

Struggling to beat rebellion, Iraqi troops blast into cities

NICOSIA, Cyprus - Saddam Hussein's troops blasted their way into the Shiite Muslim holy cities of Karbala and Najaf as they struggled to beat back a nationwide rebellion, Iraqi opposition leaders said Tuesday.

Loyal troops also were reported to have used napalm to try to crush a rebellion in the southern Iraqi city of Basra. And rebels were said to have slowed their advance on the northern oil city of Kirkuk, out of fear for 5,000 civilians being held as human shields there.

The reports, none of which could be confirmed, drew a picture of Saddam's forces slowly regaining control over Iraq, portions of which have been plunged into rebellion and chaos since the end of the Gulf war.

Rebel sources still claim control of many towns and cities in the north, but the inconsistency of their reports indicate that many areas are see-sawing between government and insurgent control.

At a meeting of opposition leaders in Beirut, Lebanon, speakers agreed that the rebels will need better coordination to overcome Saddam's battered, but still effective, war machine.

Ayatollah Mohammed Baker al-

Hakim, the most influential Shiite opposition leader, conceded in a statement that the revolt was "not an organized act." He maintained that "the dictatorship cannot be confronted by a popular revolution but by accurate and organized underground acts."

The Beirut meeting brought together 325 Iraqi opposition leaders from 23 factions, who tried to reach unity on the type of government they would like to see in a post-Saddam Iraq. In his statement, Hakim said his Shiite followers do not want a Muslim state like Iran's, but "believe that Islam should be respected and applied in Iraq."

Sources at the meeting conceded that Iraqi troops had retaken Karbala and Najaf, south of Baghdad, after heavy fighting on Monday.

"Several towns change hands repeatedly. One day we control them and the other day Saddam controls them. Then we attack them again. There is still some fighting in Najaf and Karbala, but most of them are controlled by Saddam's army," one source said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

In Washington, Pentagon spokesman Pete Williams offered a similar assessment.

Williams said that "government



forces do appear to be gaining some greater control over the situation, particularly in and around the Shiite holy cities of Najaf and Karbala."

Williams said Saddam has concentrated more of his military on the southern cities than on the north.

Iran's official media said loyalist forces had used napalm to try to crush the rebellion in the southern port city of Basra.

New talks

Baker sees more opportunity

JERUSALEM - Secretary of State James Baker opened new talks with Palestinian Arabs on Tuesday, overlooking their assertion they represent the Palestine Liberation Organization that the Bush administration has shunned for the past year.

Baker discussed with Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir demands from Arab nations that Shamir prove he is willing to make concessions in their direction.

A senior U.S. official said Shamir took the request under consideration.

Baker is touring the Middle East trying to sell Arabs and Israel on President Bush's Mideast settlement formula: That Israel relinquish occupied land in order to gain the acceptance of its Arab neighbors.

Shamir and Baker met for 75 minutes and excluded even note-takers from most of the one-on-one discussion in Shamir's office.

Baker's meeting with the Palestinians was widely publicized by American and Palestinian participants.

He called the meeting with the Palestinians in the home of U.S. Consul General Philip Wilcox a "window of opportunity."

Faisal Husseini, a spokesman for the delegation, said "we told him we are here because Yasser Arafat told us to be here." The group presented Baker with an 11-point memorandum reaffirming that "the PLO is our sole legitimate leadership and interlocutors, embodying the national

identity and expressing the will of the Palestinian people everywhere."

The Bush administration a year ago suspended U.S. talks with the PLO, accusing it of new terrorist attacks against Israel.

Baker said at a news conference Monday night that the dialogue had been "terminated," but Hussein said Baker explained he had misspoken and meant to say "suspended."

According to a senior U.S. official, who described the meeting on condition of anonymity, the Palestinians complained to Baker about such Israeli actions as curfews and deportations.

The official said the Palestinians wanted to continue the talks in the future and the United States would comply. He brushed aside as "a ritualistic presentation" the Palestinians' statement of ties to the PLO and said Baker was not surprised by them.

One of the Palestinians, Hanan Ashrawi, said Baker had tried to persuade them to make moves without the PLO.

Baker's talks with Shamir, which resumed over dinner Tuesday night, were designed to prod Israel into negotiations both with Palestinians and with Arab nations.

Avi Pazner, the prime minister's media adviser, said the two met in "a very friendly, warm and cooperative atmosphere" and that Israel would try to keep the peace process going.

Bush urges passage of home front agenda

WASHINGTON - Before a nationwide audience, President Bush challenged Congress to pass his domestic agenda in 100 days. Then he shunted aside a domestic-policy trip to Ohio in favor of postwar talks with world leaders.

Bush's planned visit this week to Cleveland to unveil an administration initiative to combat infant mortality was postponed so Bush could fly to Ottawa, Martinique and Bermuda to consult with the leaders of Canada, France and Britain.

