

Iraq: at least 500 dead from allied raid

BAGHDAD, Iraq - Rescuers and weeping families dug charred, mutilated bodies from a bomb shelter blasted by allied warplanes Wednesday in a pre-dawn strike.

Authorities said the attack killed at least 500 civilians. If accurate, it would be by far the highest civilian toll reported from any single attack since the Persian Gulf war began four weeks ago.

The United States said the targeted facility was a military bunker used as a command and control facility. No evidence of any military presence could be seen inside the wreckage, and Iraqi authorities denied that any military personnel had been using the facility.

Foreign journalists, including two reporters from The Associated Press, were allowed to inspect the site and were told, for the first time during the war, that they could file their reports without censorship.

The attack occurred about 4 a.m. By nightfall, rescuers were still working to remove huge chunks of concrete from the 40-foot-deep facility in the al-Amerieh district, a middle-class neighborhood.

Smoke still rose from the rubble, and about 5,000 people were gathered nearby, many awaiting word about missing relatives.

At mid-morning, more than 40 charred bodies were laid out on the ground at a time as dozens of ambulances shuttled back and forth to morgues.

“There's no way any human being could have survived until now.”

Iraqi civil defense official

As reporters watched, the decapitated body of a woman was pulled out and laid next to a small torso — apparently that of a girl whose head and limbs were blown off.

Containers of water could be seen in the rubble. Outside the bombed facility was a sign, in English and Arabic, designating the place as a bomb shelter, and loudspeakers which appeared to be used to sound alarms.

One teen-ager, Omar Adnan, said he was the only one in his family to escape alive. He said his three younger sisters, mother and father all died.

In a faint voice, Adnan, 17, said: “I was sleeping and suddenly I felt heat and the blanket was burning. Moments later, I felt I was suffocating. I turned to try and touch my mother who was next to me but grabbed nothing but a piece of flesh.”

Residents of the neighborhood crowded the scene, looking for relatives and friends. Men beat on their chests and yelled “Allahu Akbar!” Arabic for “God is Great.” Women cried hysterically.

Witnesses said the first missile or bomb hit the entrance of the facility, jamming the only escape route. The second strike, moments later, penetrated the 9-foot-thick concrete roof and exploded inside the windowless shelter, the witnesses said.

A senior civil defense official said there was no hope anyone remained alive.

“There are no survivors there anymore. The fire is melting the metal. There's no way any human being could have survived until now,” he said on condition of anonymity.

Health Minister Abdel-Salam Mohammed Saeed told reporters there were 1,000 people inside the shelter, one of five similar structures built during the 1980-88 war against Iran and designed to hold twice that number.

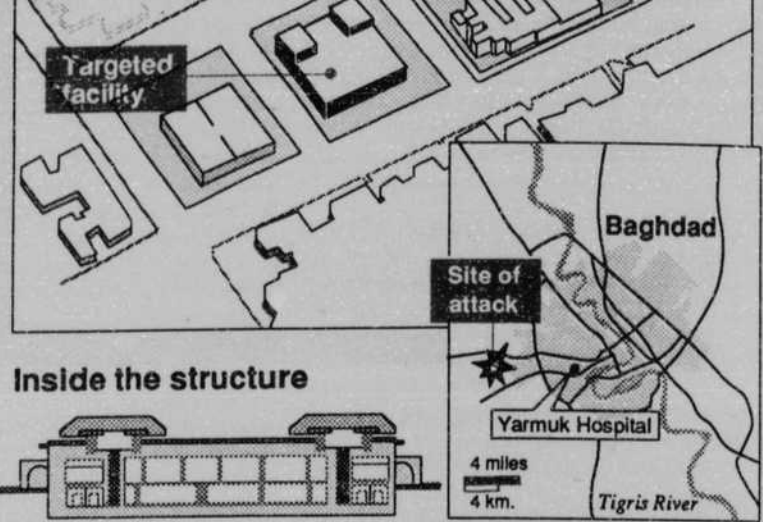
Other officials said 400-500 people had moved into the facility since the allied bombing began Jan. 17. Because allied attacks were particularly intense Tuesday and Wednesday, many more people sought refuge in the fortified structure overnight, the officials said.

