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Land, sea and air assault

Baghdad under cruise missile attack ● UK and US marines fight way to Basra ● Initial Iraqi resistance light ● Reports of oilfields set ablaze ● Rumsfeld promises force 'never seen before'

Julian Borger in Washington and **Rory McCarthy** in Camp As Sayliyah, Qatar

The ground war began in Iraq last night as British and American marines stormed beaches on the Gulf coast in an assault on the south-eastern city of Basra, while explosions lit up Baghdad under a heavy bombardment by cruise missiles. Royal Marines from 3 Commando Brigade launched a helicopter and hovercraft assault on "Red Beach" where the strategically vital Shatt-al-Arab waterway meets the Gulf. There were also reports that British and US marines had taken the port town of Umm Qasr on the way to Basra.

The assault was preceded by a barrage by coalition artillery, naval guns and cruise missiles, along with aircraft launched from US carriers in the Gulf. Initial reports suggested that when the marines reached the beach, Iraqi resistance was light or non-existent.

The Pentagon claimed that in the first 24 hours of Operation Iraqi Freedom there had been no coalition casualties. US defence officials also claimed the psychological offensive on Iraqi soldiers, under which they have been bombarded with radio messages and leaflets urging them to stand aside, was bringing successes although they did not give details. "So far, so very, very good," an official said.

In Baghdad, huge explosions shook the city centre and illuminated the suburbs. US defence officials said that the barrage came almost exclusively from cruise missiles, to minimise the threat to coalition pilots. They said the missiles had been aimed at "leadership targets", like yesterday morning's cruise missile attack, which had been intended to kill Saddam Hussein.

However Pentagon officials said the most formidable barrage, the long-predicted "shock and awe" to be inflicted on Iraq, was yet to come. Yesterday the US defence secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, promised action of "a force and scope and scale beyond what has been seen before". Officials at the Pentagon said last night that advance elements of the 101st Airborne Division pushed their way northwards through the sand barriers along the frontier after nightfall, but did not reveal their destination.

Meanwhile, journalists with the 101st Airborne Division reported that its air assault troops were also inside southern Iraq, alongside special forces units which have been infiltrating for days.

One official in the Pentagon said that the unexpected nature of the first hours of the assault — a staggered attack using an initially small number of ground troops — was a result of tactical decisions taken

by the field commander in Qatar, General Tommy Franks, responding to events and to Iraqi manoeuvres.

"From now on, it's in his hands, and we will not always know what is going on," the official said. "When you see shock and awe you will know about it."

Gen Franks may have dispatched his troops early in response to the reports that the south-eastern oil fields were burning, and to counter Iraqi artillery and missile attacks aimed at northern Kuwait. US and British troops along the border repeatedly donned their protection suits as fears were raised that some of the shells and missiles might contain chemical or biological agents.

However, there were no reports of any such weapons being used by late last night. Nor was there any confirmation of early reports that Scud missiles, also banned by the United Nations, had been used against coalition forces. At least one of four incoming missiles was destroyed in mid-flight by Patriot interceptor missiles and debris was being analysed by military experts.

The Pentagon admitted that a special forces helicopter had crashed landed behind the lines. The soldiers abroad were rescued by another helicopter and the damaged aircraft was then bombed to prevent it falling into the hands of Iraqi soldiers.

Scores of navy planes could be seen taking off from aircraft carriers in the Gulf, while bomb and missile blasts shook central Baghdad and the outskirts.

Mr Rumsfeld, the US defence secretary, also said that oilfields could be seen burning yesterday. He had received "indications", he said, "that the Iraqi regime may have set fire to as many as three or four of the oil wells in the south".

US defence officials said later the oilfields were west of Basra in the south-east corner of Iraq, but the claim could not be independently confirmed.

Defence and intelligence officials appeared confident yesterday that the pre-dawn cruise missile and stealth aircraft attack on a "leadership compound" on the southern outskirts of Baghdad had killed a number of senior Iraqi officials.

There were even said to be some senior CIA officials who believed that President Saddam had been killed and that a double had made the subsequent video broadcast. "I would not steer you in that direction," a US official said.

Defence sources claimed that "channels of communication" had been opened with Iraqi commanders, including senior officers from the elite Republican Guard, and that they were ready to defect.



Smoke billows from a burning building as a US missile hits the planning ministry during the bombardment of Baghdad yesterday Photograph: Ramzi Haidar/EPA

A short, sharp shock, then Baghdad bounces back



Suzanne Goldenberg in Baghdad

The plaintive wail of the air raid siren sliced through the evening at around 9pm, announcing the moment Iraqis had awaited with dread: the definitive start of the war.

