

Iraq around the clock

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WAR ON TERROR: The quickening pace of military operations in postwar Iraq is being determined in part by the political calendar, in part by Iraqi distaste for foreign occupation, and in part by intelligence suggesting a massive wintertime terrorist offensive. But is it fair to ask our war-weary soldiers to work any faster?

At midnight at Baghdad International Airport, in a small tent on the runway where air crews and armed soldiers come in out of the cold wind for a cup of coffee, a grim-faced officer approaches Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Chris Willcox. He wants to know whether the secretary or any of his guests mind flying back with "HR" - military-speak for human remains.

The wind rattles the canvas and the roar of C-130s and Black Hawk helicopters is constant. Mr. Willcox nods assent and no one drinks his coffee for a moment.

It is a routine request these days in Iraq. One Defense Department officer says he would be honored to fly back with a soldier who gave his life for his country. The rest simply nod. There is nothing to say.

The body of Sgt. Francisco Martinez, a 28-year-old man from Humacao, Puerto Rico, who was killed on convoy duty on Nov. 4 by a roadside bomb, is loaded into the back of a C-130 bound for Kuwait City. A small party of military officials, soldiers, civilians, and reporters troops aboard.

Roman Catholic Archbishop Edwin O'Brien, traveling with Mr. Willcox, asks whether the plane's departure could be delayed. The archbishop, a priest since 1965 who has seen victims of combat, leads the group in a prayer for Sgt. Martinez. Then the rear cargo door closes with a groan and the plane lifts into the night sky.

Back home all the news about Iraq is body counts, car bombs, and poor intelligence. Senior officials are developing new techniques for safeguarding troops, including a new radar that can identify in seconds the location of incoming mortar fire. U.S. Army commanders insist counterintelligence is defeating more and more terrorist attacks.

That's one reason, the officials believe, that the enemy has shifted tactics. In June the enemy engaged in direct attacks. "But they could not compete against our night vision and thermal sights," said Brigadier General Marc Barbero, assistant commander of the 4th Infantry Division's Taskforce Iron Horse in Tikrit. In July the enemy "moved back and used RPGs," he said, referring to rocket-propelled grenades that can be fired hundreds of feet from their targets. "They learned they couldn't survive."

So in August, and ever since, the enemy shifted to roadside bombs crudely constructed from mortar rounds or artillery shells. These bombs are gradually becoming more sophisticated. But intelligence is improving as well. Of the 55 improvised-explosive devices (IEDs) discovered in the first week of November by the 4th Infantry Division, 19 were found before they exploded, said Gen. Barbero - "thanks to Iraqi help."

It's reasonable to expect more attacks on "soft targets." American military intelligence officers believe that the bombing of the Baghdad headquarters of the International Committee of the Red Cross was "unintentional" and that the actual target was an Iraqi police station some 100 meters down the road, said the U.S. administrator for Iraq, L. Paul Bremer.

But don't expect morale of the uniformed soldiers to fall. Based on half a dozen informal conversations with randomly chosen corporals and privates, it seems that U.S. soldiers accept the current level of risk. They understand that the life that they have volunteered for is dangerous. They are happy for small daily improvements, like recently arrived "real food" in place of packaged MREs (Meals Ready to Eat). The main complaint heard in mess halls in Baghdad and Camp Victory in southern Iraq is that they can't explain to their families why their deployment orders and return dates keep changing. One soldier stationed in the Green Zone in Baghdad explained: "You just can't explain to your wife why you can't plan your life."

While the "body count" seems to fascinate the Baghdad-based press corps, much as it mesmerized Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara during the Vietnam War, the military officers on the front line talk little about it. It is simply a fact of war. Instead, civilian and military officials are more concerned about a number of potential crises that could emerge in Iraq in the coming year. Largely overlooked by the media, these potential flashpoints could severely test America's resolve during a presidential election year.

These range from military to political, economic, and cultural. Some officials worry about a "winter offensive" of high-profile terror strikes. They fear that snags and delays in the hunt for weapons of mass destruction will erode public support, that the transfer of sovereignty back to the Iraqis will prove more difficult than expected (especially if the constitution explicitly makes Iraq an Islamic state), that the Iraqi economy will collapse, and - without Iraqi tolerance for foreign rule - that constantly changing troop rotation schedules will sap morale or, alternatively, that a too-rapid evacuation of the bulk of U.S. forces will further destabilize Iraq.

Winter offensive: American military intelligence officers in Iraq expect that the mortar and terrorist attacks will become more lethal. Gen. Martin Dempsey, who is in charge of the 1st Armored Division in Baghdad, says that he expects "bombs to get larger" and worries about intelligence indicating that "the hostiles are learning better fusing techniques." That's means deadlier bombs that are more likely to go off.

