After a Friday deadline for gunmen to surrender their weapons and renounce violence expired with few complying, Maliki extended a 72 hours deadline he had given militants to surrender, saying they had until April 8 to turn in their weapons. Maliki has staked his authority on disarming Sadr's followers with a major military operation.

But his forces have made little progress driving fighters from the streets and instead have provoked rebellion in towns across the south.

But Sadr's Mehdi Army fighters remained defiant.

"We will fight on and never give up our weapons," Mehdi Army deputy military commander in Basra Abu Hassan al-Daraji told Reuters by telephone. "We will not turn over a single bullet."

Local members of parliament who belong to Mr Sadr's political organisation said in a news conference that they were prepared to negotiate, but that their militiamen had the right to act in self-defence.

"Whoever points a gun at us, we have the right to kill them," said one.

Militia fighters have painted slogans and photographs of Sadr on captured vehicles.

The government military headquarters at a downtown hotel came under repeated fire.

Defense Minister Abdel Qader Jassim said his forces in Basra had been caught off-guard by their foes.

"We supposed that this operation would be a normal operation, but we were surprised by this resistance and have been obliged to change our plans and our tactics," he told a news conference in Basra. In a sign of the worsening situation, reporters were brought to the briefing in military vehicles and kept inside for hours afterwards as fighting raged nearby.

Witnesses in Basra said there was little evidence that security forces had moved the Mahdi Army out of neighborhoods they had long controlled.

In the western Hayaniya neighborhood, where the Mahdi Army has fought with security forces, only militia members and a few residents were seen on Thursday.

Mahdi checkpoints were highly visible, often consisting of at least half a dozen fighters armed with weapons like rocket-propelled grenades.

“They are not allowing any military convoys to pass near the area,” said Ameen Ali Sakran, a Hayaniya resident.

Alaa Abdul Samad, an educational supervisor who lives in the Mahdi-controlled Kibla neighborhood a couple of miles south of the city center, said he had not seen any official army vehicles during the assault.

The Mahdi army “have controlled even the Kibla police station and taken all its weapons,” Mr. Samad said.

“The area is now in the hands of the militias, and there is no army except some of the helicopters that fly around.”

Estimates by Basra residents of how much of the city is in the Mahdi Army’s hands ranged from 50 percent to much higher.

“We have soldiers in Basra, and they are doing fine,” said a militiaman in Baghdad named Abu Ali, who identified himself as a division commander for the Mahdi Army. “They are in full control.”

Those estimates of how much of the city was under Mahdi control were disputed by Mr. Rikabi. “No, this is not true, this is not true,” he said, though he offered no specific estimate.

Iraq’s parliament called an emergency meeting to discuss the crisis, which has brought a three-day curfew to Baghdad. But just 54 MPs out of 275 managed to get inside the fortified Green Zone to attend the session, because it was under fresh bombardment from mortars and rockets.

The government says it is fighting “outlaws,” but Sadr’s followers say political parties in Maliki’s Shi’ite-led government are using military force to marginalize their rivals ahead of local elections due by October.

With the militia remaining in control of some densely populated areas, the prime minister has pulled out of this weekend’s Arab League summit in Syria to deal with the crisis.

Reuters television footage from Basra showed soldiers from Sadr’s Mehdi Army still in control of the streets, openly carrying rocket launchers and machine guns.

Mehdi Army Captures Nassiriya; Fighting Rages Over The South

28 Mar 2008 Reuters & New York Times

A Reuters witness said the Mehdi Army had seized control of the southern city of Nassiriya. Three policemen were killed and 50 people wounded in the fighting.

There was intense fighting for a second day north of Basra in Dhi Qar Province and its capital, Nasiriya, where officials said the toll on Saturday was 28 killed and 59 wounded.

There were running battles on a main bridge in Nasiriya, an Iraqi police officer said, and Mahdi Army forces controlled the town of Shatra, about 20 miles north.

Mehdi Army fighters have also held territory or fought with authorities in Kut, Hilla, Amara, Kerbala, Diwaniya and other towns throughout the Shi'ite south over the past several days.