Eight survivors were taken to nearby Yarmuk Hospital, and only two of them appeared conscious. All suffered burns.

“Look at him. He's the only one alive of my family,” said Karim Mohammed. A teen-age boy, who Mohammed said was his son Abdullah, lay unconscious on a hospital bed.

Structure Destroyed in Baghdad

Allied warplanes destroyed an underground facility killing hundreds. The United States called it a military command center, not a bomb shelter.



Witnesses say the first missile or bomb hit the entrance of the facility, jamming the only escape route. The second penetrated the 9-foot-thick concrete roof and exploded inside.

Source: Pentagon briefing

AP

Minefields an obstacle for ground soldiers

RIYADH, Saudi Arabia - When allied soldiers jump off for the ground attack into Kuwait, one of the most daunting obstacles they are likely to face is the simple land mine — a psychological as well as physical weapon.

Mines and obstacles have been part of the tactics of war for centuries and American officers here have little doubt that breaching Iraqi minefields will be a major task for ground forces attacking Kuwait.

“It's pretty massive — mines, wire, trenches and now oil,” one American colonel said, referring to what the allies will face if they move across the Saudi-Kuwait border in an attempt to oust the Iraqis.

Mines serve a number of purposes. First, they are used to deter, slow or divert an attacking force and disrupt a commander's plans and timetable. Second, they can bring great psychological stress on attacking troops.

Mines are terrifying. Large ones cripple or destroy vehicles. Others blow off the feet and legs of infantrymen. Some pop up out of the ground waist high and explode. Mines even can be filled with nerve agents or mustard gas.

The explosives usually are used in conjunction with obstacles such

as wire and ditches.

Burning ditches, one of the expected obstacles along the border, can be surmounted by bulldozing sand into them and covering the flames. U.S. military sources also point out that burning oil causes large amounts of smoke that not only obscures the view of the attacking force, but that of the defending army as well.

The sources declined to go into any other details concerning the breaching of Iraq's burning ditches.

Land mines can be set off by pressure on them, by the magnetic influence of vehicles passing over them and by the vibration of vehicles. Anti-personnel mines can be set off by pressure or by trip wire.

The science of breaching is practically as old as that of laying minefields. Many of the techniques used today date from World War II.

Breaching can involve the use of explosives to detonate the mines. Combat engineer vehicles, which move through a minefield at 3-5 mph, can be outfitted with bulldozer blades to move the earth, or front end rakes and heavy rollers. Mobile bridges can be used to span ditches. Bangalore torpedos — long, thin pipe bombs — can be used to destroy wire.

Short recession now doubted

Retail sales continue to plummet

WASHINGTON — Retail sales fell 0.9 percent in January after an even worse December performance, the government said Wednesday, in a report analysts took as an ominous sign the recession could be longer and deeper than expected.

The Commerce Department said retail sales totaled a seasonally adjusted \$148.2 billion, down from \$149.5 billion in December, when sales dropped 1.5 percent — even worse than the 0.4 percent first reported last month.

It was the first back-to-back monthly decline in seven months.

At the same time, January sales were down 1.4 percent from those of the same month of 1990, the first year-over-year decline in 29 1/2 years.

Some economists had said the recession would be short and mild, lasting just two quarters, but many now are having misgivings.

They point to the 6.2 percent unemployment rate in January that resulted in the loss of 232,000 jobs, worse than the 150,000 loss the previous month.

William MacReynolds, forecasting director for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, said the economy was “tumbling faster as the year started than was realized at the time.”

“The sharp downward revision in December retail sales, along with the decline in January, show that the consumer is not ready yet to lead the economy out of recession,” MacReynolds said.

