

# Troops shut down Iraqi newspaper

U.S. authorities claim an extremist Shiite cleric's newspaper promoted violence and misinformation

By Ken Dilanian  
Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

BAGHDAD, Iraq — The U.S.-led occupation authority dispatched soldiers to shut down the newspaper of an extremist Shiite cleric Sunday, charging that the paper repeatedly published misinformation designed to incite violence against U.S. troops.

The closure prompted as many as 3,000 of followers of the cleric, Moqtadr Sadr, to assemble for an angry demonstration that blocked traffic on a main Baghdad thoroughfare.

The protesters chanted "Long live Sadr" and "America is just infidels," and some burned an American flag. Iraqi police were nowhere to be seen, and U.S. troops looked on from a distance.

The newspaper closure and the protest illustrated the coalition's dilemma as it tries to promote democratic values in Iraq while also combating what it sees as dangerous extremism.

Alaa-eldin Elsadr, a spokesman for the U.S.-led coalition, said he accompanied about 50 U.S. troops to the offices of the Sadr organization's weekly al Hauza newspaper. The soldiers ordered employees out of the building and sealed it. The paper will be closed for at least 60 days, Elsadr said.

Elsadr gave newspaper officials a letter from U.S. Ambassador L. Paul Bremer that said the paper published misinformation, including articles blaming terrorist attacks on coalition forces.

"These false articles not only mislead readers but constitute a real threat of violence against coalition forces and Iraqi citizens who cooperate with the coalition in the reconstruction of Iraq," the letter said.

Sheik Mahmood al Sawdani, a Sadr spokesman, denied that the newspaper had incited violence and said it was shut down because it "rejects the occupation."

"This is a contradiction to the new constitution," said Juma Khanjar, 44, a taxi driver who came for the protest. "The Americans said there is freedom of the press. Where is the freedom of the press?"

Iraq's interim constitution, which takes effect July 1, provides for freedom of the press and freedom of speech. It does not discuss when speech becomes incitement to violence. The coalition is setting up a news media commission that will come up with rules about such issues.

In the United States, courts have allowed state laws against incitement to violence. But the language has to be far more explicit than anything the Sadr newspaper said, according to coalition officials' translations of the offending passages.


On Feb. 26, an article claimed that a suicide bombing that targeted a Shiite town south of Baghdad, killing 53, was a rocket "fired by an (American) Apache helicopter and not a car bomb," Elsadr said.

Another article was headlined "Bremer follows the steps of Saddam," and criticized coalition work in Iraq.

Elsadr acknowledged that such a shutdown would not happen in the United States, but added, "Iraq is not America. Iraq is going through a very sensitive time right now, and, while there is freedom of the press, that freedom must be used responsibly."


Most of the protesters arrived after hearing about the closure on mosque loudspeakers in Sadr City, a poor Shiite enclave of Baghdad named after Sadr's father, who was killed by Saddam Hussein.

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