

Kurds forcefully move for control of Kirkuk

Mark McDonald

Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

KIRKUK, Iraq — This oil-rich city in northern Iraq always figured to be one of the great prizes of the war, and Kurdish political parties are aggressively moving to take control of it — lock, stock and oil barrel.

The Kurds, strongly opposed by rival groups of Arabs and Turkmen, have taken the largest physical hold of Kirkuk. Hundreds of Kurdish police officers have been imported from the neighboring ethnic enclave of Iraqi Kurdistan, and squads of Kurdish soldiers man the 24-hour checkpoints on every road leading into the city.

Kurdish leaders also are using the phrase "our Jerusalem" to refer to Kirkuk, a budding boomtown of 600,000 that is poised to generate billions of dollars in oil revenues.

Officials from the dominant and well-armed Kurdish groups — the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan — have occu-

pled numerous government buildings in Kirkuk, along with the telecom offices, the TV station, military and police installations, and most of the former Baath Party offices. At each bank in town, two armed guards stand watch: one from the KDP, the other from the PUK.

Kurds, Arabs and Turkmen all claim to be the majority population in Kirkuk, although reliable population statistics do not exist. The last census here was done in 1957.

Ethnic and political violence continues to flare, and although U.S. forces here have been reinforced in recent days, they remain outmanned and overmatched. As a result, some of Kirkuk's most valuable oil installations are being left unguarded.

"Nobody is watching the Zambur (oil and gas) company," said a Kurdish police sergeant, Ibrahim Hamza Aziz. "We saw some men looting it the other day, but the Americans weren't around. And since the Americans

don't allow us to carry guns, we couldn't do anything. Zambur is a huge facility, and you could blow up the whole place with a single cigarette butt."

Such is the cynicism about U.S. efforts here that Aziz and other Kurdish policemen say they believe Kirkuk's oil facilities are unguarded on purpose.

"All the oil equipment and machinery is Russian-made," he said. "Maybe the Americans want someone to blow it all up so they can rebuild it and replace everything with American equipment."

U.S. military officials in the city declined to be interviewed.

Kurds, meanwhile, also are moving to influence the cultural and social life of Kirkuk through a covert but aggressive campaign of flooding the city with Kurdish teachers, doctors, engineers and lawyers.

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WHO criticizes China again over withholding SARS data

Michael Dorgan

Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

BELJING — More than a week after promising to end the SARS cover-up in China's capital, where the epidemic is raging, government officials have continued to withhold information crucial to combating the spread of the deadly virus, the World Health Organization's chief representative in Beijing charged Monday.

"It's high time that information became available," Dr. Henk Bekedam said at a news conference.

Since April 20, when the city's mayor and the nation's health minister were fired for mishandling the epidemic, the number of reported cases of severe acute respiratory syndrome in Beijing has shot from 37 to 1,210.

That number, plus more than 1,300 suspected SARS cases, many of which will become confirmed cases in coming days, puts Beijing on a trajectory to quickly become the SARS capital of the world. Already, 59 people in Bei-

jing have died.

Over the past week, officials have taken drastic steps to contain the virus in the crowded capital of 13 million people. Nearly 8,000 people have been quarantined. Schools, nightclubs, cinemas, museums, libraries and many office buildings have been closed. People entering or exiting the city are checked for fever, a key symptom of SARS.

Yet nearly eight weeks after Beijing's first official SARS case was diagnosed, health officials have still not provided the WHO or their own residents with essential information about the epidemic, Bekedam said.

Health authorities have reported an average of nearly 150 new SARS cases a day during the past week in Beijing. But Bekedam complained that they still have not disclosed how many of the newly reported cases are new cases and how many are old cases tardily reported.

Without that information, it is im-

possible to determine whether the infection rate is growing, declining or leveling off.

Officials also have not provided key information on the pattern of cases, Bekedam said. That includes the crucial matter of whether a few large clusters at hospitals or universities or elsewhere account for the bulk of the cases, or whether they are scattered widely across the city. Also, missing is data needed to profile the victims of SARS by age, sex, occupation or other factors that could help identify the groups most at risk.

Without such basic information, Bekedam said, it is difficult for health officials to design effective measures to contain the epidemic, and difficult for residents to know what precautions to take.

"You need to know more to be able to protect yourself," he said.

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