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UNCLASSIFIED - ~~FOUO~~

London Times
November 21, 2003

US Forces Unleashed On Border Town Rebels

By James Hider, in al Qa'im

THOUSANDS of US troops streamed into three Iraqi towns close to the Syrian border yesterday, in an attempt to flush out foreign Mujahidin fighters who have been using the city of al Qa'im as a launchpad into Iraq.

The offensive against the so-called "jihad superbowl" started at 3am as up to 4,000 soldiers, backed by tanks and helicopters, sealed off the city and the nearby towns of Karabilah and Saada, which are allegedly used to funnel foreign fighters into and out of the Sunni Triangle and Baghdad.

Attacks have increased sharply in the border region, with nightly gun battles being fought for the past month between US troops and foreign extremists as loyalists of the toppled president Saddam Hussein try to smuggle in men, arms and contraband.

Last month, masked gunmen took over al Qa'im police station and threatened the entire force with death if they continued "collaborating" with the coalition, according to Colonel David Teeples, the head of US forces in the area.

Facing mounting violence, and with local police too scared to do their jobs, Colonel Teeples of the 3rd Armoured Cavalry Regiment, launched operation Rifles Blitz yesterday with a pre-dawn artillery barrage of desert areas from which US troops have been mortared.

By dawn, all three towns were cut off from the world and from each other. Scores of tanks and troop carriers guarded the main roads and desert tracks. A helicopter dropped 90,000 leaflets warning the population in Arabic not to co-operate with fundamentalist "bastards".

The Syrian border was closed, the electricity cut and all satellite telephone communication jammed for several hours. Having isolated the region, the troops then started a massive operation to search all the houses in an area home to about 150,000 people.

Colonel Teeples said that the foreign fighters, backed by former regime loyalists, were a "cancer" that had to be surgically removed in a massive military operation.

For the first time since the US-led occupation began, he ordered his men to disarm entire towns, confiscating all weapons except those with licences.

Until now, the coalition has allowed Iraqis to keep pistols and AK47 assault rifles at home for protection against armed thieves who still roam the country.

He also ordered his officers to disburse \$20 (£12) in cash to any householder with no weapons at home. Larger rewards were offered to people who pointed out weapons caches or foreign fighters.

As soldiers swept the town of cinderblock one-storey houses, occasionally kicking down doors not opened voluntarily, groups of sullen Iraqis lined the streets to stare. Some responded to the waves from the lorryloads of soldiers in full combat gear, most just glared impassively back.

Colonel Teeple gathered what few local community leaders were willing or able to brave the streets to explain he wanted to help the "good people" of al Qa'im. But there was plenty of evidence on the street that anti-coalition hostility here is rampant.

Graffiti scrawled along the main street called for holy war, proclaiming "Jihad is the only way out"; "Long live Saddam Hussein," and "Slow death" in English for the benefit of the occupying forces.

Every week a gloating list of US casualties is posted in Arabic on the walls of the city mosques, together with a list of alleged collaborators marked for death. The most prominent of those was the police chief, murdered recently for working with the Americans. Seven others have also been named and killed.

American soldiers say they suffer daily attacks by rocket-propelled grenades, roadside bombs and mortars, mainly targeting tanks enforcing the nightly curfew. But officers were sure their massive show of force could stamp out the violence accompanying Ramadan, the Muslim holy month.

"If this is as bad as our generation's Tet Offensive gets, then we're in good shape," Lieutenant-Colonel Joe Busch said. He added that among more than 100 people detained in dawn raids was a man known as "the gatekeeper," whose role was to tip off foreign fighters to the movements of US troops, and of groups crossing the Syrian border illegally.

During the operation, a Syrian border guard ran across the border and opened fire on a US tank, an army spokesman said. The guard was shot in the leg and crawled back across the border.

One man was killed and another wounded at a US checkpoint when they attempted to leave al Qa'im as the operation started.

One local man said there were up to 300 Mujahidin in the town, many of them Saudis, Jordanians and Yemenis and believed to have direct links to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda terrorist movement. Others were Iraqi Islamists.

He said they were helped by members of Saddam's intelligence forces, who supplied them with guns, money and information. The intelligence officers at first posed as jihad fighters themselves until they had forged a bond of common interest that overcome ideological differences.

Most of the population supported the fighters, he added.

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