

Iraqis mourn dead civilians, vow revenge against U.S.

From Associated Press reports

BAGHDAD, Iraq — Iraqi mourners marched alongside flag-covered coffins Thursday, firing automatic rifles into the air and crying out for revenge for the U.S. air strike that Iraq said killed hundreds in a shelter.

"By God we swear, we will make them pay their blood for this crime!" members of the crowd of 5,000 yelled. "The death of our women and children will not go unavenged!" Scores more bodies were pulled from the building that was blasted apart early Wednesday by U.S. warplanes, and a Cabinet minister depicted President Bush as a war criminal comparable to Hitler — a comparison Bush himself has used when speaking of Saddam Hussein.

The Iraqi military reported nearly 400 allied air raids late Wednesday and early Thursday, including 135 against "residential targets" across the country and 251 sorties against military targets in the southern war zone.

It said one allied plane was shot down, but gave no details.

Iran's official Islamic Republic News Agency said the southern Iraqi port city of Basra underwent intensive attacks, aimed primarily at an oil refinery and petrochemical complex.

The agency also reported numerous other raids, one of them targeting the southeastern town of al-Qurna, the reputed location of the biblical Garden of

Eden.

The manager of Baghdad's al-Rashid hotel, meanwhile, denied U.S. claims that his establishment housed a military communications center, and allowed foreign reporters to search the 14-story building.

The death toll from Wednesday's raid remained uncertain, in part because rescuers had not yet reached all areas of the shattered above-and-below-ground shelter.

The Information Ministry said at least 400 people had been killed. Civil defense officials estimated the toll at more than 500, mostly women and children. In either case, it was the bloodiest attack yet reported in the month-old Persian Gulf War.

Information Minister Latif Jassim angrily rejected U.S. assertions that the building was a military command bunker, rather than a civilian air raid shelter.

"We are told that Hitler burned the Jews," Jassim told reporters. "Now Bush is burning Iraqi children."

Jassim also denounced U.N. Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar as "a filthy and criminal conspirator."

"By maintaining silence toward the crimes of the Americans and their allies, he has in fact provided cover for the United States," Jassim said. "From both the moral and legal standpoints, he is no longer suitable for the position he holds."

At the United Nations, Perez de Cuellar replied: "I don't pay attention at all to their insults. ... I don't understand how during this terrible situation they have the time to attack the secretary-general."

Among those visiting the site Thursday was Yasser Arafat, chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization,

who was in Baghdad to confer with Saddam.

"If President Bush thinks that by killing civilians daily, he will break the morale of the Iraqi people, he's completely wrong," Arafat said. "Let's stop the war. Let's confer."

Arafat declined to give details about his talks with Saddam, but told reporters he saw "viable" aspects to peace proposals being formulated by non-aligned countries whose foreign ministers met in Yugoslavia this week.

At least 20 people killed in the raid were buried Thursday, and many more bodies were retrieved from the wreckage in Baghdad's al-Amerieh district by rescue teams supported by bulldozers and cranes.

Officials fear many corpses will never be identified, mainly because they were so badly mutilated or because entire families died. A military communique issued during the afternoon said 64 bodies had been identified.

Reporters escorted to the site by Information Ministry officials counted at least 40 corpses, many decapitated or missing limbs.

CNN reporter Peter Arnett quoted a mortuary director as saying that 288 bodies had been removed from the shelter, including 91 children.

A few hundred yards away, mourners marched to the neighborhood cemetery to bury the dead.

Other private funerals were held elsewhere in the capital.

Officials said most of the bodies retrieved Wednesday were still in hospital morgues.

Rescue operations had stopped after sundown Wednesday when allied air raids on Baghdad resumed. Officials said these raids, considerably less in-

tense than those of the previous night, targeted mainly the downtown telecommunications center, inflicting damage to nearby houses and business centers.

In its communique, the military said: "The coward, Bush, and his cowardly allies carried out an air raid on our

beloved capital, Baghdad, during the night of the 11th-12th."

It said the attack was a "premeditated plan to target civilians."

U.S. officials insisted the building was a legitimate military target, saying it served as a command and control center. They said they did not know

why civilians were there, and suggested Saddam might be using his people as human shields.

Neighborhood residents denied the accusations. Several people who had used the building for shelter in the past said an antenna on the roof was for television, not military communications.

Student boycott spreads to other cities

From Associated Press reports

VIENNA, Austria — A university boycott by students challenging Albania's ruling Communists has spread from Tirana to several other cities, Albanian journalists said Thursday.

