

Saddam's spin doctors keep up a war front

But Iraq's main anger is trained on Saudi prince

It was a most peculiar day. Overnight, the Americans had pulverised a neo-Classical office block next to what was – before a previous pulverisation – the Iraqi government's Department of Air Armaments. Then, just before 10am yesterday, an aircraft could be heard diving high over Baghdad and a clap of sound from the other side of the Tigris, with the usual grey-black column of smoke, signalled the end of another annexe belonging to the sons of Saddam. Then came the bus trip.

The Iraqis wanted to take the press to see another example of US and British “imperialist-racist violence” and so we were trucked off to the outskirts of the city, to the campus of what was described as a ladies education college. Campus it was, with agricultural blocks and plant testing fields and a perimeter of palm groves. And the crime against humanity to which we were taken? A large crater in the lawn beside a women's dormitory, a hundred smashed windows and some broken power lines. A hundred metres away, I found four black and white cows tethered in the grass and, perhaps 30 feet from the crater, a slit trench with sand-bags; surely, we told ourselves, an ordinary part of any college campus.

Now let's be fair. College staff have every right to take their own protection against America's notoriously inaccurate “smart” bombs. But did they dig the slit trench? Did they park the civilian trucks and buses, scattered around the empty campus, 30 metres from each other and always under the foliage of trees? And if college personnel normally worked the gates, why was the campus guarded by armed and green-uniformed militiamen? The crater was 20ft deep – the classic cruise missile's gouge in the ground – and its blast was enormous. Internal doors were torn from their hinges, desks overturned, beds thrown across rooms. But no one was hurt; indeed, the college

Robert Fisk » Saddam's spin doctors keep up a war front

had been abandoned long before the attacks.

Now fast-forward to a press conference a couple of hours later by the ubiquitous, bespectacled and uniformed minister of information, Mohamed Saeed al-Sahaf, who announced casualties in Baghdad for the previous 36 hours of air raids as 125 wounded and 24 dead.

His figures for other governorates were, of course, somewhat less: 18 wounded in Qadasiyeh and three dead, in Babylon more than 100 wounded and 18 dead, including nine children in the Hilla district (from which, by chance, Mr Sahaf himself comes). But this provoked an obvious question.

Why did the bus not take us to the hospitals to talk to the 125 wounded rather than the empty women's college with its broken windows and four uncommunicative cows? Of course, bureaucracy here works in Ottoman fashion, no more so than in this former capital of the Caliphs. Someone in authority had the bright idea of allowing Arab cameramen for Reuters and the Associated Press to travel to Babylon to take video footage of the aftermath of a battle that the Iraqis claim to have fought successfully. And that was that.

Mr Sahaf's most dramatic moment, however, came at the start of his daily press conference when he said American aircraft had attacked two buses on the highway between Baghdad and Amman carrying western "human shields", including Europeans and Americans. "The brave Americans have started shooting at the Americans – and Europeans of different nationalities," he announced – not, I thought, without some satisfaction at further evidence of American "barbarism". But then again, we know as a fact that the Americans attacked a Syrian bus last week just after it had crossed the frontier into Iraq, reportedly killing five passengers. And the British soldier whose own unit was attacked by US "friendly fire" last week – he also condemned the air assault for endangering Iraqi civilians – described the American pilot as a "cowboy". Anything, in other words, could be true.

It's getting hotter in Baghdad – in every sense of the word – and in one month the temperature will rise to 35C. The dense black shroud of oil smoke that covers the city is now creating a sinister fog – peace activists have not yet complained of the damage this may do to the health of Iraqi children – which makes even the mildest of air raids into things of mystery. At 4.45pm yesterday came the sound of jets yet again, followed by a series of short, sharp explosions that lasted for up to a minute. They sounded all too familiar to my ears, the rumble of cluster bombs – legal against armour but decidedly illegal if used against civilians. I stared for 10 minutes through the smoke from a high-rise apartment block, to no avail. Whether the bombs were dropped in the suburbs, on a military barracks or in a built-up area was not possible to discover.

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Nor is the status of Baghdad in this war. Far from being besieged, its main roads north and south are open – a few trains are still leaving for northern cities – and although US troops were reported to have set up a checkpoint on the road west to Amman, they appear to have been a “flying column”, stopping trucks and cars for a few hours and then vanishing into the desert at night.

By evening, Vice-President Ramadan was back – he has the intriguing habit of never looking at anyone who asks him a question – to insist that 6,000 Arab volunteers have arrived in Iraq to fight the Americans and British, half of them anxious for “martyrdom”.

Mr Ramadan repeated yet again Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction and spent some time claiming the Americans and British might plant such weapons in Iraq to fool the world and justify their invasion. The Saudi Foreign Minister, Prince Saud al-Faisal, was Mr Ramadan's – and thus Saddam's – target. “He has offered advice – which is something he is in the habit of doing – and his advice is he would like to see our leader leave his post,” Mr Ramadan thundered. “Let me tell this lackey, this stooge, this small entity – they know full well who his cousin is, the so-called Prince [Ambassador] Bandar in Washington, and who he works for. Let them [the Saudis] say to him: ‘Go to hell. All we wish for is that you do not have an Arab name...’ Let me tell you, you are too small, too much of a nothing, to say a word to the leader of Iraq. Those who give up will be swept away from the land of the Arabs.” Which did little for Iraqi-Saudi relations. ♦