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A NATION AT WAR: THE IRAQI CAPTIAL; Iraq Blames U.S. for Market Blast That Killed Civilians in Baghdad

By John F. Burns

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Iraqi officials said Friday tonight that at least 35 people, possibly as many as 55, many of them women and small children, were killed when a missile or bomb struck a crowded marketplace in an impoverished district of Shiite Muslims in the northwest suburbs of Baghdad. Dozens of others were wounded, many critically.

Some survivors said they had seen the vapor trail of a high-flying aircraft heading south immediately before the blast at about 5:30 p.m. Reporters taken to the scene, in the Shula district 15 miles from central Baghdad, were told by others that seconds before the impact, they heard the roar of an engine they likened to cruise missiles.

Amid scenes of carnage at the marketplace, and among grieving relatives clinging to open caskets at a nearby mosque, many people placed blame for the attack on the United States or Britain, partners in the war against President Saddam Hussein. As they washed the bodies of the dead and carried them away for a night's mourning before dawn burials today, the victims' relatives appealed for America to end the war at once.

But as with a similar incident on Wednesday, when two explosions in Baghdad killed at least 17 people and wounded 45, it was impossible to determine the cause. After the Wednesday incident, attributed by the Iraqis to an American air attack, United States military spokesmen said they had no planes in the area at the time and suggested that the explosion might have been caused by an errant Iraqi missile or even bombs that were planted.

A Central Command spokesman in Qatar said Friday night that the United States could not tell what caused the bombing on Friday. One issue likely to be examined in both bombings is the relatively small size of the craters, in the case of Friday's attack they were closer to the kind associated with mortars, artillery shells or small bombs, than to the kind of craters commonly caused by American bombs or missiles in Baghdad.

Still, incidents like the one on Friday, the worst so far in a bombing campaign that has subjected key government installations here to a relentless pounding, threaten to become yet another major problem for the Bush administration.

With an invading force of already hung up in southern Iraq by unexpectedly fierce resistance, Mr. Hussein and his associates in the Baghdad leadership are certain to use any incident involving large numbers of civilian deaths to mobilize opinion against the war at home and abroad.

Ultimately, the Iraqi ruler appears to hope that growing opposition to the war abroad, especially in the United States and Britain, will force a turnaround in allied war aims, saving him from being ousted the same way he was spared by the American decision to seek a cease-fire after Iraqi forces were pushed out of Kuwait in 1991.

This alone, Iraqi opposition leaders say, would give Mr. Hussein an incentive to organize incidents like the two bombing attacks this week.

Iraqi officials react to those suggestions with fury, to the point that the dwindling number of Western reporters still working in Baghdad have been cautioned that any suggestion of Iraqi complicity in civilian deaths could be a cause for expulsion. These officials also say that a bombing campaign that involves hitting Baghdad with dozens, and on some days, hundreds, of bombs and missiles is inherently ''criminal'' -- a word used in nearly every Iraqi bulletin since the beginning of the war -- because even with America's high technology, the smallest of errors can have disastrous results.

The risks inherent in the American air attacks have became even clearer in the last few days, as the Pentagon has turned to a new category of targets.

For the second time in 24 hours, bombs that fell shortly after dawn on Friday struck two of Baghdad's principal telephone exchanges, after an initial strike the previous night.

Friday night, there was a huge explosion near the Information Ministry. But at daylight today, the building was still standing with damage limited to windows being blown out and large satellite dishes on its roof destroyed, apparently by a bomb or missile designed to cripple the communications without killing anyone.

The attacks on the telephone exchanges left much of the capital without telephones. Many Iraqis, especially those who favor a change in government here, had hoped that there would be no return to the pattern of 1991, when American targets included the telephone exchanges, power plants, water-pumping stations, and bridges across the Tigris. This time, the bridges have been left standing, as have the power stations and water stations.

After the marketplace explosion Friday night, there was no ambiguity in the response of Iraqis struggling to deal with the carnage. Dr. Hassan Razouki, 50, director of Al Noor Hospital half a mile from the explosion, broke away from directing surgery to talk to reporters.

''At 5:30 p.m. this evening, an enemy plane deliberately hit the local market,'' he said. ''It was crowded with lots of people, including many children and many elderly, who went there to buy food. The number of martyrs from this criminal act is 35, most of them under 15 years of age, elderly or female, and we have treated 47 others who were injured.''

He added: ''The bodies were shattered by the missile, which was intended to kill as many people as possible. It was daylight. It was clear to anybody that the market was crowded, and there are no military or strategic facilities in this area.''

