

PERSIAN GULF WAR

Iraq claims 500 civilians dead in Allied attack

DHAHRAN, Saudi Arabia (AP) — Allied warplanes, in a pinpoint bombing that sent shock waves far beyond Iraq, destroyed an underground structure in Baghdad on Wednesday, and officials said 500 civilians were killed. Iraq called it a bomb shelter, the United States a military command center.

By nightfall, 14 hours after the pre-dawn attack, crews were still pulling charred bodies, some of them children, from the rubble, an Associated Press correspondent reported from Baghdad. Distraught relatives crowded the smoke-filled streets.

But the U.S. command in Saudi Arabia, and later the White House, said the subterranean concrete facility had been positively identified as an Iraqi military command-and-control center, and the right target was hit.

"We don't know why civilians were at that location," said Marlin Fitzwater, President Bush's spokesman. American officials blamed Iraq's leadership for the tragedy, saying it had put civilians "in harm's way."

The AP correspondent, Dilip Ganguly, inspected the ruins with other journalists and said he saw no obvious sign that it

had a military use.

Coupled with continuing civilian deaths elsewhere, the Baghdad bombing was sure to inflame an international debate over the war's costs and tactics. A senior Iraqi official said earlier this week that "thousands" of civilians have been killed in the air war.

The deadly Baghdad air strike was among 2,800 sorties mounted by Operation Desert Storm on Wednesday in favorably clear skies.

About one-third of the missions were directed at targets in southern Iraq and Iraqi-occupied Kuwait, aimed at "softening up" the dug-in positions of Iraqi troops before the expected ground offensive by the U.S.-led alliance.

Before word flashed from Baghdad of Wednesday's devastating attack, U.S. officers told reporters in Riyadh, the Saudi capital, that the Iraqi military had managed to maintain communications links despite more than three weeks of nonstop bombing. It was clear U.S. strategists were anxious to knock out more of these command-and-control networks.

The night's raids on Baghdad, described by residents as among the worst of the air war, began about 8 p.m. Tuesday and lasted 12 hours, Ganguly

reported. Telecommunications centers in two Baghdad districts were among the sites bombed.

At about 4 a.m., it was the turn of the 40-foot-deep underground structure — which U.S. officials acknowledge was built as a bomb shelter — in al-Amerieh, a middle-class neighborhood.

Iraqi officials said 400 to 500 people had moved into the facility after the bombing began

Jan. 17, and hundreds more joined them because this week's bombing was particularly intense.

At least two weapons — U.S. spokesmen said they were two bombs from planes — struck the shelter, one slamming into the entrance and cutting off the lone escape route with debris, the second piercing the 9-foot-thick roof and exploding inside the structure, the Iraqis said.

Emergency teams and local residents who rushed to the site found an inferno. Rescue efforts proceeded slowly, but by mid-morning more than 40 charred bodies were laid out on the ground, Ganguly reported.

By nightfall, Abdul Razak Hassan al-Janaby, a supervisor of the facility, said 235 bodies had been recovered and at least 300 more were believed still trapped in the wreckage.

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