What House GOP Conference Chairman Rep. Jerry Lewis dubbed "Operation Domestic Storm" may become, for Bush, an absentee battle.

White House aides privately suggested he will only expend enough energy on his domestic agenda to

avoid being criticized for not having one.

Rather than engaging in contentions with Congress over social policy, Bush seems more inclined to linger in the international spotlight — including greeting troops and then visiting the Middle East.

The president focused on domestic policy Tuesday, meeting in the morning with Republican leaders and in the afternoon with the Cabinet. On Monday, he met with state law enforcement officials to push his crime package.

White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater said Bush reiterated the 100-day timetable at Tuesday's session with GOP leaders. "We think 100 days is a reasonable period of time and a good objective for us to follow," Fitzwater said.

Bush and the GOP lawmakers discussed Democratic maneuvering on domestic issues, participants said.

Unable to criticize Bush on the war, the Democrats are attacking his social programs out of "sheer frustration on their part that they may be out of the White House for six more years," contended Georgia Rep. Newt Gingrich, the assistant House Republican leader.

If there was to be a second honeymoon with Congress, it was off to a bumpy start as Democrats scoffed at both Bush's domestic proposals and his 100-day timetable.

"George Bush still lives and breathes foreign policy," said Rep. Barney Frank, D-Mass.

White House officials concede that it will be difficult to translate Bush's record popularity into votes on do-

mestic programs, many of which were previously rejected by Congress.

"We've always been in a tough position. The Democrats control the majority of both houses in Congress. We've always had a tough time," said Fred McClure, Bush's chief lobbyist.

As the nation's attention turns to the economy and other domestic concerns, Democrats and Republicans are skirmishing over legislation dealing with home-grown issues like education, transportation, energy, crime and drugs. But unlike the Persian Gulf war, the outcome of these political battles is far less certain for Bush.

Chief of Staff John Sununu last November told a group of conservatives he wouldn't mind if Congress just went home — that there was nothing further in terms of domestic

legislation that the administration really wanted.

The administration, after all, could point to a number of accomplishments — a five-year deficit reduction accord, and bills on clean air, child care, crime and immigration.

Although Sununu and other officials now are publicly championing Bush's new "domestic agenda," officials privately suggest they will be satisfied if they accomplish just enough to deflect Democratic attacks that Bush doesn't have a domestic plan, while trying to keep the spotlight firmly on his war role.

Even though Bush called on Congress a week ago to "move forward aggressively on the domestic front," he's been having a hard time getting his domestic divisions to the front line.

Yugoslav leadership meets

BELGRADE, Yugoslavia - The collective leadership of Yugoslavia met in emergency session Tuesday following an appeal by the defense minister to restore law and order in the Marxist republic of Serbia.

For the fourth day, anti-Communist protest convulsed Serbia. About 10,000 students demonstrated against Saturday's military crackdown that left two people dead and 120 injured. Students also demanded an end to Communist censorship of the local press.

The challenge to Serbia's government has brought to a head the political and ethnic strife pulling apart this fractious nation of six republics and two provinces. Serbia is the most populous republic.

The residents of Yugoslavia's various republics are being tugged at by pro-Western forces advocating more freedom in northern Croatia and Slovenia and by Communist authorities seeking to maintain their rule in Belgrade, the federal capital and seat of the powerful Serbian republic.

Borisav Jovic, Serbian head of the collective presidency and nominal armed forces commander, said the latest unrest has left security "endangered in various parts of the country"

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Jovic
Serbian collective president

and executive power paralyzed.

"In such circumstances and upon the demand by the federal defense minister, I have called an urgent presidency session as the supreme commander of the armed forces, to be held immediately," Jovic's statement said.

Slovenia and Croatia, where center-right governments replaced Communists last year, seek a loose alliance of sovereign states and have threatened to secede unless their demands are met.

Tuesday's session of the collective presidency, which includes a

representative from each republic and two provinces, appeared ominous to some because of the announcement that the session was ordered by Jovic at the behest of Defense Minister Gen. Veljko Kadijevic.

Serbia and the Serb-dominated, pro-Communist armed forces leadership are allies in the fight to restore order throughout Yugoslavia.

Slovenia's president, Milan Kucan, warned in a news conference in his capital Ljubljana that Tuesday's session in Belgrade could lead "to the proclamation of a state of emergency in order to suspend democratic processes in the country."

Slovenia boycotted the session, but no other details on the meeting were immediately available.

Republic authorities on Saturday ordered dozens of Army tanks out to restore order in Belgrade after fierce clashes that touched off the present anti-Milosevic protests.

Police using armored vehicles, tear gas and live ammunition broke up an opposition rally of 100,000 people protesting Communist censorship in Serbia's media.

Student protests have spread from Belgrade to the cities of Novi Sad, Nis and Kragujevac.

