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Iraqi Town's Anger Explodes Into Chaotic Revolt

Tense Encounter Underscores U.S. Difficulties

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KHALDIYAH, Iraq, Aug. 5 -- The troubles that swept through this rough-and-tumble farm town along the Euphrates River began with a grenade attack Monday on a U.S. convoy parked outside the mayor's office.

A few hours later -- after a staccato series of escalations compounded by confusion, misperceptions and anger -- a mob had ransacked the mayor's office. Its newly painted white walls were scorched from fires still smoldering today. At least two teenage boys were shot and wounded, and the mayor and police chief in charge of restoring order were nowhere to be seen.

In the aftermath, the U.S. military was left pondering what it would take to bring calm from chaos and resurrect its effort to rehabilitate Khaldiya's municipal government, while some residents of the town of 15,000 were vowing that they would never allow American forces to return. U.S. troops had withdrawn from the town earlier.

"We're sad this building was destroyed. This is our property," said Said Farhan Abed, 41, as he gazed at the two-story mayor's office, which was looted of everything except a toilet. "But we feel happy we got rid of the Americans."

U.S. forces have blamed resistance to the four-month occupation of Iraq on an eclectic assortment of Saddam Hussein loyalists, religiously inspired militants and foreign fighters. The groups enjoy little support from citizens mostly interested in improving their lives after years of deprivation and repression, U.S. forces have said.

But the unrest Monday in Khaldiya, which lies on a sun-baked plain 45 miles west of Baghdad, provides a glimpse of how brittle U.S. efforts to reconstitute Iraq remain, and how quickly popular sentiments, particularly in the restive region that is home to Iraq's Sunni Muslim minority, can turn from simmering anger to open revolt.

"It's my sense that this was a setback that we can recover from," said Maj. Antonio Aguto, the executive officer for the 3rd Infantry Division, which is in charge of much of western Iraq. "This too will pass. It will obviously take some doing."

The trouble began, residents recall, at about 10:30 a.m. Aguto said soldiers from the 43rd Engineering Company had traveled to Khaldiya for a weekly meeting with the mayor, police and other officials on making improvements in the town.

Some residents, however, believed that the U.S. troops were meeting informers behind closed doors. In the past six weeks, two lists had circulated in Khaldiya of people believed to be giving U.S. forces information -- the first list had 30 names, the second had six. No one on the lists had faced reprisals, residents said, but as with other Sunni towns, the suspected informers were a source of resentment.

"The Americans are used to going inside this building," said Kamal Suweid, 33, and an employee at a state-owned company in the nearby city of Ramadi. "We didn't accept their presence in there."

Soon after the meeting began, two armored vehicles and a Humvee parked outside the office came under fire. Abed, Suweid and others said two rocket-propelled grenades were fired from the sprawling date groves across the street; Aguto said it was only one, launched by a passenger who stepped out of a black Mercedes-Benz. The rocket-propelled grenade missed its mark, but the explosion drew a crowd of onlookers.

U.S. troops were quick to respond. Reinforcements were called in to sweep the area, Aguto said.

In their search for the assailants, residents said, U.S. troops used explosives to open the corrugated iron gates of two stores along a row of blacksmith and mechanic shops, where the men were believed to be hiding. The blasts tore off the gates, incensing a crowd that had grown to 200 people outside the mayor's office across the street. Aguto said he was not aware of those measures.

By then, Mayor Thar Halu Hamdullah and Abed Khalaf Jadaan, the police chief whose pickup truck was parked outside had been removed from city hall by U.S. troops. As the troops withdrew east toward the town of Fallujah, residents were chanting, and Iraqi flags were later held aloft. A crowd had gathered around a reporter from the Arab television network al-Jazeera, who was interviewing Abed when gunfire broke out.

Aguto said a man stepped out of the crowd. A soldier fired warning shots, he said, then aimed at the man and shot again. "To my understanding, they saw what resembled a grenade," he said. "You have to remember we had just taken an RPG shot."

Aguto said he understood one person was wounded but that troops were unable to locate that person when they tried to assist him.

Witnesses said the gunshots wounded Wisam Abdel-Karim Ahmed, 17, and Abdel-Qadir Fayedh, 15.

Abdel-Jabbar Ahmed Mohammed, another boy who was walking with the teenagers and was wounded in the leg by what he called shrapnel, said Ahmed waved his hand at a soldier and shouted, "Go!" Ahmed denied this. "We didn't say anything," he said, lying on a couch with a bandage over his right thigh. "It was just revenge for the person who shot them with an RPG. It was a lesson for us."

In about a dozen interviews in Khaldiyah today, no one reported seeing a grenade, and residents said the shooting had infuriated the crowd.

"They fired without reason. I swear to God," said Fawzi Saleh, a 57-year-old policeman, one of the few police officers seen in the town. "The boys didn't have guns. They were just going to see al-Jazeera. It's really ridiculous. God above us wouldn't accept such a thing."

Mohammed Ibrahim, 33, came out of his house to see what was going on when he heard the blasts across the street. He found himself a few feet from the two youths, who lay on the ground bleeding. Ahmed was able to walk, and Ibrahim carried Fayedh to a pickup truck, which sped the wounded boys to the hospital in Ramadi. As the Americans withdrew, residents said, the crowd threw rocks at the police chief's pickup, then burned it. Others threw four grenades into the mayor's office, then ransacked it set it on fire.

"The protest was not because we worked with Saddam," Ibrahim said. "The protest was because they shot children and bombed the shops. My opinion -- now, now -- is that Saddam is better than the Americans and the Governing Council" -- the U.S.-appointed body now ruling Iraq.

By this morning, the mayor's office, recently furnished and painted, was an empty hull, with a cracked safe at the entrance.

Doors and windows were ripped from their frames. Gone was the new office furniture, along with carpets, floor tiles and molding painted in bright blues, yellows and pinks along the ceiling. Fluorescent lights and light bulbs were taken, as was a circuit breaker, banister and bathroom sink. From atop the building, looters made away with four water tanks and had started ripping away slabs of concrete lining the roof. Amid piles of half-burned documents, still smoldering, the only fixture left was a toilet.

"They don't need that," Abed said.

Abed, college-educated but unemployed, surveyed the damage with a hint of embarrassment.

"They don't really need all these things," he said. "But if they leave the furniture, the Americans will come back."

Aguto, speaking from the 3rd Infantry Division's base in Ramadi, said the Americans planned to reenter the town, although residents said that by late this afternoon, they had seen no soldiers. Aguto acknowledged that Monday's incident was a setback, but a temporary one.

"We will go back in, we will help the mayor establish security and calm. We will help him rebuild his office if that's what he desires," Aguto said. "We know the way we want to go forward. This isn't a grope in the dark."

Today, a handful of people from the mayor's office had set up shop at the nearby office of a relief organization -- the only furniture was a green and gray desk in a bare room. The police chief was said to be at home, the mayor in meetings in Ramadi.

"There's no government here in Khaldiyah," Ibrahim said.

"What are they doing?" asked Abed, who called the police powerless. "What are they providing us?"

They recited the litany of complaints heard often in Sunni Muslim towns -- prices for gasoline and butane had skyrocketed, and electricity was better but available only 12 hours a day. They hesitated to praise the resistance, which they insisted was religious, not Baathist, but voiced sentiments that suggest fertile ground for opposition grounded in Islam.

"Every true Iraqi Muslim, who has faith in his heart, will not accept humiliation, and he will resist Americans and any occupier," Abed said. "We won't accept anyone who comes on the back of a tank."

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