The journalists said in telephone calls from the Albanian capital that students at several post-secondary institutions outside the capital had joined those striking at Enver Hoxha University since last week.

Students, who first staged their walkout nine days ago, have won government consent to upgrade primitive dormitory conditions and to make other improvements of campus life.

But the ruling Party of Labor has refused to agree to political demands that include the resignation of several government ministers and the removal

of Hoxha's name from the university. Hoxha, the strong-willed founder of communist Albania, led the country through decades of repressive Stalinist isolation.

He died in 1985. President Ramiz Alia, Hoxha's successor, began cautious liberalization last year. But popular discontent with both the moribund economy and repression bubbled over into occasional street violence and forced Alia to speed economic and political reforms.

Popular pro-democracy pressure in December led to the legalization of opposition political parties for the first time in 46 years of Communist rule. Albania's first free elections are scheduled for March 31.

A journalist at Democratic Revival, the newspaper of the opposition

Democratic Party of Albania, said about 7,000 students and an unspecified number of faculty were boycotting classes at several institutes, but some students continued to go to lectures.

That journalist and one with the state media, who spoke separately, said the strike had spread to students and teachers at the Higher Pedagogical Institute of Shkodra, 55 miles north of Tirana.

Some classes also were being boycotted at the High Institute of Agriculture in Kamez, outside of the capital, and at another post-secondary institution in Gjirokaster, about 85 miles south of Tirana, they said.

Tirana radio, monitored by the British Broadcasting Corp. in London, earlier reported that student teachers in Elbasan and agriculture students in Korçe also were on strike.

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War

ther fled north into Iraq or surrendered to the multinational forces strung out across the border.

Allied officers say that defectors traditionally overstate numbers of deserters to rationalize their own decision to flee.

However, front-line allied officers have reported a sharp rise in desertions this week.

The nearby U.S. 2nd Marine Division has taken 25 prisoners of war since the air war began Jan. 17. Lt. Col. Jan Huly, a division spokesman, said the latest

six, captured Wednesday night, included two lieutenants and four enlisted men. He said they were hungry, tired and afraid of the constant U.S. bombing.

Ahmed Abed Ali, an Egyptian military doctor who has been examining deserters, said all had been malnourished to some degree.

The soldiers said their food rations had been cut to two spoons of rice and some bread once every two days. Allied aircraft have been hitting supply lines, and other deserters have reported shortages of food, fuel and parts.

It is not clear how many other prisoners showed up at the other troop positions along the front on Thursday. Reports from the U.S. 1st Marine Division in northeast Saudi Arabia said more than 50 Iraqi enlisted men had surrendered in small groups to that unit in the past week.

Allied officers say the Egyptian encampments often draw the most prisoners because of their proximity to an abandoned city at the front that is visible from Iraqi positions.

The Army officer and Egyptian officers said the 22 who showed up were the largest group to surrender to any front-line unit.

U.S. military officials said last week that 1,000 Iraqis had either been captured or had surrendered since the war began, but military officers at individual units along the front said the numbers of deserters had risen sharply in the past few days.

None of the 12 deserters questioned was a ranking officer or a member of Iraq's 150,000-member Republican Guard, considered the most committed and skilled component of Saddam's 1-

million-man army.

However, 11 of the 12 said they were veterans of the 1980-88 war with Iran, and some said they were tired of war.

Some said it was not the intense allied bombing during the night that prompted them to leave, but the momentary absence of sentries.

The Egyptian officers did not allow enough time for reporters to question all the Iraqis individually.

A translator asked most questions to the group as a whole during the brief interview session, and it was unclear what prompted each individual to desert.

Six said they had left families behind in Iraq. One 35-year-old soldier said he left his wife and five daughters at home. "It's very difficult for these guys," the Army officer said.

"The single ones are relieved to be away from the fighting, but the ones with wives and children are pretty depressed."

They said they fled south, to Saudi Arabia, rather than north into Iraq because of the so-called "execution squads" that Saddam has posted behind his troops to kill deserters. However, other deserters have said the number of Iraqis heading north is many times greater than those going south.

The soldiers all said they were from the first tier of Iraqi defenses and that the bombing has been concentrated on the larger second line of troops and tanks. Previous groups have said the same thing.

The anti-Iraq alliance has been pounding Iraqi troops' positions in an attempt to break as much havoc with the army before the war shifts to high-casualty ground combat.

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