Seven people were killed and 15 others wounded in clashes between Mehdi Army fighters and Iraqi security forces in Mahmudiya, 30 km (20 miles) south of Baghdad, police said.

An Army Colonel, Jabar Rashid, was killed in clashes with Mehdi Army fighters in Numaniya, 120 km (72 miles) south of Baghdad, police said.

Gunmen killed the mayor of the Ghmash neighbourhood in Diwaniya, 180 km (112 miles) south of Baghdad, sparking "very severe" clashes between Iraqi security forces and Mehdi Army fighters, police said.

Clashes between Mehdi Army fighters and Iraqi security forces killed four police officers and wounded two in Kut, 170 km (105 miles) southeast of Baghdad, police said.

Six policeman were killed and nine others wounded in clashes with Mehdi Army fighters in Hamza, 35 km (22 miles) south of Hilla, police said.

Six policemen have been killed and 30 policemen wounded in clashes between Iraqi security forces and Mehdi Army fighters since Tuesday across Hilla, 100 km (62 miles) south of Baghdad, police said.

**Baghdad Police Give Up Their
Weapons To Mehdi Army;
“We Can’t Fight Our Brothers”
“Officers” Holding Prisoner “High-Profile
Civilian Spokesman For The Baghdad
Security Operation”**



Sheik Salman al-Feraiji, left, Muqtada al-Sadr's chief representative in Sadr City, Iraq, talks to a group of Iraqi government forces who came to surrender their weapons on Saturday. KARIM KADIM: AP

March 29, 2008 The Associated Press & Mar 29 By Leila Fadel, McClatchy Newspapers

A group of police in the Mahdi Army's Baghdad stronghold of Sadr City abandoned their posts and handed over their weapons to al-Sadr's local office.

"We can't fight our brothers in the Mahdi Army, so we came here to submit our weapons," one policeman said on condition of anonymity for security reasons.

He said about 40 policemen had defected to the Mahdi Army. AP Television News footage showed about a dozen uniformed police, their faces covered with masks to shield their identity, being met by Sheik Salman al-Feraiji, al-Sadr's chief representative in Sadr City.

Al-Feraiji greeted each policeman and gave them a copy of the Quran and an olive branch as they handed over their guns and ammunition.

On Saturday, Iraqi officials said they had received a phone call from Tahseen Sheikhly, the high-profile civilian spokesman for the Baghdad security operation, who was seized by nationalists two days earlier from at his home in the capital.

An Iraqi-owned satellite television station, Sharqiya, broadcast what it said was a tape of the conversation, in which a man identifying himself as Sheikhly said he was being held "with a group of officers" at an unknown location.

"I am being treated nicely," he said. "But this is dependent on the release and treatment of wounded people and stopping this military operation against the Sadrist trend in all governorates...This call isn't only from me, but from all who are in custody including officers who are detained with me."

The recording ended with him begging: "Please, please to the Iraqi government. Make a decision as our situation depends on it."

"Our release depends on the withdrawal of al-Maliki from Basra and the easing of the military operations against the Sadrists in all provinces," he said.

"We appeal to the prime minister and the Iraqi government to work with the Sadrist movement, which represents the popular base of society."

Sadr's Mahdi Army militia went door to door in Sadr City with a list of those employed by government security services, demanding that they not report to their jobs, local residents said.

Troops Invited:

What do you think? Comments from service men and women, and veterans, are especially welcome. Write to Box 126, 2576 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10025-5657 or send email contact@militaryproject.org. Name, I.D., withheld unless you request publication. Replies confidential. Same address to unsubscribe.

Iraqi Police In Basra Shed Their Uniforms, Keep Their Rifles And Join The Mahdi Army:

"All These Years, We Were Like A Scream In The Face Of The Dictator And The Occupation"

"The Iraqi Army Is Already Defeated From Within"

"They Come To Basra With Fear In Their Hearts, Knowing They Have To Fight Their Brothers, The Sons Of Iraq,

Because Of An Order From Bush And His Friends In The Iraq Government”



March 28, 2008 James Hider in Baghdad, The Times [UK] [Excerpts]

Abu Iman barely flinched when the Iraqi Government ordered his unit of special police to move against al-Mahdi Army fighters in Basra.

