

Hope fades for citizens of Baghdad

They begin to see appalling fate that awaits them

The darkness is beginning to descend, the fog of anxiety that falls upon all people when they realise that they face unimaginable danger. It's not just the thousands of empty, shut-up shops in Baghdad, whose owners are taking their goods home for fear of looting. It's not even the sight of concrete barges beside the Tigris to provide transport if the Americans blow up the great bridges. It's a feeling – and I quote a long-term Baghdad resident who has lived in the Middle East for almost a quarter of a century – that “the glue will come unstuck and there will be nothing left to hold people together”.

The nightmare is not so much the cruel bombardment of Iraq, whose inevitability is now assured, as the growing conviction that the Anglo-American invasion will provoke a civil war, of Shia against Sunnis, of Sunnis against Kurds, of Kurds and Turkomans. Driving through the streets of the great Shia slums of Saddam City – the millions here originally came from the Amara region of southern Iraq – it is possible to comprehend the fears of the Sunni minority, that the poor will descend in their tens of thousands to pillage Baghdad City the moment central authority crumbles.

How unkind, you may say. Weren't the Shia the most repressed people in Iraq these past decades? Around Baghdad, the people have seen the Republican Guard; their checkpoints are growing more impressive. The main highway to Kurdistan has been closed for the past three days and thus the outlines of a siege are being laid in the minds of Baghdad's people. City officials are now talking of a total day-and-night curfew in Baghdad throughout the US bombardment, 24 hours of confinement without a known end, not a soul on the street for a week or two weeks – depending, I suppose, on the length of time General Tommy Franks wants to use and test his weapons

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against Saddam Hussein and Iraq.

In the 1991 Gulf War, Baghdad residents packed their freezers with meat, only to find that the US destruction of the Iraqi power grid turned their food rotten within hours. Now they are eating through the contents of their freezers and buying tons of bread, biscuits, dates and nuts. Thousands of e-mail users in Iraq are also receiving anonymous messages in Arabic outlining the medical treatment to be given in the event of chemical or biological attack. They don't suggest who might use these weapons of mass destruction, nor who might have sent the messages. The very few Europeans left here suspect this could be a US military Psyops job, another attempt to throw panic into a civilian population.

Oddly, the e-mails did not mention something the Americans might prefer to hide from both Iraqis and their "allies" in the West: that they fully intend to use depleted uranium (DU) ammunition in the coming conflict. Tens of thousands of Gulf War syndrome sufferers and a growing number of medical scholars believe that the aerosol spray released by these armour-piercing rounds have caused plagues of cancers, especially in the area around Basra where they were used 12 years ago. But now – in remarks virtually ignored outside Kuwait – General Buford Blount of the US 3rd Infantry Division has admitted that his men would again be using DU shells in battle in Iraq. "If we receive the order to attack, final preparations will only take a few days. We have already begun to unwrap our depleted uranium anti-tank shells," he said.

Equally ignored outside Kuwait have been the violations of the UN's buffer zone between Kuwait and Iraq, guarded by Bangladeshi troops until their withdrawal yesterday. The great majority of recent violations have been by American helicopters, jets and vehicle patrols over the territory, which will be the starting point for America's invasion.

It's extraordinary that none of this makes its way into the Baghdad press. Not even when Ukrainian chemical weapons specialists agreed to assist US troops in the battlefield – most of Iraq's chemical weapons were of Soviet inspiration – did the Iraqi press wake up. For wasn't this the same Ukraine that was being threatened with sanctions by the US only four months ago for allegedly selling to Iraq its Kolchuga radar system, which can detect Stealth bombers?

So who, with the clock at five minutes to midnight, appears to be the most confident man in all Iraq? Indeed, need the reader ponder such an obvious question? On state television yesterday, he appeared yet again, insisting that his forces would destroy the American invasion force, instructing his son Qusay – commander of the Baghdad military zone – that American mothers would weep tears of blood at the death of their sons if they invaded Iraq.

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He was in uniform, and he smiled confidently, as usual. Perhaps there is some quaint reassurance to be had, listening to the wisdom of the Great Leader at such a moment. Yesterday, even as President Bush was giving him 48 hours to go into exile to spare his country invasion, President Saddam was regaling the world with his assurances to the Tunisian Foreign Minister. “When Saddam Hussein says we have no weapons of mass destruction, it means what he means he says,” he explained. Then came the more familiar rhetoric. “If the US attacks, it will find [Iraqi] fighters behind every rock, wall or tree in defence of their land and freedom.”

Only a couple of weeks ago, the President was telling his soldiers that “all this talk about what [weapons] America has, is nonsense ... We should plan on the basis that the battlefields must be everywhere, the battlefields should be wherever there are people.” Orwellian isn’t the word for it. As a quarter of a million US troops prepare to invade Iraq within hours, page two of the Baghdad newspaper Babylon informed its readers yesterday that “President Saddam Hussein, may God preserve him, received a telegram from the Ministry of Industry and Minerals on the anniversary of His Excellence’s visit to the dairy product factories of Abu Ghoraib on 16 March, 1978.”

Dairy products? Isn’t that what President Saddam was thinking about 13 years ago, when he told a British schoolboy hostage he was about to free that he must “take care to drink your milk every day”? But the statement the world waited to hear about the Iraqi leader came from one of his officials. “The President was born in Iraq and will die in Iraq,” he said. ♦