

Air attacks fly in face of protest

DHAHRAN, Saudi Arabia — From the Kuwaiti coast to central Iraq, U.S. and allied pilots pounded away at fresh targets Thursday, unimpeded by the international furor over the Baghdad bunker tragedy.

The U.S. command, in response to the death of hundreds of civilians in Wednesday's Baghdad bombing, said it was looking for new ways to limit such casualties.

The air war appeared to have made major progress. The command said one-third of Iraq's tanks and artillery in the battle zone had been destroyed.

“ Bush, Bush, you will pay! ”

Baghdad crowd

Strategists are believed shooting for 50 percent destruction before ordering the ground assault. The commander of British forces in the Persian Gulf, Lt. Gen. Sir Peter de la Billiere, told reporters Thursday there were already “proposed dates” for the offensive.

A fourth U.S. aircraft carrier, the USS America, has moved into the Persian Gulf, joining the Ranger, the Midway and the Theodore Roosevelt, a Pentagon source confirmed Thursday. The America had been in the Red Sea. Planes from the warships are expected to fly cover over allied troops in a ground assault.

Palestine Liberation Organization head Yasser Arafat visited the site and pledged solidarity with Iraq. “I'm truly astonished at what has happened,”

he told reporters. “It has exceeded completely the mandate of the United Nations. It is a crime.”

The U.S. Air Force suffered a loss as well Thursday. The two crewmen of an EF-111 were killed when their plane went down in northern Saudi Arabia, apparently after being damaged in combat.

Two Iraqi Scud missiles fell on the isolated town of Hafr el-Batin, demolishing an auto-repair shop and house, and slightly injuring four Saudi civilians. Allied officers said the missiles apparently broke up in flight.

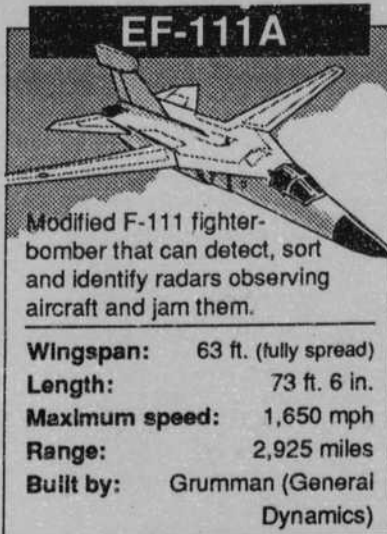
Body after body was pulled in grisly procession from the rubble of the underground structure bombed by U.S. warplanes early Wednesday, while it was crowded with civilians seeking refuge from air attacks.

The Iraqis said it was only a civilian bomb shelter. But U.S. officials said they had indisputable evidence, from radio intercepts, reconnaissance photos and other sources, that the concrete facility was being used as a military command-and-control center. They said they were unaware it harbored any civilians.

Just a few hundred yards from the ruins, 5,000 mourners marched to the neighborhood cemetery to bury some of the dead, in coffins draped with the Iraqi flag, in a mass grave, Associated Press correspondent Dilip Ganguly reported from Baghdad.

“Bush, Bush, you will pay!” the crowd chanted.

The United States has blamed President Saddam Hussein and the rest of the Iraqi leadership for the tragedy, saying they deliberately put civilians “in harm's way” at a potential target.



Source: Jane's All the World's Aircraft AP

Administration to ask Congress for war funds

WASHINGTON — The White House will ask Congress to authorize \$56 billion for the first three months of fighting in the Persian Gulf, a senior administration official said Thursday. He said the administration believed the expected ground war with Iraq would be “very violent, very quick.”

The official, speaking with reporters on condition of anonymity, refused to speculate when a ground war might begin but indicated it would not be within the next few days.

He said the administration envisioned that a ground war would be brief, suggesting as a model the six-day Arab-Israeli war of 1967 rather than the eight-year Iran-Iraq war.

“There will be basically mobile tank battles and those usually take place very quickly — very violent, very quick,” the official said. “I think it will move swiftly.”

Separately, Marlin Fitzwater, White House press secretary, said the ground war could begin “at any time.”

Air Force traffic cop patrols corner of sky

OVER SAUDI ARABIA — Dozens — sometimes hundreds — of little green symbols flash on a computer screen. Some inch forward toward red flashes on a map of Iraq and Kuwait; others hang back, waiting for their turn.

Away from the swarm, to the north and west, other green symbols move about freely in more open spaces — airspace deep inside Iraq.

The computer screen, which easily could be mistaken for a fast-paced video game, is aboard a U.S. Air Force AWACS plane high above Saudi Arabia. From this high-tech vantage point, the Air Force directs a daily ballet of sorts, tracking an allied air siege that often includes more than 200 planes airborne at one time.

On this night, as on most since the opening days of the war with Iraq, the Air Force's traffic cop in the sky is policing a crowded, but one-way, street.

“All we're doing is going up there, dropping bombs and breaking all of his toys,” Col. Gary A. Voellger, commander of an Oklahoma-based AWACS wing, told a visitor. “Welcome to the friendly skies.”

AWACS is an abbreviation for Airborne Early Warning And Control. The planes, bristling with radar and electronic monitoring equipment, are designed to keep track of allied aircraft and watch out for hostile ones. Lately, there hasn't been much need for the latter.

Still, crew members watch intently for the enemy that never comes, the red V that would, in this deadly showdown, represent an Iraqi airplane.

With none in sight, the word goes out from the AWACS to all the green symbols — the hundreds of allied warplanes — “Picture Clear.”

This day's program includes 2,800 allied sorties and runs 950 pages.

