

U.S. launches offensive strike against attackers

The insurgents have been targeting U.S. troops and may be linked to a helicopter crash that killed 17 soldiers

By Jeff Wilkinson and Maureen Fan
Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

TIKRIT, Iraq — The U.S. military on Sunday launched a fresh series of attacks on insurgent positions in central and northern Iraq, as the investigation continued into the crashes in Mosul of two helicopters on Saturday evening that killed 17 101st Airborne Division soldiers — in the worst single-incident death toll since the beginning of the Iraq war.

In Mosul, with scout helicopters overhead and surrounded by jeering crowds, investigators picked through the wreckage of the downed helicopters, but were unable to confirm reports that they had collided after one was fired on and perhaps struck by a rocket-propelled grenade.

In Tikrit, the 4th Infantry Division launched the latest in a series of offensive strikes — this one dubbed Operation Ivy Cyclone Two — aimed at rooting out the insurgency that has been attacking coalition forces 35 times a day.

The overnight operation that extended well into Monday morning involved close air support for ground troops and the use of heavy weaponry not seen since the main phase of the war that ended on May 1, including the launch of a satellite-guided missile with a 500-pound warhead from a mobile launch pad north of Baghdad.

The missile struck an insurgent training center on an island on the Little Zab River west of the northern city of Kirkuk.

In Tikrit, army units fired artillery and tank rounds at insurgent positions early Monday morning, destroying a number of houses, including one belonging to a senior official of Saddam Hussein's former government.

Also on Sunday, Al Arabia Television

broadcast an audiotape that it said was Saddam Hussein's voice for the first time since just after his sons were killed in Mosul in July. Giving greetings for the Muslim holy month of Ramadan in measured tones and with a tired cadence, the speaker called on Iraqis to fight the transitional authority. It was not immediately clear whether he was referring to the upcoming provisional government that Iraq's Governing Council announced on Saturday — or to the council itself, which is to be phased out.

Occupational forces are in trouble, the speaker said, in an apparent reference to all military forces working with the Americans.

The two helicopters downed in Mosul were on separate missions, flying after dark when the incident occurred about 6:30 p.m., a spokesman said. They crashed on two rooftops about 250 yards apart.

One Black Hawk carrying 12 soldiers was responding to reports of a bank being fired upon in the Bab

Sinjar neighborhood in west Mosul. Seven soldiers were killed and five injured in that crash.

It is unclear whether the helicopter collided with another Black Hawk transporting 10 soldiers to an undisclosed location. All 10 soldiers in the second helicopter were killed.

"Our main concern right now is to recover all of the remains and do a thorough investigation," said 101st Division spokesman Maj. Trey Cate.

Spc. Michael Pearson, 21, of Livermore, Colo., said he was angry about the incidents "because there is nothing we can do about it. They were good men and women, and they didn't deserve to die that way."

The two soldiers were part of a large cordon of troops securing the perimeter of a four-lane boulevard in the working-class residential area where the crashes occurred.

At each intersection, large crowds, mostly young men and boys, taunted the soldiers. The soldiers responded by shouting, cocking their weapons

and at least once threatening the crowds with billy clubs.

"We hate them," said Ahmed Abdullah, 21, who sells cigarettes from a street cart. "We don't want them here. Everyone is happy they lost the helicopters."

Mohammed Ahmed, a 40-year-old grocer, said the people of the city, Iraq's third largest, are becoming increasingly frustrated with civilian deaths they blame on U.S. soldiers. There is also lingering resentment of the United States because of the hardships brought by 13 years of U.N. sanctions after the first Gulf War, and a perception that the ruling coalition hasn't moved fast enough to provide basic services such as telephone service and dependable power.

"The people here like Saddam because life was better," before the U.S. wars, he said.

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Medicare drug plan awaits congressional approval

Bush says he will 'actively push' the prescription drug plan despite widespread skepticism by opponents

By James Kuhnhehn
Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

WASHINGTON — President Bush and congressional leaders on Sunday began the hard work of selling a complex, newly forged Medicare prescription drug plan to skeptical conservatives and reluctant Democrats in hopes of getting Congressional

approval by week's end.

The plan would help millions of seniors fill their prescriptions, a long-sought Democratic goal that would cost \$400 billion over 10 years. It also would expand the role of the private sector in Medicare and broaden the use of tax-free health savings accounts, a Republican priority.

"There's going to be immense pressure on members of both the House and the Senate to support this bill," President Bush said on the South Lawn of the White House. "I will be actively pushing the bill because it conforms to the principles I laid out

for prescription drugs for our seniors: choice for seniors, accountability for the Medicare plan."

Top negotiators and their staffs released details of the plan Sunday, about 20 hours after the deal was sealed late Saturday. But congressional budget experts planned to work late into Monday to determine the actual cost of the various provisions.

Still, lawmakers who have been working on the bill since early summer were buoyant Sunday. Over the last few weeks, they had subsisted on sodas and pistachio nuts in tense meetings as Republican leaders

pressed them for a final deal.

On Sunday they presented a bipartisan face. Two Democratic negotiators — Sens. Max Baucus of Montana and John Breaux of Louisiana — joined top Republicans to lend their support.

"What we have on balance is a moderate plan ... that gets the job done," Breaux said.

That opposition could still sink the bill. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, R-Tenn., said he hopes to have final passage by the end of next week — even on Sunday if necessary. But critics already were lining up, and they included Sen. Edward Kennedy,

D-Mass., an expert on health care and a supporter of the original prescription drug bill that passed the Senate last summer.

Speaking on CBS's "Face the Nation" Sunday, Kennedy predicted the bill would fail.

"This has been a litmus test by those who have never supported and trusted Medicare, to make sure that they had the provisions in there that was going to begin the dismantling of Medicare. And that's unacceptable," he said.

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