Separately, an Iranian intelligence officer who is negotiating his defection to a European country predicts that the terrorist offensive will occur in both Iraq and Afghanistan. While U.S. intelligence on the enemy is growing rapidly, so is enemy intelligence on troop movements. One concern, mentioned by a non-American intelligence officer, is that Baathist forces may have a mole on the Iraqi Governing Council.

To counter this, operational tempo is increasing. In the month of October, Taskforce Iron Horse conducted more than 21,000 patrols and 361 raids, detaining over 1,500 people. Among the prisoners were 46 bomb makers and six cell leaders who finance attacks on allied forces, said Gen. Barbero, the assistant commander of that unit.

Virtually all of the enemy forces encountered, according to Gen. Barbero, are former regime loyalists - FRLs in the jargon - who are paid to do their murderous work.

While Gen. Barbero says he doesn't need more men, he insists he needs more high-tech tools to defeat terror attacks. He complains about a shortage of unmanned aerial vehicles, pilotless spy planes used to scout the borders with Iraq and Syria. Gen. Barbero said, "If we had more UAVs, we'd fly them every night."

He showed reporters a series of aerial photographs, taken from a UAV known as a "Shadow," of a caravan of terrorists snaking through dry riverbeds along Iraq's border with Iran. Black Hawk helicopters were dispatched and some two dozen armed men were captured. But it was a fleeting success. The following night the Shadow did not fly.

Weapons of Mass Destruction: David Kay, head of the Iraqi Survey Group, said his team's search for WMD is making progress. "Contrary to what you read in the press, senior detainees are talking," Mr. Kay said. The United States has built a new prisoner interrogation facility in Acha, north of Baghdad.

Mr. Kay's biggest problem - and one unlikely to be solved soon - is a shortage of Arabic translators with a high-level security clearance. "We've got more than 95 miles of documents" relating to WMD, he said. Most still have not been translated. Early on, Mr. Kay's team tried searching captured computer databases for key Arabic words such as nuclear or anthrax and found nothing. Saddam's weapons programs were more cleverly hidden should UN inspectors ever hack into his databases.

A lack of translators also hampers some interrogations with Iraqi scientists. Scientists who speak good English have been useful. Two top Iraqi biological-warfare scientists, codenamed "Charlie" and "Alpha," are cooperating, Mr. Kay said.

"Almost every week there is a new discovery that boggles your mind," he said. One example: He recently learned that Saddam had paid the North Koreans a \$10 million deposit for long-range No Dong missiles that could be adapted to carry chemical or biological weapons. Apparently, the missiles were never delivered, but North Korea kept the money.

Translators are not the only problem. Some of the best WMD sources have fled or been killed. The head of Saddam's nuclear-enrichment program was shot to death when his driver ran a checkpoint on May 8, Mr. Kay said. Because Saddam demanded that his top people memorize the most sensitive information, Mr. Kay explained, most of the information about the nuclear-enrichment program died with him.

If Mr. Kay's hunt for WMD fails to turn up dramatic evidence in the coming months, public support for the continuing occupation of Iraq could shrink.

Transfer of Sovereignty: Turning authority over to an appointed Iraqi Governing Council in June 2004, a target announced by the White House in November, may cause even more problems in Iraq. Mr. Bremer is frustrated with the slow pace of their decisions and finds the Iraqi Governing Council "unwieldy," said one official who works with Mr. Bremer.

Relations could become worse if the new Iraqi constitution, due to be drafted by the end of February, is deemed unacceptable by the Iraqis or if one religious faction wants its faith written into law. A range of localized issues needs to be addressed to avoid wider conflict. Relations between Kurds and Arabs in northern Iraq, for example, seem to be worsening. Many Kurds lost homes and farms that were forcibly transferred to Sunni Arabs in Saddam's day, and now want them back. The constitution may have to provide for compensation or land reform. At the same time, cities like Tikrit, which flourished under Saddam, may chafe at returning to local rule. In Tikrit's case that means shifting power away from Saddam's hometown to the province's former capital of Samara.

The timetable to turn over Iraq to the Iraqis is driven not by the death toll of allied forces, but by growing demands from troops to "rotate" home. Most troops in Baghdad are scheduled to leave in the spring. Gen.

Dempsey said their replacements will not be "green troops." Most have served in Afghanistan or the Balkans. Still, many will be new to Iraq and its unique hazards.

A too-rapid exit, some locals fear, could push Iraq into civil war or renewed dictatorship. Staying on has downsides, too. "We are in a condition of descending consent," said Col. Roy Baker, who commands an armored unit in Baghdad. "We've got a year at most to do this job and go home."

For officers like Col. Baker, daily in the trenches, improving security - and fast - is the first way to build respect on the streets of Baghdad. And the best way to honor the sacrifice of fallen comrades like Sgt. Martinez.

*Mr. Minitzer is author of *Losing bin Laden: How Bill Clinton's Failures Unleashed Global Terror**

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