His response, while swift, was not what British and U.S. military trainers who have spent the past five years schooling the Iraqi security forces would have hoped for.

He and 15 of his comrades took off their uniforms, kept their government-issued rifles and went over to the other side without a second thought.

Such turncoats [translation: patriots] are the thread that could unravel the British Army's policy in southern Iraq. The military hoped that local forces would be able to combat extremists and allow the Army to withdraw gradually from the battle-scarred and untamed oil city that has fallen under the sway of Islamic fundamentalists, oil smugglers and petty tribal warlords.

But if the British taught the police to shoot straight, they failed to instil a sense of unwavering loyalty to the State [translation: traitors serving the Occupation].

“We know the outcome of the fighting in advance because we already defeated the British in the streets of Basra and forced them to withdraw to their base,” Abu Iman told The Times.

“If we go back a bit, everyone remembers the fight with the US in Najaf and the damage and defeat we inflicted on them. Do you think the Iraqi Army is better than those armies?”

We are right and the Government is wrong. Maliki (the Iraqi Prime Minister) is driving his Government into the ground.”

The reason for his apparent switch of sides was simple: the 36-year-old was already a member of the al-Mahdi Army which, like other militias, has massively infiltrated the British-trained police force in the southern oil city.

He claimed that hundreds of others from the 16,000-strong force have also defected to the rebels' ranks.

"We already heard two weeks ago that we were going to attack the Mahdi Army, so we were ready," he said.

"I decided to take off my uniform and join my brothers and friends in the Mahdi Army. All these years, we were like a scream in the face of the dictator and the occupation."

He said: "I joined the police because I believed we have to protect Basra and save it with our own hands.

"You can see we were the first fighters to take on Saddam and his regime, the best example being the Shabaniya uprising."

Abu Iman said that the fighting raging in Basra yesterday was intense because the al-Mahdi Army was operating on its own turf. He was confident that the Shia militia would prevail because its cause was just.

"The Iraqi Army is already defeated from within. They come to Basra with fear in their hearts, knowing they have to fight their brothers, the sons of Iraq, because of an order from Bush and his friends in the Iraq Government.

"For this reason, all of the battles are going in the Mahdi Army's favour."

Major-General Abdelaziz Moham-med Jassim, the director of operations at the Ministry of Defence, played down reports of defections in the Basra police force. "The problem of one policeman doesn't make up for the whole of the force," he said.

In recent months Major-General Abdul Jalil Khalaf, Basra's police chief ... only narrowly escaped an assassination attempt yesterday when a car bomb attack in Basra killed three of his policemen.

A local tribal leader said the police directorate building was later gutted by fire.

More:

Basra: Iraqi Army Forces Defect To Moqtada Al-Sadr

3.30.08 By Aqeel Hussein in Basra and Colin Freeman, Telegraph Media Group

With gunfire and explosions echoing round him, Lt Hamid Abbas of the Iraqi Army was letting no car pass unchallenged at his makeshift roadblock on the outskirts of a Basra slum.

His closest scrutiny, however, was reserved not for the few civilian motorists daring to venture on to the streets, but for other Iraqi army vehicles.

“Some of our soldiers have refused to fight the Mehdi Army and have instead handed their vehicles and weapons to them,” he said, looking disgusted. “Now we are having to check every Iraqi army patrol that passes through to ensure they are genuine soldiers.”

The scene on the other side of the battlefield proved his suspicions right. Dug in behind a wall was a squad of Mehdi Army fighters, the Shia militiamen Lt Abbas and 15,000 other Iraqi soldiers have been sent to quell.

Sure enough, one was driving an American-issue Iraqi army Humvee - one of seven, said the squad’s leader, Haji Ali, handed to them by sympathisers within the Iraqi army.

“We shall fight them until the last drop of our blood,” he said, clutching a Glock pistol of the kind issued to Iraqi police. “We will force them to respect the Mehdi Army.”

A number of soldiers have simply deserted, others have handed their weapons to the opposition or even changed sides.

The backbone of the force squaring up against the militants has been the three brigades sent from Baghdad, and local men such as Lt Abbas - whose motivation is not entirely selfless. He was a member of the [pro-Iranian] Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council, a rival Basra militia that will be only too happy to see its Mehdi Army [nationalist] rivals vanquished.