The warplanes roaming in western, central and northern Iraq are hunting Scud missile launchers, bombing bridges, raining laser-guided munitions down on hardened aircraft shelters, and circling to protect allies and prevent Iraqi planes from scooting to Iran.

As midnight approaches, a wave of B-52 bombers arrives on cue. On the screen, they appear the same as the comparatively tiny F-15s. But as they pass methodically over their target, an Iraqi missile facility at Taji, it is clear they are different.

The distant yellow glow on the horizon offers proof.

Throughout a 17-hour AWACS mission, the first flown by journalists since the war began four weeks ago, green symbols were stacked one atop the other along the crescent-shaped western Kuwait border.

At the receiving end are troops in southern Kuwait and two Republican Guard divisions along the Iraqi side of the Kuwait border.

Always there are “packages” of fighters and bombers waiting to go next.

“It kind of looks like Safeway on payday — they're just lining up,” Voellger said. “We own the skies.”

Indeed, not one Iraqi aircraft was detected airborne during an AWACS mission that began at midday Wednesday and ended just before dawn Thursday. As the sun rose, allied aircraft were still pounding Iraqi ground forces, artillery and forward command posts.

Moscow shoppers scoff at plan to increase prices

MOSCOW — Government proposals to hike retail prices by up to 200 percent brought sighs of resignation from Soviet shoppers who said Thursday that it would do nothing to put more food and goods on empty store shelves.

The plan, which must be approved by the Soviet legislature, would eliminate government subsidies to producers.

Wages, pensions, children's welfare payments and other income would be increased to compensate for at least some of the higher prices, according to the government newspaper Izvestia and state television.

The plan is an attempt to close the large gap in the Soviet Union between the cost of producing goods and wholesale prices. It would not end central government control

over prices, a cumbersome system that must be dismantled before a free market economy can ever exist in this vast nation.

“It's not going to do any good for any of us,” said Sergei Baranov, a worker at a Moscow machine tool factory. “The compensation is laughable. The prices are too high even now compared to our pay.”

Russian federation President Boris Yeltsin told the legislature of the largest and most populous Soviet republic that the proposals call for a 200 percent increase in prices for meat, bread and flour.

Milk and fish prices would rise 130 percent, eggs and vegetable oil by 100 percent, sugar by 135 percent and cigarettes by 50 percent, the independent Interfax news agency quoted Yeltsin as saying.

Soviets urged to mind treaty

VIENNA, Austria — Former Soviet allies on Thursday joined the West in warning that there could be no “business as usual” at arms talks unless the Kremlin complied with a treaty to slash tank quotas and other non-nuclear weapons.

The stand of the Eastern European countries, still formally allied with Moscow in the moribund Warsaw Pact, illustrated the Soviets' increasing isolation in Europe.

The West says the Soviets are trying to exclude three motorized infantry divisions of about 1,000 tanks from a historic East-West arms treaty signed last November in Paris.

Western countries also are concerned about the movement of thousands of Soviet tanks outside the zone covered by the treaty and figures the Soviets have provided on the quantity of weapons they possess.

“No one supported the Soviets,” Hungarian chief negotiator Istvan Gyarmati told reporters after the meeting. “It's very serious, it's more than serious,” he said. “We hope this is not the prevailing policy in Moscow.”

There has been evidence in the Soviet Union recently that hard-line rightist military officials are gaining influence, affecting the policies of President Mikhail Gorbachev.

U.S. Secretary of State James Baker suggested delaying congressional ratification of the Paris treaty because of questions about Soviet compliance. Hungary has said it would not submit the treaty for ratification until the Soviet position was clarified.

The treaty commits all countries to strict limits on the number of tanks and other conventional weapons.

The new round of the Conventional Forces in Europe talks are to focus mainly on the number of soldiers stationed on the continent. But the Soviets were told Thursday that there would be no progress in those talks until they complied with the treaty they signed in Paris.

Western diplomats quoted U.S. chief delegate James Woolsey as warning the meeting that it could “not conduct business as usual” until the Soviet position was clarified.

New San Francisco law

Unwed register romance

SAN FRANCISCO — Chris Minor and Richard Mulholland, sporting matching leather jackets and boots, beat the Valentine's Day rush and became the city's first domestic partners.

“It's a real milestone, not only in our relationship, but for the gay community,” said Minor, who had waited since 5:30 a.m. on the steps of City Hall.

His chilly vigil paid off when the couple became the city's first legal domestic partners shortly after 8 a.m., a test case on the first day that unwed couples could officially register their romances with the city.

About a dozen couples were waiting when City Hall opened for an expected Valentine's Day deluge of gays, lesbians and unwed heterosexuals taking advantage of the first opportunity to sign up under the new law.

Among the first wave were Christmas Leubrie, a 41-year-old nurse, and her lover of six years, Alice Heimsoth, 39, a city health worker.

“We worked hard on this,” said Leubrie, who was active in the campaign to get the law approved by voters last November. “It's about love and recognition of relationships.”

City Hall already had 100 weddings scheduled for Valentine's Day, and no one was sure how many domestic partners would show up to add to the throng. Estimates ranged from 50 to 5,000.

By 11 a.m. about 70 couples had paid the \$35 fee to file their declaration with the county clerk.

Voters passed the law in November after narrowly rejecting a similar ballot initiative in 1989. The city's Board of Supervisors had adopted a domestic partners ordinance in 1982, but former Mayor Dianne Feinstein vetoed it as too costly.

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. ALL MATERIAL COPYRIGHT 1991 DAILY NEBRASKAN