From the western banks of the Tigris, that source of ancient Mesopotamian civilisation that, while silted now, still defines the heart of Baghdad, the anti-aircraft guns clattered into action.

Streaks of red and white from anti-aircraft guns shot across the sky as the Iraqi soldiers took to their stations. But the attack was already upon them.

Fifteen minutes later, two projectiles hit the dome of what appeared to be one of Saddam Hussein's palaces in a thunderous explosion.

The building collapsed in flames, and great billows of smoke drifted towards the river.

Unlike an earlier pre-dawn

raid, when American F-17 fighters pounded installations on the western and southern perimeters of the city, the evening attack — though relatively brief — appeared calculated to shake Baghdad to the core.

At least two other official buildings were pulverised in a bombardment that appeared concentrated on the cluster of ministries strung out for about 1km along a bend in the river.

From the far side of the Tigris, with a clear view of the fireworks, it appeared that the Americans were sticking to their self-declared strategy of decapitating the Iraqi regime.

The campaign began only minutes before dawn, when US bombers struck what the Pentagon said was a meeting of the Iraqi leadership command on the western perimeters of Baghdad.

The attack — 90 minutes after the expiry of President George Bush's deadline — was also brief, and by mid-morning Baghdad officialdom had bounced back from the assault.

Shabab television, which is controlled by Saddam's oldest son, Uday, was airing pictures of defiance: commandos swathed in black headscarfs in the embrace of close combat. An announcer read out a speech from Uday — who,

Austin



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while sidelined for his younger brother, remains a power to reckon with in Baghdad — in which he raged against the enemy, and denounced the Americans as "sons of whores and bastards".

Barely two hours after the first Cruise and Tomahawk missiles were fired, Saddam Hussein popped up on television to demonstrate he was alive and well, and thoroughly in command.

"With the dawn prayers of this day, the criminal little Bush together with his allies carried out the crime they had been promising against Iraq," he said, turning over the handwritten pages in a stenographer's notebook.

It was difficult to read the expression on a face framed by an uncouth pair of horn-rimmed glasses and a black beret, but he seemed outwardly calm.

Minutes later, Iraqi officials rustled up the information minister, Mohammed Saeed al-Sahaf, with uncharacteristic speed to demonstrate their mastery of the situation remained undiminished.

"I am sure they are stupid, and they will never succeed," he said of America's strategy. "At the same time, this is a good testimony, a good proof that they are killers, they are criminals and they ▶ **Page 2**

Blair appeals for national unity

Michael White Political editor

Tony Blair appealed to a deeply divided Britain last night to unite behind the country's armed forces as they joined the attack to deliver the Iraqi people from their "barbarous rulers".

In a recorded television broadcast transmitted after the first main Anglo-American assault — "from air, land and sea" — the prime minister claimed that the direct threat to Britain was "real, growing" and entirely different from those of the past.

Addressing fears that his actions will make Britain a special target, he said: "The truth is, all nations are targets ... Britain has never been a nation to hide at the back. But, even if we were, it wouldn't avail us."

Speaking before flying to a fraught European summit with President Jacques Chirac of France and anti-war critics, Mr Blair

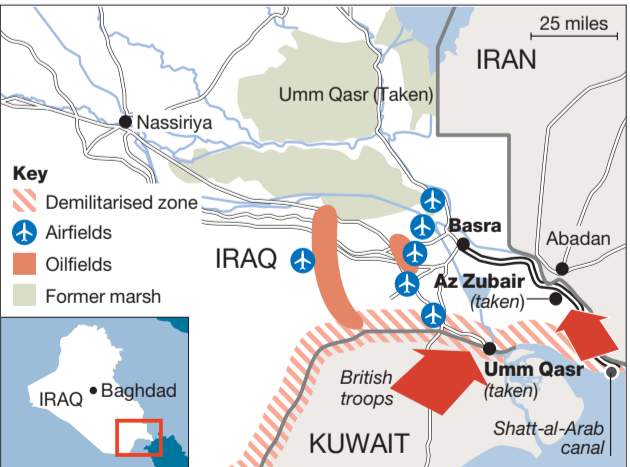
insisted that brutal states with weapons of mass destruction and terrorist groups can "come together and deliver catastrophe to our country and the world."

He added: "Should terrorists obtain these weapons now being manufactured and traded round the world, the carnage they could inflict on our economies, our security, to world peace, would be beyond our most vivid imagination."

In an attempt to placate critics, he was careful to promise post-Saddam relief and democracy to the Iraqi people and a two-state solution, with President George Bush's backing, to the running sore of Palestine-Israel.

Repeating his oft-stated indictment of Saddam Hussein's evasion of weapons inspection, Mr Blair concluded: "Our choice is clear: back down ... or proceed to disarm him by force."

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