

Iraq Reinforces the North

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Kurdish and US sources report Iraqi forces mobilizing at the frontiers of the Kurdish-controlled areas.

As the countdown to war continues, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein has moved military reinforcements close to the border with the liberated Kurdish region, mirroring a similar build-up on his southern border with Kuwait.

In addition to troop and tank reinforcements on the edge of the 32nd parallel - the limit of the no-fly zone imposed by the US and UK over northern Iraq - the skies over the oil city of Kirkuk only a short distance outside the liberated area have in recent days been covered in a thick, black cloud of smoke.

The reason for the smoke barrier obscuring Kirkuk is not known. Kurdish leaders believe the Iraqi regime may be creating a literal smokescreen in hope of interfering with US satellites and reconnaissance flights over the northern front-line area. But there are also reports that a number of mines planted around the Kirkuk oil wells have accidentally exploded, starting a series of fires.

According to these sources, the mines have been laid in recent weeks by Russian experts working with the Iraqis. Their purpose may be to enable the destruction of the oil wells should Kirkuk be captured by American forces.

Although unconfirmed as yet, these reports were strengthened on Tuesday by claims that the United States had detected movements of explosives towards the Kirkuk oilfields.

US officials said last week that Saddam Hussein had moved Ababil-50 and Ababil-100 missiles north of Baghdad in order to be in a position to threaten the populations of Kirkuk and Mosul - once predominantly Kurdish, but now almost wholly "Arabised" - after a takeover by American or Kurdish forces.

The officials said Saddam had also boosted his southern defences by placing surface-to-surface missiles within range of Kuwait, which is hosting US combat forces. The missiles are mobile and have range enough to reach Kuwait city. The officials said Saddam appeared to be attempting to put in place systems that could threaten US-led invasion forces and local resistance movements - including the Kurdish peshmerga in northern Iraq.

Despite the military build-up along the Kurdish front line, Kurdish officials believe that many army officers - including generals - will desert as soon as war begins and join American and British forces in the liberated area.

But the build-up has deepened the fears of ordinary Kurds, who have suffered so much at the hands of Saddam's regime. They are hoping the war will be short, as the United States and Britain are promising. If Saddam remains in power, and Kurds have to face the consequences of his regime once again, many would try to leave Iraq in order to claim asylum abroad.

Kurds are also concerned about a possible occupation by Turkish troops. Turkey has not concealed its concern that a war to remove Saddam Hussein might result in the disintegration of Iraq and the establishment, in northern Iraq, of a Kurdish state that would encourage new agitation within Turkey's own Kurdish population. The Turks also have historic claims to the oil wealth of Mosul, just outside the liberated area.

Kurdish leaders have expressed outrage over Turkey's desire to send its troops into northern Iraq and hope the United States can persuade Turkey not to enter the liberated area.

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Location: Turkey
Iraqi Kurdistan
Iraq

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