



IRAQ SITUATION STILL TENSE AFTER SADDAM'S CAPTURE

January 14, 2004

Although the U.S.-led coalition forces in Iraq were bolstered by the capture of former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein last month, violence continues as U.S. administrators and local leaders debate the best way to form a new government.

Iraq's U.S. administrator Paul Bremer said Tuesday that attacks against American targets had fallen significantly in the wake of Hussein's capture.

"In the last three or four weeks we've seen a rather dramatic reduction in the number of attacks on the coalition. They are down by about 50 percent," Bremer said.

"I think we have found since the arrest of Saddam a better way to go after the insurgency, more intelligence about who they are and, even more important, we are finding a lot of people ... coming over and providing us information," he added.

But some recent attacks have been rather devastating, including the downing of three aircraft this month west of Baghdad. The most recent was Tuesday in which hostile fire brought down an Army Apache attack helicopter. According to military spokesman Col William Darley, the two crew members escaped injury. However all nine U.S. soldiers in a helicopter that was shot down on Jan. 6 were killed.

Since American-led forces invaded Iraq last March, 496 American soldiers have died, 343 of those from hostile incidents, according to Department of Defense statistics. Since President Bush declared that major combat operations ended May 1, 358 U.S. soldiers have died.

Anti-U.S. insurgents

According to U.S. and Iraqi officials, many anti-U.S. fighters come from central Iraq, an area known as the Sunni Triangle because it is home to many Sunni Muslims. Although Arabs who follow the Sunni strain of Islam make up only about 20 percent of the population here, these tribes and clans were closest to Hussein and reaped power and privileges from his government.

Many of the men of the area were once part of Hussein's army, police and intelligence agencies. Because of this they have the most to lose in the new Iraq. Many have been banned from the new governing system under construction.

The effects of such bans are far reaching in many areas.

“Just about every family had someone working in security or the army or some government job,” Maj Hussein Mahdi Obeidy, a member of the U.S.-appointed police force told The Washington Post. “It was normal to join the Baath Party. It was like a rule.” Although a former Baathist, Obeidy was sufficiently low-ranking to qualify for the new force.

Some frustrated former Baathists have chosen targets meant to discourage Iraqis from cooperating with occupation forces, such as Iraqi police and government institutions.

Moving toward self-rule

Occupation authorities also face anti-American sentiments in other parts of the country, including southern Shiite towns. Shiite Muslims are a majority in Iraq but were long oppressed by the Hussein regime. Many of the complaints stem from the hardships of the past nine months, since the collapse of Hussein’s regime.

"I have three children to support, we are living in one rented room and I have to hold up a bucket to the ceiling when it rains," Ali Aziz, 35, a stocky, out-of-work laborer told The Washington Post. "I helped protect the city offices during the war, but now the old thieves are back inside, and they only give jobs to their friends."

Leading the criticism is the Shiite spiritual leader Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani who has said the U.S. formula for transferring power to the Iraqis is inadequate. Al-Sistani wants the provisional national assembly to be elected directly, not selected from regional caucuses as determined by a Nov. 15 accord.

U.S. officials responded to the cleric’s objections with a new plan that would open the caucuses to more people and make the transitional authority’s workings more transparent.

Crucial to any agreement is how long the more than 100,000 American troops would remain in the country after power is handed over to the Iraqis this summer as planned.

By Annie Schleicher, NewsHour Extra

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