

US officials admit missiles hit Iraqi residential areas

David Walsh
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US military officials acknowledged Monday that missiles fired by American warplanes may have struck residential neighborhoods in the southern Iraqi city of Basra, resulting in the death and wounding of dozens of civilians. Pentagon officials privately told journalists, according to the Associated Press, that the planes misfired and at least two missiles might have caused the deaths. Publicly, US officials refused to admit responsibility. A military spokesman, Navy Capt. Michael Doubleday, told reporters, "We're still assessing the site damage," and could not say whether civilians were hit because "we don't have any details."

The Iraqi News Agency (INA) said one US missile hit the al-Jumhuriya neighborhood of Basra around 9:30 a.m. Monday (1:30 am ET). The Iraqis reported that a second air strike targeted the village of Abu al-Khaseeb near Basra, the Basra airport and Rumeila oilfield.

Iraq's information minister said several people were killed and dozens wounded, primarily women and children. CNN reported 11 killed. The INA denounced the US and Britain for continuing "their savage raids against a number of residential areas and economic targets in the province of Basra." The Iraqi government called the two powers "criminals" for carrying out the attacks. The British government denied any role in the raids.

The INA reported that civil defense teams in Basra ferried the wounded to local hospitals and tried to recover bodies from the rubble of buildings. A Western reporter in the southern Iraqi city told the Associated Press that he saw a house that was completely destroyed and three others that were damaged. He was taken to a hospital where he saw severely wounded children. Greg Palkot of Fox News, a US cable television network, said he saw civil defense teams

searching for people believed to be buried in the ruined buildings. Palkot reported that Iraqi officials said three people were killed and 42 injured in the first attack. A CNN producer in Basra confirmed that at least 10 houses were destroyed or damaged. Iraqi officials offered to take Western reporters from Baghdad to Basra to see the damage.

The missile attack on Basra was the latest of several carried out by US forces in the so-called "no-fly zones" in the north and south of Iraq over the past few days. On Saturday two American F-14 Tomcats and two F/A-18 Hornets dropped laser-guided bombs on a surface-to-air missile site in southern Iraq after Iraqi MiGs allegedly violated the no-fly zone. The US reported that an F-15E Strike Eagle fighter attacked a surface-to-air missile system on Sunday in northern Iraq. According to the Pentagon, on Monday afternoon two F-15Es dropped one laser-guided bomb each on an air defense system in northern Iraq near the city of Mosul after encountering anti-aircraft artillery fire. In a separate incident near Mosul a Marine Corps EA-6B electronic warfare plane fired a missile at an Iraqi surface-to-air missile installation that "posed a threat" to US aircraft. An Air Force F-16CJ later attacked a different missile site.

The raids on Basra airport and the Rumeila oilfield near the Kuwaiti border were the most sustained since the US-British air war conducted against Iraq in December.

The renewed aggression by the US against Iraq comes in the midst of new efforts by some of the other major powers to work out a deal with the Saddam Hussein regime. The Russian government presented proposals to the United Nations Security Council last week calling for the replacement of the UNSCOM weapons inspection team by a new arms control body.

Once in place the UN oil embargo against Iraq would be lifted. The US immediately rejected the suggested plan. On January 13 the French government proposed revamping UNSCOM, lifting the embargo on oil exports and the introduction of new surveillance measures to prevent the building of "weapons of mass destruction."

Iraq's Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz told visiting journalists Saturday that there could be no going back to the situation regarding UN arms inspectors that prevailed before the US-British air strikes. "There will be no return to the past," he told a visiting Spanish delegation, reiterating the Hussein regime's refusal to accept the presence of the UNSCOM inspectors. Accepting their return would mean Iraq had given in to aggression, according to Aziz. He expressed support for the French plan, but said it was unlikely to become a reality because of American and British opposition.



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