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Getting Offensive

U.S. forces give up on hearts and minds

By Bay Fang

WESTERN IRAQ--The time is 2100 hours. Like clockwork, four Bradley fighting vehicles roar up for their nightly meeting here in the desert. Ramps lower, and the commanders step out into the whipping rain. Surrounded by armed guards, they huddle in the back of one Bradley, using a red laser pointer and satellite-imagery maps to report their accomplishments. The booms of artillery firing illumination flares punctuate the meeting. No one seems to notice.

The U.S. forces here are playing hardball. In an unprecedented operation, they have locked down three towns stretching east from the Syrian border along the Euphrates River valley. Together, Husaybah, Karabilah, and Sadah claim a combined population of about 120,000 people. While troops from the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment search their houses, none of the residents are allowed in or out. It's part of a new get-tough initiative here, which aims to take the fight to the terrorists. Col. David Teeples, commander of the 3rd ACR, says he was forced to use these draconian measures. The region was the major transit point for foreign fighters, he says, who would come across the border, link up with contacts for weapons and money, then move along a terrorist "rat line" down to Ramadi, Fallujah, and Baghdad. "I said to the mayor, 'You've got a cancer in your town right now, so we are going to put your community on the operating table. It's going to take a few days, but when we're done . . . there won't be any more cancer in your community.'" Teeples says the goals of the initiative, called Operation Rifles Blitz, are simple: "That the Al Qaim region is free of foreigners, that all illegal weapons are destroyed or have been seized, that there is no resistance or anticoalition attacks. And I think the last part of it is, at the very least, I would like to have the population neutral. And that may be the toughest one."

Tough, indeed. As a line of Bradleys and humvees thunders through Karabilah, people watch, expressionless. When a soldier waves, no one waves back. A family that has just been searched stands by as a Bradley flattens a metal bench to squeeze into a narrow alleyway. "Why do they have to invade our neighborhoods?" asks a woman holding her dirty-faced baby. It is the start of the three-day Eid al-Fitr holiday, marking the end of Ramadan, but her family has not been able to visit relatives in other towns, and she is too afraid to even go to the market. They did receive the \$20 given to each compliant household, but they had to surrender their Kalashnikov rifle. The woman's speech is interrupted by the sounds of soldiers shooting the padlocks off nearby shops. "This just makes people angrier at the Americans," she says, "and more willing to fight them."

"Feel good." The commanders insist they have no choice. "I spent over \$1.5 million here, rebuilding schools, setting up city councils. They just don't care," says Lt. Col. Greg Reilly. For the past two months, Reilly says, his men were getting attacked roughly 15 times a day. "I endured it. But I reached a point where I had to fight." Whatever else it accomplishes, this operation has been good for morale. "Before, we were just taking it," says 2nd Lt. Steven Wojdakowski. "What we're doing now definitely makes soldiers feel good."

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A truck pulls up to a converted train station in the desert and discharges detainees, their hands bound. The detention facility, nicknamed Blacksmith Hotel, was built for this operation and can hold 2,000 prisoners. American soldiers with taped-over name tags pull the checkered scarves off detainees' heads and shove them into a pen. In just the first few days, they detained over 300 men--10 to 15 said to be foreign fighters. According to one intelligence officer, more and more townspeople have come forward to provide information.

What happens next, however, is anyone's guess. There have been few attacks during the operation, but that could just mean the fighters are lying low. And Colonel Teeple has to worry that the "cancer" might spread. Iraqis sit next to their cars and complain about the Americans. "They . . . say they want to bring us freedom and happiness," says one man, whose wife and children are in Karabilah. "But instead, they are just making enemies out of every one of us."

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