Other officials at the hospital said that there were 55 names on an updated list of the dead. Officials at Al Noor Hospital were not able to provide the list or say which other hospitals might have received fatalities.

An unofficial tally by one group of reporters indicated that they had seen, between them, at least 20 bodies, at a time hours after the strike when it was clear that many others had been taken away to their homes. At the Musa al Khadem Mosque, about 200 yards from the marketplace, about 15 bodies in coffins were brought in for washing and prayers in the late evening, then taken away. Five other bodies were stored in large, shelved refrigerators outside the Noor hospital. The bodies there, mostly of young men, had much of their clothing ripped away, and were caked with dirt. At least two were missing heads.

The explosion hit the Nassar market, an area of bare concrete stalls, row on row, that serve as the main shopping center for the sprawling Shula district. A small crater, about 18 inches to 2 feet deep and about 4 to 5 feet across, was visible in the dark, about 10 feet from the first row of stalls, where they face onto open ground looking to the south. The crater was far smaller than those made by many of the American bombs and missiles in the last week. Some of these, hitting homes and buildings in Baghdad, have left craters as much as 30 to 40 feet deep.

At the marketplace, fragments from the blast killed people up to 80 yards away, including three brothers from a single family in a home beside the market and two traders putting up their shutters for the night at shops just down the road.

For Iraqis, the fact that the disaster struck at Shula was filled with ironies. Dating from the 1960's, the district began as a shantytown for migrants coming north to Baghdad from cities like Kut and Nasiriya, in the poverty-stricken area of southern Iraq between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, known as Mesopotamia in the ancient world, where American troops have been hung up in the fighting of the past week.

Almost all of Shula's resident are Shiites, the majority group in Iraq, but mostly poor and mostly deeply alienated from Mr. Hussein's government, which is dominated by the Sunni Muslim minority. American planning for the war assumed strong support from Iraqi Shiites, who have been particular victims of the repression of the last 30 years of Baath Party rule.

A poll of the men grieving in the mosque on Friday night showed that they included construction workers, truck drivers, low-ranking policemen, barbers, plumbing workers, farm workers, bank clerks and men who operate street stalls. Many said they were in ''free work,'' a euphemism for unemployment.

Their salaries averaged about $10 a month. One man said the poverty in the neighborhood could be judged from the fact that there were no butchers in the Nassar market. Meat, he said, was a luxury most residents of Shula could not afford.

Anger among the survivors, and relatives of the dead, seemed suppressed, as if in their grief they could hardly summon any emotion but despair. American and British reporters were welcomed, allowed into the innermost sanctums of the mosque to witness the washing of the bodies and the sewing of the winding sheets, and assured that there was no animosity toward them personally. But, man after man, boy after boy -- women being excluded from the mosque on such occasions -- they made clear that they had no doubt that the blast was caused by a bomb or a missile, and that the perpetrators were the American or British.

One victim was a 6-year-old girl, Iman Fadil, who died along with her mother and small brother, neighbors said. As her tiny, limp body was carried away to be washed in a casket big enough for a man, the crowd in the mosque broke into rhythmic chants, ''La, illah, illah, lah, Muhammad rassoul Allah'', they said, in the passage that opens every Muslim's prayers: ''There is no God but God, and Muhammad is his messenger.'' Washed, her body was taken outside into the chill darkness for prayers led by the mosque's imam, Said Abbas.

In the black shouldered cape and turban of a Shiite cleric, the imam spoke sonorously into the night. ''We pray for the Muslims who have died, and for those who still cling to life,'' he said. ''We say that we depend on God, and only God, to save us. And we pray that he will lead the Americans and the British to go away, and leave us in our land of Iraq. Lastly, we pray for the spirits of the departed to go to Paradise.''

In the prayer on that muddy ground, in the mosque, at the marketplace amid the pools of blood, at the hospital, nobody, at least nobody directly affected by the bombing, made any mention of Saddam Hussein. In the darkness, it seemed suddenly, to an outsider, that these were people who had made their own quittance with the Iraqi leader, at least in their souls, and that what mattered to them now were ancient truths, and ancient sufferings, that would far outlast the Iraqi ruler, whatever the outcome of the war.

The men shouldered the casket and headed down a dirt alleyway to the girl's home. Some carried candles, others kerosene lamps. For the moments it took them to disappear from view, it was a scene from Middle Ages. All was quiet, save for the chants that receded with the procession. ''There is no God but God, and Muhammad is his messenger,'' they said, over and over and over again, until the night's silence returned.