

Iraqi Regime Prepares for War

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Baghdad readies for street-by-street fighting, as Saddam Hussein considers his options.

As the Anglo-American net tightens around Iraq, with war seemingly only hours away, the son of President Saddam Hussein has issued an order decreeing that anyone smuggling information to opponents of the regime will face immediate execution.

Sources close to Saddam's inner circle said the order was issued on Sunday, little more than 24 hours before US President George Bush gave his Iraqi counterpart 48 hours to leave Iraq - or be removed by force. They said it was one of a raft of measures designed to strengthen the protective shield around the regime's inner core as Iraq braces for a conflict designed to topple Saddam after three generations' despotic rule and two catastrophic wars.

The sources said the order was signed by Qosay Saddam Hussein, Saddam's younger son, the commander of the elite Republican Guards and the man with overall responsibility for Iraq's security forces. It was a clear indication of concern over the loyalty of some of those around Saddam and appeared to confirm claims by opposition leaders working closely with the United States that they have informants in the very heart of the regime.

The sources said Saddam had also placed his half-brother, Barzan Tikriti, under house arrest. Reports of disputes between Barzan and Saddam have circulated for years. Since returning to Iraq in 1998, after a decade as Iraq's ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva, Barzan has been portrayed by some opposition forces as a man positioning himself to replace Saddam.

Military movements ordered since the drift to war began several months ago indicate that Saddam intends to fight for his life in the Sunni heartland of Iraq, from where his regime draws much of its strength and where he has the vast majority of his command-and-control posts. Republican Guard divisions have been moved towards the centre, from the Kurdish north and Shia south, and now form a wall around Baghdad.

Inside the capital, three main militias have been readied for street-to-street fighting - the Fedayeen of Saddam of Odey Saddam Hussein, the president's elder son; Qosay's Emergency Forces; and the militia of the ruling Ba'ath party. Key positions including road junctions and offices of the intelligence services have been heavily sandbagged.

Saddam himself no longer travels in multi-Mercedes convoys and, once war has broken out, is expected to hide himself, as he has in the past, among the people - disguising himself in tribal robes and moving about in lorries and pick-up trucks.

Although most Arab analysts believe Saddam will portray himself as the victim of this war for as long as he can, there is growing concern inside Iraq that he may use the chemical weapons most Western countries believe he has to halt any ground offensive into southern Iraq across the Kuwaiti border.

Iraqis contacted by telephone in the southern city of Basra report being told to leave the area "or face serious consequences" - a reference, they believe, to chemical weapons. Saddam has warned repeatedly that anyone trying to remove him from power will inherit "a land without people".

Fears that chemical weapons may be used in a final, cataclysmic show of Ba'athist power have been

strengthened by the appointment of Saddam's cousin, Ali Hassan al-Majid, to head the key southern sector under emergency war plans announced on Saturday. Al-Majid is known to all Iraqis as "Chemical Ali" for his role in the 1988 campaign against rebellious Kurds in northern Iraq in which thousands of Kurds died, many in chemical attacks.

Once war begins, Saddam is expected to appeal to the Arab and Muslim worlds to declare a jihad - holy war - against America, Britain and any power supporting them in any way. Such a call would increase the fear of terrorist attack and be of deep concern to Gulf states who have provided the US with logistical facilities for war. It could cause turmoil in the Arab street, threatening the stability of governments perceived to have stood idly by as one of their own comes under attack. But it would be unlikely to influence the behaviour of the Iraqi people and Iraqi fighting forces, who have direct experience of Saddam's atrocities.

Reports from inside Iraq suggest that neither the people nor the military will put up much of a fight as the prospect of liberation from Saddam looms. Many senior officers have already signalled their intention not to oppose the invaders either in the Kurdish north or in the Shia south. If anywhere, it is in Baghdad itself that the Anglo-American forces will meet resistance and casualties could be high.

There is also concern that Saddam might try to slow the pace of war by creating a humanitarian tragedy that he believes will increase popular opposition to the war in the West and force the war planners to reconsider. Kurds fear this might take the shape of a chemical attack against them, Saddam's oldest and most hated opponents.

But reports from Baghdad suggest that this tragedy might take place in the capital itself - within range of the television lenses of an army of journalists. A well-informed source in the western suburb of Amariya reported yesterday that a new command-and-control bunker has been set up underneath a children's orphanage, setting the stage for a replay of the 1991 disaster when hundreds of civilians died in Amariya when two US missiles hit a building being used as an air raid shelter. The Allies said the shelter concealed a command-and-control post - fiercely denied by Baghdad, which depicts the incident as a humanitarian outrage.

Opinion is divided over what Saddam will do when - if - the war against him enters its end game. Some believe the great survivor will appeal to the Arab world for asylum; others that he will escape, in one of his many disguises, and become a new Osama bin Laden. - on the run and dangerous. But the clue to his final stand may well lie in a 27-page analysis he wrote in 1979 after the overthrow of the Shah of Iran.

His conclusion: that the Shah's big mistake was leaving the country. Had the Shah held his ground, Saddam wrote, his rule would have continued.

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