

BUSH ORDERS START OF WAR ON IRAQ; MISSILES APPARENTLY MISS HUSSEIN

DEFIANT RESPONSE

Iraq Leader Exhorts His People to Draw Arms Against Invaders

By JOHN F. BURNS

BAGHDAD, Iraq, Thursday, March 20 — Iraqi television broadcast a speech by a defiant Saddam Hussein this morning, a few hours after the first blasts on Baghdad. In it, he exhorted his people to "draw your swords" against invaders and referred to the United States government as "criminals" and "Zionists." "God willing, we will take them to the limit where they lose their patience and any hope to achieve what they have planned and what the Zionist criminals have pushed them to do," he said. It was unclear whether the address had been recorded previously.

According to one translation, he said, "The criminal little Bush has committed a crime against humanity." Another had him referring to "Junior Bush."

The broadcast came in the lull after a strike on the city just before dawn. Beginning at about 5:35 this morning, bombs exploded, answered by anti-aircraft fire and what sounded like machine-gun fire, mingled with a muezzin's call from one of the city's many mosques and the rush-hour sounds of cars racing over the highway, heading away from town in an apparent attempt to escape American fire.

Apparently fashioned to mark the bombing, the muezzin's call consisted of a plaintive 10 minutes of "Allah-u Akbar," or "God is great," over and over.

This morning the waiting was over, just hours after President Bush's 48-hour ultimatum to Saddam Hussein elapsed. As it ticked down Wednesday, there was only one question that waiters, masons, vegetable sellers, physicians, government clerks and an endless roll call of other anxious Iraqis put to any foreigner:

"America, what time?" they asked. "Bush, what time?"

After nearly 30 years of living under Saddam Hussein, Iraqis in every walk of life, at every age, at every level of competence in English and in every corner of this capital had their minds transfixed by when, precisely, the clock would run down for Mr. Hussein and the totalitarian system of government he has built here on a model he took from Stalin.

When, exactly, would American

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Big Hospital Fraud Case

The nation's largest chain of rehabilitation hospitals, HealthSouth, was accused of sweeping accounting fraud in a case that regulators said might rival wrongdoing at Enron and WorldCom. PAGE C1

Oil Drilling Plan Defeated

The Senate narrowly voted against a proposal to drill for oil in the Alaskan wildlife refuge, dealing a crippling blow to the central element of the Bush administration's energy plan. PAGE A29

Optimism on Finding Virus

World Health Organization officials expressed increased optimism about scientists' search for the cause of a mysterious respiratory ailment that has killed at least nine people and sickened hundreds more. PAGE A10

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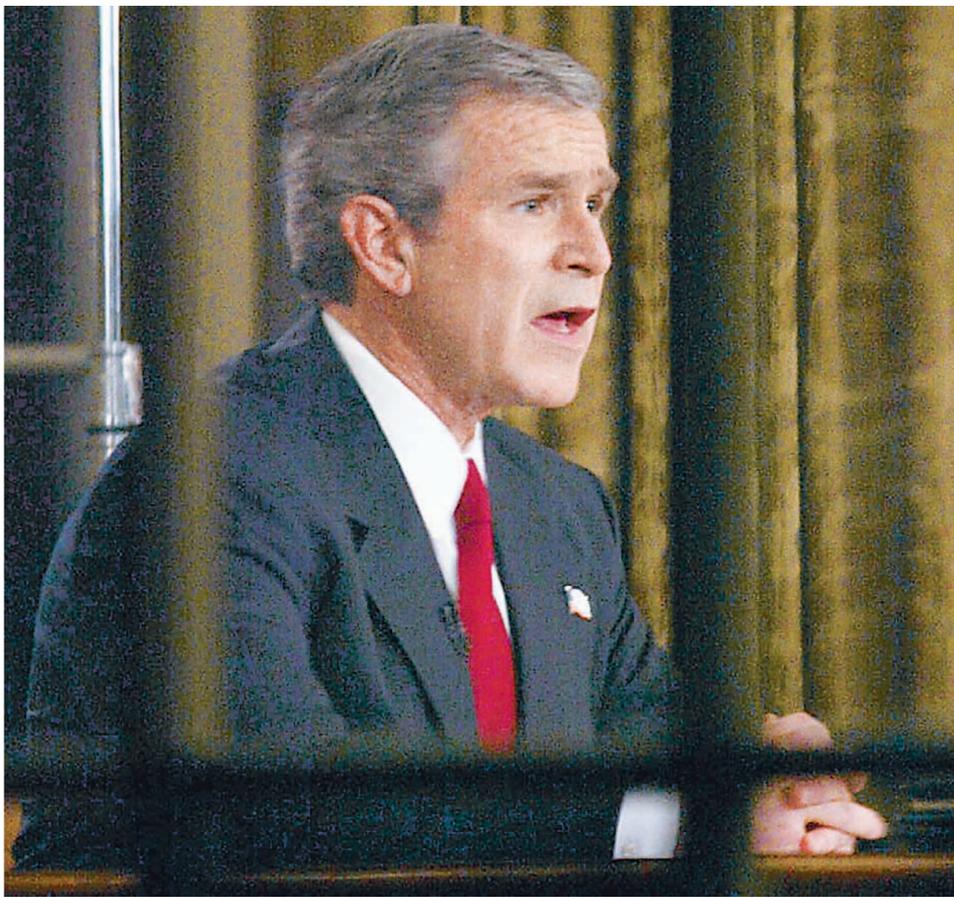
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Patrick Baz/Agence France-Presse



