

Prison attack kills 22 captives in Iraq

Tuesday's attacks, which wounded 92 others, were called 'puzzling' by U.S. officials and military

By Carol Rosenberg
Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

BAGHDAD, Iraq — Arab insurgents fired a fusillade of mortars on the coalition-controlled Abu Ghraib Prison on Tuesday, killing 22 Iraqi captives held in razor-wire-ringed tent camps and wounding 92 others.

The attack was puzzling to U.S. military commanders, who consider the 4,400 so-called "security detainees" to be anti-American insurgents, some of whom are suspected of launching similar mortar and missile attacks.

Marines helped evacuate wounded prisoners. Twenty-five of the most seriously injured were taken by helicopter to two U.S. military field hospitals, one of which is inside the Green Zone, which houses coalition headquarters.

U.S. Army Brig. Gen. Mark Kimmitt, deputy commander of operations, said the attackers may have intended to hit their comrades either to

trigger an uprising or to intimidate them against cooperating with their interrogators.

"Our guys scratch their heads and say, 'Why would they be shelling their own people, killing their own people?'" Kimmitt said several hours after the attack.

In all, 18 mortar rounds slammed into the prison compound, which, until little over a year ago, served as a torture and execution center for Saddam Hussein's regime. The compound has come under frequent mortar attack since U.S. officials reopened it last year.

Tuesday's was the heaviest mortar barrage yet at Abu Ghraib, and it came on the same day that Marines instituted several goodwill gestures to try to restore order in the Sunni Muslim city of Fallujah.

Also on Tuesday, another American soldier died in a guerrilla ambush on a U.S. military column. A bomb exploded under a convoy west of the northern Iraqi town of Mosul in the morning, wounding five Task Force Olympia soldiers, one of whom died at a combat support hospital.

In Fallujah, U.S. forces waiting for insurgents to surrender their weapons eased a nighttime curfew

by two hours and let about 50 families who'd fled the battles between Marines and insurgents return to their homes. Fighting has raged off and on in the city of 250,000 throughout the month.

Marines laid siege to the city in their bid to smoke out an estimated 1,000 to 2,000 resistance fighters, thought to include Saddam loyalists and Arab foreigners. A group of Sunni Muslim sheiks have tried to mediate through talks with civic leaders in Fallujah, Iraqi Governing Council members and other coalition contacts.

"We are very serious about a peaceful resolution. But everybody must recognize that, in the absence of a true cease-fire, major hostilities will return on short notice," said Senior Coalition Advisor Dan Senor.

The relief measures are expected to include safe passage for people from Fallujah to bury their dead in a huge cemetery in Abu Ghraib. They are now believed to be interred in a soccer field in the city.

The shaky cease-fire seemed to be holding. Marines came under fire from Fallujah only once overnight Monday, commanders said, and the coalition is trying to return Iraqi police to their city posts.

An uncertain standoff also seemed to hold in the southern Shiite Muslim city of Najaf, where the U.S. military reported no overnight attacks on coalition forces by Mahdi Army militiamen loyal to Shiite cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr. Coalition forces are on the outskirts of the shrine city, while Mahdi Army forces still dominate there and in adjacent Kufa.

An Iraqi mediator was bound for Baghdad on Tuesday night to brief U.S. authorities on a day-long meeting with al-Sadr, and there was a hopeful sign: On Tuesday night, Al-Sadr aides canceled a daily news conference which has become a platform to air anti-American grievances, suggesting there may be progress in the talks between U.S. authorities and al-Sadr.

While determined to arrest al-Sadr and disband his militia, American military commanders are eager to avoid bloodshed in the holy Shiite city. They pulled back some of their 2,500 3rd Brigade Task Force troops on Tuesday and camped outside, awaiting more forces due by the weekend.

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Despite Iraq news, Bush leads Kerry in polls

Two separate polls show a lead in numbers for the President over Sen. John Kerry and Ralph Nader

By Steven Thomma
Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

WASHINGTON — Despite weeks of bad news about Iraq and questions about whether he should've done more to avert the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, President Bush has regained a lead over Democratic rival John Kerry and has improved his standing on issues from war to education.

Doubts about the war have grown and still could hurt Bush's chances for re-election. But two new independent polls this week found that the president has gained versus Kerry on every major issue, is preferred over Kerry to handle the war in Iraq and the war on terrorism, and would

defeat the Massachusetts senator if the election were today.

By themselves, the polls are only snapshots of an ever-changing campaign. But they do reveal two major political forces at work this spring: Bush's ability to retain support at a time of war losses and his initial, ad-driven success at defining Kerry as an unworthy alternative.

The president leads Kerry 48 percent to 43 percent among registered voters, with third-party candidate Ralph Nader at 6 percent, according to an ABC-Washington Post survey. Bush leads 50 percent to 44 percent among likely voters, with Nader at 4 percent, according to a Gallup poll for CNN and USA Today.

In a memo to reporters Tuesday, Kerry pollster Mark Mellman and aide Tom Kiley dismissed the polls. They noted that an average of four recent polls showed the president and Kerry tied.

"Polls fluctuate often in meaningless ways," they said. "More important than the day-to-day changes in the horserace are the underlying dynamics of the race. ... (The) race remains essentially tied. Beneath the surface, the data continue to contain ominous signs for President Bush."

The new numbers came amid images of anti-American violence in Iraq and new questions at home about whether Bush could have or should have done more to prevent the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

The percentage of Americans calling the Iraq war a mistake has swelled from 16 percent a year ago to 46 percent, according to the ABC-Washington Post poll. The same poll found that 45 percent of Americans approve of the way the president is handling Iraq, while 54 percent disapprove.

The number of Americans listing war and terrorism as top concerns

jumped between March and April, suggesting a potential problem for Bush. He has made war the keystone of his re-election bid. The number of Americans listing the economy as their top concern dropped, though the issue remained number one on the national agenda.

Bush aides said they were confident that a new book by Washington Post Assistant Managing Editor Bob Woodward about the president's stewardship of the war also would help Bush's standing if read in full. They said it showed the president as engaged, thoughtful and deliberative before the war, and they noted that the Bush campaign Web site, www.georgebush.com, puts the book, "Plan of Attack," at the top of its suggested reading list.

James Kuhnenn, traveling with Kerry in Florida, contributed to this report. (c) 2004, Knight Ridder/Tribune Information Services.

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