

US Imposes Harsh Regime in Kut

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Townpeople fondly recall former occupation by Ukrainian soldiers, whom they describe as simple and friendly.

US Humvees patrol the city of Kut, their mounted machineguns and grenade launchers at the ready, while idle-looking Ukrainian soldiers stand next to their jeeps at roadside checkpoints.

Citizens of this south-eastern Iraqi town say the contrast is due to an uprising by followers of Shia preacher Muqtada al-Sadr which led to the easygoing Ukrainian occupation being replaced by a harsh American one.

The Ukrainian occupation of Kut began last August, when their forces took over from US Marines, and continued to April 7, at which point they evacuated the city after a brief confrontation with members of Sadr's Mahdi Army.

IWPR reporters attempted to approach US and Ukrainian soldiers for comment, but were warned away - despite identifying themselves as journalists.

Kut citizens interviewed by IWPR, though, said the Ukrainian withdrawal was prompted by closure of the Sadrist newspaper al-Hawza which sparked a demonstration outside a Ukrainian position guarding the town's main bridge over the Tigris.

According to Muhammed Hussein, a mukhtar or neighbourhood leader from the Sharqiya district of Kut, the Ukrainians fired on the protesters, killing a man and a woman inside their car.

In later fighting, according to Coalition sources, one Ukrainian soldier and a South African security contractor were reported killed.

Then - according to some reports - the Ukrainians withdrew without orders, leaving other Coalition personnel behind.

Two days later, however, Ukrainian forces re-entered the city together with the US 1st Armored division, which triggered renewed fighting. However, citizens say, the Mahdi Army quickly dispersed.

Khalid Mohammed, a doctor at the city's main hospital, counted 18 dead, only three from the Mahdi Army and all shot in the head by snipers. The remaining 15 dead were civilians, while dozens of other were injured.

Eight of the dead - including three women and a child - came from one house. Zuhair Hikmat, 27, was inside when the building was hit.

"Late in the night, I heard a bang and then suddenly everything collapsed. I awoke in the hospital knowing nothing of my family until people informed me," Zuhair said.

"What did my family do?" he asked. "They paid the price of the Americans' random strike. Where are the human rights that they keep talking about?"

Although the Mahdi Army has now disappeared, the thud of explosions, which residents presume to be mortar impacts, still echo from behind the four-metre high concrete walls surrounding the airbase where US troops are stationed, while puffs of smoke and dust drift skyward.

The city shuts down as the 9.00 pm curfew approaches, with citizens scurrying home before the deadline. Even the local television station goes off the air at 8.00 pm.

Residents complain that US forces brandish their weapons, arrest citizens arbitrarily, and have ripped up photos of revered clerics, including Muqtada al-Sadr's father, the venerated Ayatollah Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr, reportedly murdered by agents of Saddam Hussein in 1999.

"It seems that the photo of the late Mohammed [Sadeq] al-Sadr and his son terrify the Americans," said secondary school student Jassem Mohammed.

"This looks like Saddam's policy of targeting our religious symbols," Jassem said. But he insists that "we won't allow them to deface any picture of our marjaeya, our spiritual guides".

Townpeople look back fondly to the occupation by Ukrainian troops, whom they described as simple and friendly - albeit prone to occasional corruption.

Taxi driver Hussein Jabbar recalls how Ukrainian soldiers guarding a petrol station used to let him fill up without sitting in the hours-long queue, in exchange for a gift of alcohol.

Mukhtar Hussein witnessed soldiers from the Ukraine pocketing cash offered by Iranian pilgrims at an immigration control point at the city's main bus depot.

Nonetheless, few Kut citizens appeared to resent the graft, which they attributed to the Ukrainians' poverty.

"When they came to buy little things, they interacted well with us, in a nice way, and we respected them," recalled 24-year-old grocer Reda Khalf.

"We never saw a Ukrainian brandish his weapon at any citizen of Kut, and they never used violence against the people," said Sayf Ahmed, 22, a student. "They were real peacekeepers."

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