

Iraq: Civil unrest hits British-controlled Basra

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A Danish soldier became the latest military casualty of the occupation of Iraq when he was shot in an incident in the British-controlled Basra area on August 16.

Corporal Preben Pedersen, 34, is the first Danish soldier to be killed since Denmark sent a contingent of about 400 troops to Iraq in July. Full details of the incident have yet to emerge but it is thought that shooting erupted when a Danish unit stopped a truck carrying several Iraqis in Al-Madinah, about 50 kilometres (30 miles) north of Basra, during a routine patrol overnight, according to a spokesman from Denmark's army command.

The shooting was the latest incident in several weeks of unrest in the British-occupied area of Basra, which gave the lie to claims made by President George W. Bush that the coalition forces were making significant progress in Iraq.

In a radio broadcast on 100 days since the ousting of Saddam Hussein, Bush said, "Every day, Iraq is making progress in rebuilding its economy." "Iraq's energy industry is once again serving the interests of the Iraqi people. More than a million barrels of crude oil and over two million gallons of gasoline are being produced daily," he claimed.

Such production is not taking place for the benefit of the Iraqi people, however, who face severe fuel and power shortages. Anger at the lack of essential supplies boiled over during the weekend of August 9-10, when British troops were confronted with stone-throwing Iraqi protesters.

Trouble broke out in several different areas of the southern Iraqi city after an estimated 2,000 people took to the streets to protest the shortages, leaving Basra in a blaze of burning Kuwaiti vehicles and smoking barricades of tyres.

The disturbances centred on petrol stations across the city, which were unable to pump fuel because of power cuts. The cuts also meant air conditioning and fridges could not work in the stifling heat.

Britain's occupying forces responded with a series of contradictory statements. The British Army attempted to belittle the significance of the protests. Army spokeswoman, Squadron Leader Linda Sawers, claimed they were "relatively minor".

"The heat, lack of air conditioning and rising temperatures means tempers are boiling over, and soldiers are of course in the line of fire in these situations," she said.

The British run Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in Basra admitted that many districts "have had minimal power for four days now," but claimed this was a result of "smugglers", "looters" and "saboteurs".

The CPA went on to claim that the disturbances had been whipped up by a minority of extremists. Iain Pickard, CPA spokesman for the southern region, asserted that although the demonstrations broke out spontaneously among the drivers who were most directly affected by the gas shortage, trucks were seen dropping off tyres to be set aflame by rioters in several parts of the city. This, he implied, was the work of "extremist Islamist groups."

Pickard blamed the Iraqi people for having "too high" expectations. "Some people" had made all kinds of promises before the war, Pickard complained, without taking into account the state of the infrastructure.

In reality, the unrest in Basra signifies growing hostility by the Iraqi people to the illegal occupation of their country by US and British forces. For the most part it has been US forces who have borne the brunt of attacks in the largely Sunni Muslim areas north and west of Baghdad. Facing daily casualties, the US military and the Bush administration have gone to great lengths to claim that these are the actions of "Saddam loyalists" and do not reflect the views of the population at large.

Events in Basra refute such claims. This is a predominantly Shi'ite area that was the centre of opposition to Saddam Hussein's regime. Those involved in the protests were nearly all Shi'ite Muslims, for whom the coalition forces promises of "liberation" and "democracy" have given way to the imposition of a puppet authority under British control and continuing widespread shortages.

It is outrage at these conditions that has led to the unrest. With temperatures at 50 degrees Celsius (120 degrees Fahrenheit) and rising, fridges and air conditioners have ground to a halt whilst household generators have run out of

fuel, cutting electricity supplies.

Eye witnesses said British troops responded to the protests by firing in the air and letting off baton rounds at one gas station where queues had formed. There were reports that at least two Iraqis were hit by rubber bullets.

Violence spread to other fuel outlets and crowds threw stones at soldiers guarding the main British headquarters. More than 20 soldiers were said to be suffering from stab wounds and cuts from stones and bottles hurled at them. It subsequently emerged that British forces shot dead two Iraqis on August 10 after two tankers were hit with rocket propelled grenades.

With the British authorities repeatedly claiming the situation was under control, violence continued throughout the week. On Monday August 11 a British Army Land Rover was destroyed when it was attacked as it drove along a main road close to the port of Umm Quasr. Approximately 20 Iraqi men hurled stones at the vehicle, smashing its windscreen and forcing the soldiers inside to escape on foot.

On Thursday August 14 a British soldier was killed and two others injured as the Army ambulance they were travelling in was caught in the blast of an improvised explosive device left by a lamppost at the side of the road.

Interviews with local people make clear the level of anger. Some directed their anger at Kuwaitis, whom they accuse of smuggling out cheap Iraqi oil, and at the British occupation forces, whom many see as having facilitated this through the invasion. Others were simply angry that the occupying powers have failed to restore services to pre-war standards as they promised.

Comments such as those of 45 year-old taxi driver Adnan Abud, who had spent six hours queuing for fuel, were common. "The British and Americans come here and promise us everything, but things are worse now than under Saddam," he said.

"They did not give us what they promised and we have had enough of waiting," said Hassan Jassim, a 19 year-old student, explaining the outbreak of unrest.

Nors Mhibs, 60, who had been waiting for hours at a gas station in central Basra, said, "When the people get what they want they are peaceful, but if they don't, the British will see something else. I have six sons, I have six guns and I have an RPG [rocket-propelled grenade]. I can make trouble any time."

Sabri Zugheyer, 45, a restaurant owner seeking fuel for his generator, said, "The British promised to make everything better, but now it's worse. Even in the old days it was never as bad as this. Their promises are worth nothing."

"They promised us there would be petrol today, but there is nothing. The British, they are selling it to the Kuwaitis and taking \$75 as their cut," said 29 year-old labourer Kadhem

Sagbhan.

It is likely that such resentment was responsible for a fire at a section of the newly reopened oil pipeline from Kirkuk, which produces 40 percent of Iraq's oil production, to a Turkish terminal at Ceyhan.

The pipeline had only just opened on Wednesday August 13 when a section in Baiji, north of Tikrit, was engulfed by fire on Friday August 15, forcing it to close again for repairs that could take weeks.

"We believe at this stage it was an explosive device planted on the pipeline," the US-appointed interim oil minister in Iraq, Thamir Ghadban, said following the blast. There were reports of a second blast on Sunday August 17 on the same oil pipeline, which officials were quoted as saying was also sabotage.

The US administration say that the pipeline and the revenue from Iraqi oil that it is designed to reap are crucial to the redevelopment of war torn Iraq, but many Iraqis see it as another example of the looting of the country's resources while they are left to suffer the consequences.

Elsewhere in Iraq the situation is if anything worse. In Baghdad a breached water pipeline flooded main roads in the capital on Sunday August 17, leaving some 300,000 residents without water. This was reported as an act of sabotage.

In the last week also, six Iraqis were killed and 59 injured in an unexplained mortar attack on Abu Ghraib prison on the outskirts of Baghdad, and two US soldiers were shot and wounded as they left a restaurant in the capital on Saturday August 16. In a separate incident the Iraqi police chief of the northern city of Mosul was wounded and two officers killed in an ambush.



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