***Sadr Says No Surrender:
“The ‘Liberation’ Of Iraq His
Militia’s Chief Goal”
“Weapons Should Be Turned Over
Only To A Government Which Can
Expel The Occupiers”
America “Worse Than The Baath
Party”***

“The Little Satan Left And Was Replaced By The Great Satan”

3.28.08 By Peter Graff (Reuters) & 3.29 Mar 29 By HAMZA HENDAWI, Associated Press Writer

A feisty Muqtada al-Sadr, making his first public appearance since May, said in a TV interview aired Saturday that he was in almost total control of the Mahdi Army and that the “liberation” of Iraq was his militia’s chief goal.

Shi’ite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr ordered his followers not to lay down their weapons, defying a five-day-old crackdown by Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, who has ordered them to disarm.

“Moqtada al-Sadr asks his followers not to deliver weapons to the government. Weapons should be turned over only to a government which can expel the (U.S.) occupiers,” Sadr aide Hassan Zargani told Reuters by telephone.

The government, he said, was “looking after its own interests, not those of the people.”

He outlined the aims of his political movement, saying he wants to rid Iraq of sectarian politics, prevent its breakup and create an Islamic society.

In a rare interview taped just before this week’s violence, he told al-Jazeera television: “I call on the Arab League, the Organisation of the Islamic Conference and the United Nations to recognize the legitimacy of the resistance.”

He said the U.S. presence in Iraq was more negative than the Baath party rule of former dictator Saddam Hussein.

“The negative effects of America on Iraqis is worse than that of the Baath party. The little Satan left and was replaced by the great Satan,” Sadr said.

Sadr, in an interview aired Saturday by Al-Jazeera television, said his Mahdi Army was capable of “liberating Iraq” and maintained al-Maliki’s government was as “distant” from the people as Saddam Hussein’s.

After Failing To Break The Resistance, “The Government Is No Longer Able To Dictate The

Terms Of An Agreement With Sadr But Now Must Seek A Deal” Sadr Tells Desperate Collaborator Prime Minister To Fuck Off; Frantic Maliki Also Begs For Volunteers To Fight Mahdi Army

Mar 29 By Leila Fadel, McClatchy Newspapers

BAGHDAD - After failing to break the resistance of Shiite militias in the five-day siege of oil rich Basra, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki sent a top general to hold talks with his Shiite rival, Muqtada al Sadr, Saturday night only to be rebuffed by the firebrand cleric, an Iraqi official close to the negotiations said.

The diplomatic initiative and the harsh rebuff further eroded expectations for a successful outcome to the offensive, which Maliki is personally directing from the presidential palace in the southern port city. It was not the only sign of problems.

Maliki issued orders Friday to enlist volunteers for the battle against the Shiite militias, and his Dawa party sought to enlist fighters.

The circumstances in which the negotiations with Sadr took place suggested the government is no longer able to dictate the terms of an agreement with Sadr but now must seek a deal.

General Hussein al Assadi, a Baghdad-based commander, traveled to Najaf to call on the head of Sadr's political bureau there, Lewaa Smaisam. From his office, the two men telephoned Sadr, who is believed to be in Iran, where he is studying religion. But they could not reach agreement, an official close to the negotiations said. He would not give his name due to the sensitivity of the subject.

**[No, This Is Not A Satire]
“Some Of The Administration’s Allies
Have Begun To Question The Timing
And Wisdom Of The Offensive, Which
Has Met With Stiff Resistance”**

March 29, 2008 By Peter Spiegel, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer [Excerpts]

WASHINGTON -- As U.S. forces are drawn further into renewed fighting, the potential for deepening chaos in Iraq is raising questions about whether the Bush administration made a wise decision or a costly miscalculation in backing an Iraqi government offensive against Shiite militias.

President Bush said Friday that the offensive answered critics who have accused Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Maliki's Shiite Muslim-dominated government of inaction and of favoritism toward Shiites.

But some of the administration's allies have begun to question the timing and wisdom of the offensive, which has met with stiff resistance since it was launched Tuesday in the southern city of Basra.