A recession usually is defined as two consecutive drops in the gross national product — the nation's total output of goods and services. The GNP dropped 2.1 percent in the final quarter of 1990.

Retail sales are a major concern of economists because they represent

about half of overall consumer spending. Consumer spending, in turn, accounts for about two-thirds of the nation's economic activity.

Retail sales grew just 3.8 percent last year, the lowest level since the last recession year, 1982, when they grew 3 percent.

John Silvia, an economist with Kemper Financial Services in Chicago, said overall spending remained weak because more than a million jobs had been lost since last summer, “so income growth is slowing.”

Economist Gilbert Benz of the Swiss Bank Corp. in New York said that while there also is some concern over the Persian Gulf war, “what does affect spending (most) is fewer people out there making money.”

Many analysts believe a lengthy war would further fade consumer confidence and curtail spending even more.

Critics say Bush's transportation plan flawed

WASHINGTON - President Bush proposed on Wednesday a \$105.4 billion, five-year plan to prepare the nation's highways and mass transit systems “for the next American century.”

But state highway officials said the proposal was inadequate, would raise state taxpayers' costs and be rewritten in Congress.

Mass transit officials said they have been shortchanged. Environmentalists contended the continued emphasis on highways will dramatically increase oil consumption and threaten air-quality improvements.

Others criticized the bill's encouragement of tolls to pay for new and repaired bridges and highways.

But Bush and Transportation Secretary Samuel K. Skinner said they believe that the legislation is properly balanced and that its highway provisions are needed to fix deteriorated roads and bridges “so that America can stay competitive in the global economy of the 21st century.”

Skinner said each \$1 billion spent on highway construction creates 30,000 to 50,000 jobs.

Hal Rives, president of the Association of State Highway Transportation Officials, called the bill a good start and added, “On a scale of 1 to 10, we give the administration bill a 6.”

“It is not dead on arrival” on Capitol Hill, “but it will not pass as arrived,” said Frank Francois, executive director of the association.

“The concept is good,” said Rives, who is Georgia's transportation commissioner. “It streamlines the entire program. But the funding is clearly inadequate to meet our national transportation needs. And what money is there is not fairly distributed.”

The bill proposed spending, in addition to several minor programs, \$87.17 billion on highways and \$16.3 billion for mass transit over the next five years.

In a series of policy shifts, the legislation proposed giving priority for federal highway aid to a 150,000-mile National Highway System, which would be composed of the 42,000-mile interstate highway system and other highways important to the economy and the national defense.

The federal government would pay

75 percent of the cost of repairing existing roads and building new roads in this system.

The annual federal share would rise in each of the five years from \$7.7 billion in 1992 to \$11.2 billion in 1996.

The only higher priority would go to completing the unbuilt 1 percent of the interstate system and to making critical repairs. Such projects would continue to be financed by the federal government on a 90 percent-10 percent basis.

A lower priority would be given to 700,000 miles of important roads that would be grouped in an Urban and Rural Program. State governments would have to pay 40 percent of repairs and construction of such roads.

Federal spending on this program would rise from \$3.9 billion in 1992 to \$5.7 billion in 1996.

Unsafe and deteriorating bridges would also be targeted for repair or replacement. The bill seeks an increase in such spending from \$1.8 billion in 1992 to \$2.8 billion in 1996, with the federal share for such projects at 75 percent.

Daily Nebraskan

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The Daily Nebraskan (USPS 144-080) is published by the UNL Publications Board, Nebraska Union 34, 1400 R St., Lincoln, NE, Monday through Friday during the academic year; weekly during summer sessions.

Readers are encouraged to submit story ideas and comments to the Daily Nebraskan by phoning 472-1763 between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. The public also has access to the Publications Board. For information, contact Bill Vobejda, 436-9993.

Subscription price is \$45 for one year. Postmaster: Send address changes to the Daily Nebraskan, Nebraska Union 34, 1400 R St., Lincoln, NE 68588-0448. Second-class postage paid at Lincoln, NE.

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