

Samarra in Grip of Saddam Loyalists

Author: [Aqil Jabbar](#)

Republican Guards leading insurgency in Sunni town north of Baghdad.

Ten kilometres outside the town of Samarra, civilian traffic turned off the main highway from Baghdad, the danger underlined by huge US minesweepers combing the roadside in search of insurgent bombs.

Inside the town, men dressed in the dark green uniform and red boots of the Republican Guard manned a checkpoint.

They stood in the shadow of Samarra's famous gold-roofed shrine just out of sight from nearby bases of the US Army and US-sponsored Iraqi Civil Defence Corps.

"We control the situation, because the ICDC are cowards and traitors," one former Guard captain told IWPR. Policemen directed traffic as members of Saddam's former elite outfit looked on.

For 12 days, the Guards said, they prevented the ICDC and US forces from patrolling the streets of this predominantly Sunni town that spans the Tigris river north of Baghdad.

When IWPR visited, the Guards planned to drive the ICDC and US forces out of their fortified bases, and bring Samarra - like Fallujah - under insurgent control.

Just after 11:00 am, a huge explosion rocked the town.

The street outside the ICDC base in the northeast corner of the town was a scene of chaos as the injured were loaded into ambulances on the street.

An explosive device reportedly was detonated inside the gates, bringing down part of the building.

Local ICDC head Adnan Thabet ran into the street. "Why you didn't see that rigged car coming? Where were you?" he shouted at his men.

He agreed to take one question from a journalist. However, when it was asked - "why can't you control the situation inside Samarra?" - he bellowed in anger.

"If America cannot do this, how can I do it?" he shouted.

Men came running down the street shouting, "Go, go, go - the attack will begin. Some mortars from the industrial area will attack the base."

The crowd of bystanders, panicking, began to run away.

Ten minutes later, in an open area across town, outside a row of automobile workshops, a battery of insurgent mortars prepared to fire.

Nearly 20 uniformed Republican Guard soldiers were ready to fire 13 mortars, while a team armed with a Stella shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missiles stood guard on the roof of a nearby hotel.

A man wearing a general's stars listened to his mobile telephone for the signal.

Ten of the mortars were the smaller 82mm type, effective mainly against troops in the open.

But three were of the heavier more massive 120mm variety made in the former Soviet Union and capable of wreaking far greater damage.

"I can't tell you what's going to happen," the general said, answering a journalist's question.

"You will see with your eyes. Stay here and publish the truth for the Iraqis."

At 11:30 am, the mortars begin firing.

After each round, a forward observer told the general where the shell landed. The gunners corrected their aim, and fired again.

Their mortars fired for nearly 90 minutes at intervals of up to 15 minutes each.

Smoke began rising from across the town, but US forces did not fire back.

According to American military reports, the mortar fire killed four soldiers and destroyed a building inside the US base close to the ICDC building.

At 1.00 pm, as US Apache attack helicopters hovered over the town, the mortar crews dismantled their weapons and carried them away.

At the smashed US base, soldiers formed a convoy of trucks. Tanks stood guard, while Apache helicopters periodically fired into the town with Hellfire missiles and 30mm auto-cannons.

When the Americans left, looters arrived.

The looters swarmed onto the base to emerge with televisions, satellite equipment, and other valuables.

But the helicopters soon came back, and started firing at the looters. Clouds of dust erupted from the base

as 30mm rounds struck home.

One man was wounded in the leg as he ran through the street carrying a television.

Seconds later, this IWPR correspondent dashed for a new hiding place when a 30mm cannon round smashed through his cover behind a shop's metal door.

The Apaches pounded the industrial area as they circled, fired volleys of four rockets, circled, and fired again.

The helicopters peppered the upper two floors of the Mahdi hotel, where a Stella team was positioned. Fires erupted in the rooms.

Stella missiles and tracer fire arched upward toward the helicopters but missed, allowing the pilots to withdraw. In their place, F-16 fighter-bombers suddenly appeared.

Along with this correspondent, families piled into cars and raced to safety across the Tigris.

US troops guarding the bridge waved them past, and a cluster of TV cameras waited just beyond the tanks.

A huge explosion echoed across the river. The ground quivered, and the glass rattled in nearby shop windows. Smoke billowed from the town.

The loudspeakers of local mosques continued to intone "Allahu Akbar" or God is Greater, just as they had done when the fighting erupted four hours earlier.

Aqil Jabbar is an IWPR trainee.

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/samarra-grip-saddam-loyalists>