Stephen Crowley/The New York Times

An explosion lit up the skies over Baghdad, shortly before President Bush announced from the Oval Office the "opening stages of what will be a broad and concerted campaign" to remove Saddam Hussein from power.

Setting the Stage

By MICHAEL R. GORDON

CAMP DOHA, Kuwait, Thursday, March 20 — Some wars begin with a bang. Others begin with limited airstrikes, stealthy border movements and psychological operations to weaken the enemy's resistance.

This war began with both. The major blows were cruise missile attacks from the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf and strikes by F-117 stealth fighters against three "leadership targets," an apparent effort to decapitate Saddam Hussein's regime. The strike recalled the cruise missile attack the Clinton administration mounted — unsuccessfully — to try to kill Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan. It was an attempt to end the war with a single, decisive blow.

But even before the Baghdad attack took place, the final preparatory phase of the war was under way. It included attacks on artillery, a major psychological operations campaign, and the positioning of ground troops along the Kuwait-Iraq border.

Despite these twin developments — the attack on the leadership and the maneuvering at the border — the major air and land assault to collapse Mr. Hussein's regime has not yet been unleashed. If the attempt to wipe out the Iraqi leadership is not successful, the United States is still preparing the knock-out punch.

Meanwhile, it has already hit some targets. On Wednesday afternoon, allied warplanes attacked about a dozen Iraqi artillery pieces near the southern Iraqi town of Al Zubayr and on Al Faw peninsula. The strikes were

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President Warns of Difficulty — Airstrikes on Baghdad

By DAVID E. SANGER with JOHN F. BURNS

WASHINGTON, Thursday, March 20 — President Bush ordered the start of a war against Iraq on Wednesday night, and American forces poised on the country's southern border and at sea began strikes to disarm the country, including an apparently unsuccessful attempt to kill Saddam Hussein.

Mr. Bush addressed the nation from the Oval Office at 10:15 p.m. Wednesday night, about 45 minutes after the first attacks were reported against an installation in Baghdad where American intelligence believed Mr. Hussein and his top leadership were meeting. "On my orders, coalition forces have begun striking selected targets of military importance to undermine Saddam Hussein's ability to wage war," the president said.

Speaking deliberately, with a picture of his twin daughters visible behind him, he added, "These are opening stages of what will be a broad and concerted campaign."

Mr. Bush sought to tamp down expectations of a quick victory with few casualties by warning that the battles in the days ahead "could be longer and more difficult than some predict." [Transcript, Page A20.]

The results of the strike on Baghdad were unclear. However, Iraqi television broadcast a speech by Mr. Hussein, who is believed to have a number of doubles, after the attack. He denounced "Junior Bush" and promised the Iraqi people a victory.

The president's speech came about two hours after the expiration of his 48-hour deadline for Saddam Hussein to leave Iraq, an ultimatum dismissed with disdain by the Iraqi leader.

The first signs of the attack in

Baghdad, which began just before first light there at 5:35 a.m., were an air raid siren followed by anti-aircraft fire and loud explosions over the city that appeared to be bombs. The anti-aircraft fire appeared to be ineffective.

At least one impact was visible about a half mile from the Rashid Hotel in central Baghdad, throwing a great cloud of dust into the air.