Iraqi forces have called in U.S. airstrikes to fend off well-armed groups in Basra, including an attack by a Navy jet on a mortar position.

Signifying the potential difficulty ahead, other U.S. assets, including special-operations forces and spy planes, are expected to join the fight.

Within the Pentagon, officers expressed concern about the rapid spillover of violence into areas where U.S. forces have spent more than a year painstakingly working to restore order, especially the Shiite neighborhoods of Baghdad.

U.S. officials have long believed that Iraqi militias should be disbanded. But military analysts inside and outside the Pentagon are questioning whether this was the time and place to do it.

The offensive comes two weeks before Army Gen. David H. Petraeus is to testify before Congress on his plans for Iraq.

Petraeus is known for opening his recent presentations by displaying what aides call his favorite slide: a chart showing attacks in Iraq spiking last year, then dramatically dropping amid the deployment of 28,500 additional U.S. troops.

Pentagon officials worry that the recent violence will mar that otherwise compelling narrative.

Bush Says Maliki Regime Now Confronting Him In Iraq

U.S. President George W. Bush said the clashes in Iraq were a sign that Maliki's government was willing to confront "criminal elements or people who think they can live outside the law." [Mar 28 By Aref Mohammed –Reuters]

U.S. State Department Tightens Restrictions On Embassy In Baghdad Amid Rocket Attacks: Attack On Green Zone “Hit A Main Helicopter Landing Zone Used By The U.S. Forces, Putting It Temporarily Out Of Commission” “Housing Used By Some U.S. Officials And Contractors Was Also Hit”



Plumes of smoke rise from Baghdad's Green Zone after a rocket attack March 28, 2008. (Mahmoud Raouf Mahmoud/Reuters)

Mar 28 By Aref Mohammed (Reuters) & AP & Lourdes Garcia-Navarro and Robert Siegel, All Things Considered & March 29, 2008 The Associated Press

The U.S. State Department on Saturday tightened restrictions on embassy staff in Baghdad, ordering all employees to sleep inside reinforced structures and to use only armored vehicles when traveling in the Green Zone due to incoming rocket fire.

The rockets and mortars are fired from mobile launchers, meaning militants can speedily move away from the launch area before soldiers can respond.

The U.S. embassy ordered staff in the zone to stay under cover where possible and wear body armor and helmets when in the open.

The announcement came two days after embassy personnel were advised to remain under “hard cover at all times” and required to wear helmets and other protective gear if they ventured outside.

In a memo sent to embassy personnel on Saturday, the State Department reiterated the previous requirements and added that all personnel must limit their time outside “hardened facilities” and travel in the Green Zone only in armored vehicles.

“No one is to sleep or spend long periods of time in their trailer,” said the memo, a copy of which was obtained by The Associated Press.

When traveling outside, “all personnel must wear (protective gear), have their radios and cell phones with them, and must travel in armored vehicles,” it added.

There were more than 20 attacks in the Green Zone on Friday alone.

The danger has temporarily reshaped life: Green Zone traffic is minimal, few people venture out on the streets and security precautions — always high — have been boosted. Many diplomats and others prefer to bunk on cots in the stone and marble grandeur of the former Saddam Hussein palace that now holds U.S. Embassy offices.

The volleys on Thursday began in the morning and came in about once an hour well into nightfall.

An explosion ignited a fire in the central area of the zone that sent a massive column of thick, black smoke drifting over the Tigris River.

The Green Zone office of Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi was hit by a missile, but he was not there at the time. One security guard was killed, an official in his office said. Police said two people were killed by the salvo.

A U.S. official, speaking on condition of anonymity because of security concerns, said one round earlier this week hit a main helicopter landing zone used by the U.S. forces, putting it temporarily out of commission.

Housing used by some U.S. officials and contractors was also hit, the official said.

Another U.S. official said that personnel — who usually sleep two to a trailer on the embassy grounds — are now sleeping inside the former Saddam palace where their offices are located.

“There are cots everywhere,” the U.S. official said. “People are scouting out free couches.”

The official — who has been through other attacks — described the recent barrages as “qualitatively different.”

“There is a sense of hunkering down for a sustained period of time,” the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity because of security restrictions.

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