The initial round of explosions took place over a period of about 10 minutes and was followed by a lull. The first traffic of the day racing down the highway appeared to be drivers fleeing the attack.

It appeared that the war started earlier than the White House and top Pentagon officials had intended. During a nearly four-hour meeting at the White House late Wednesday afternoon — participants included Vice President Cheney; George Tenet, the director of central intelligence; Donald H. Rumsfeld, the secretary of defense; and Condoleezza Rice, the national security adviser — Mr. Bush decided to act on fresh intelligence indicating an opportunity to decapitate the country's leadership early in the war.

It was a chance Mr. Bush missed, to his regret, early in the war in Afghanistan in 2001, when American forces sought to kill Osama bin Laden and the leader of the Taliban, Mullah Omar.

According to two senior military officials, American forces launched about three dozen Tomahawk cruise missiles from four cruisers and destroyers and two submarines operating in the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf as part of an effort to kill Mr.

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Day of Waiting and Wondering Ends With Word From President

By RICHARD W. STEVENSON

WASHINGTON, March 19 — As he sat behind his desk in the Oval Office just before he addressed the nation tonight at 10:15, President Bush picked up a copy of the speech in which he would tell the world that he had launched military strikes to topple Saddam Hussein. He gave a little shake of his fist, according to a person who saw the scene on a television monitor, turned to someone in the room and said, "Feel good."

Seconds later, Mr. Bush ended what had become an anxious guessing game in Iraq, in Washington, throughout the Middle East and in capitals around the world. With television screens already showing pictures of flashing lights through the haze of the Baghdad dawn, the president told the country that it was at war for the second time since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

His decision to begin what he suggested would be an all-out assault on Mr. Hussein and his regime came between 6:30 p.m. and 7 p.m., a senior administration official said.

Mr. Bush met with his war council starting at 3:40 this afternoon to discuss what Pentagon officials said was intelligence that Iraq's leadership, perhaps including Mr. Hussein or his sons, had gathered in a single spot.

In the Oval Office with Mr. Bush were the members of the team that had also been at his side through the war in Afghanistan: Vice President Dick Cheney; Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld; Condoleezza Rice, the national security adviser; and George J. Tenet, the director of central intelligence.

After deciding that the intelligence was good enough to strike at what Pentagon officials called "targets of opportunity," Mr. Bush wrapped up

the meeting around 7 p.m. He spent some time going over his speech with Michael Gerson, his head speechwriter, and then walked to the White House residence, where he had dinner with the first lady, Laura Bush.

A senior administration official said that at a little after 8 p.m., Mr. Bush was informed by Andrew H. Card Jr., the White House chief of staff, that Saddam Hussein had not met the deadline to leave Iraq.

Two hours later, Mr. Bush sat down in the Oval office behind what is known as the "Resolute" desk, which was donated to the United

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Watching Intently As a War Is Born 6,000 Miles Away

By TINA KELLEY
and ELISSA GOOTMAN

Some learned about the war under the stuttering lights of Times Square, while many first heard about the bombing of Baghdad from their televisions at home, or in bars. Some faced it with tears, others with contempt, none with gladness, as they watched pictures of lethal lights descending on a city 6,000 miles away.

A year and a half after the attack on the World Trade Center, the city looked on intently as another city came under attack. After months of diplomacy and ominous words from Washington, there was some shrugging acceptance now that the moment for action had come.

Several New Yorkers interviewed felt the need to be with others as the fighting started. Others learned about it as they drank with war buddies. Some learned of the developments as they rode the subway, visited tourist attractions or walked sidewalks that still seemed eerily peaceful.

Elizabeth McKay, 39, her husband, Michael Gehron, 33, and their son, Jacob Blue Gehron, 18 months, left their Upper West Side apartment for groceries, and came back to find the country at war.

Ms. McKay sat on the living room

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APTN

Iraqi television broadcast a speech by Saddam Hussein a few hours after a missile strike on Baghdad.

IN THE BATTLEFIELD

U.S. RAID IN AFGHANISTAN About 1,000 American troops launched a raid on villages in the mountains of southeastern Afghanistan today, hunting for members of Al Qaeda. PAGE A23

ANXIETY AND PRAYERS Before the fighting started, the rosaries were in short supply in the desert. Troops attended religious services, bought last-minute items in the almost empty post exchanges, made phone calls home and waited. PAGE A18