

U.S. sees planning gaps in Iraqis' assault on Basra

By Michael R. Gordon, Eric Schmitt and Stephen Farrell

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BAGHDAD: U.S. Ambassador Ryan Crocker first learned of the Iraqi plan on March 21: Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki would be heading to Basra with Iraqi troops to bring order to the city.

But the Iraqi operation was not what the United States expected.

Instead of methodically building up their combat power and gradually stepping up operations against renegade militias, Maliki's forces lunged into the city, attacking before all the Iraqi reinforcements had even arrived. By March 25, a major fight was on.

"The sense we had was that this would be a long-term effort: increased pressure gradually squeezing the Special Groups," Crocker said in an interview, using the U.S. term for Iranian-backed militias. "That is not what kind of emerged."

"Nothing was in place from our side," he added. "It all had to be put together."

The Bush administration has portrayed the Iraqi offensive in Basra as a "defining moment" - a compelling demonstration that an Iraqi government that has long been criticized for inaction has both the will and means to take on renegade militias.

The operation indicates that the Iraqi military can quickly organize and deploy forces over considerable distances. Two Iraqi C-130s and several Iraqi helicopters were involved in the operation, an important step for a military struggling to develop air combat capability.

But interviews with a wide variety of U.S. and military officials also suggest that Maliki overestimated his military's abilities and underestimated the scale of the resistance. The Iraqi prime minister also displayed an impulsive leadership style that did not give his forces or those of his most powerful allies, the U.S. and British militaries, time to prepare.

"He went in with a stick and he poked a hornet's nest, and the resistance he got was a little bit more than he bargained for," said one coalition official in Baghdad who requested anonymity. "They went in with 70 percent of a plan. Sometimes that's enough. This time it wasn't."

As the casualties grew and the Iraqi planning appeared to be little more than an improvisation, the United States mounted an intensive military and political effort to try to turn around the situation, according to accounts by Crocker and several U.S. military officials in Baghdad and Washington who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Two senior U.S. military officers - a member of the Navy Seals and a Marine major general - were sent to Basra to help coordinate the Iraqi planning, the military officials said. Soldiers from the Army 82nd Airborne Division were pressed into service as combat advisers while air controllers were positioned to call in airstrikes on behalf of beleaguered Iraqi units. U.S. transport planes joined the Iraqis in ferrying supplies to Iraqi troops.

In Baghdad, Crocker lobbied senior officials in the Iraqi government, who complained that they had been excluded from Maliki's decision-making on Basra, to back the prime minister's effort there.

"I stressed the point that this was a moment of national crisis, and they had to think nationally because nobody should think that failure in Basra is going to benefit any element of the Iraqi community," Crocker said. "The response was good. I have not found any element of the Iraqi government that will admit to being consulted."

Basra, Iraq's second-largest city, lies atop vast oil reserves and is a strategically located port on the Shatt al Arab waterway controlling Iraq's access to the Gulf. Predominantly Shiite, it has suffered from infighting between numerous Shiite militias, tribal forces and criminal gangs struggling for control of its smuggling and oil revenues. Even some of the Iraqi police are believed to be under the influence of militia groups.

"Effectively, much of the city was under militia control and had been for some time," Crocker said. "Maliki kept hearing this along with some pretty graphic descriptions of militia excesses and just decided, 'I am going to go down there and take care of this.' I think for him it was a Karbala moment."

Last August, Maliki rushed to Karbala after an outbreak of Shiite-on-Shiite violence, fired the police commander and oversaw the successful effort to restore order to the city.

One U.S. intelligence officer in Washington, however, had a somewhat different interpretation of the prime minister's motivations.

While restoring order was his stated goal, he asserted, the Iraqi leader was also eager to weaken the Mahdi army and the affiliated political party of the renegade cleric Moktada al-Sadr before provincial elections in the south that are expected to be held later this year. The Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq - a Shiite political party and militia that is a rival to Sadr, his party and his militia - forms a crucial part of Maliki's political coalition.

When Maliki met with General David Petraeus, the top U.S. commander in Iraq, on March 22, he indicated that his goal was to take on the "criminals and gang leaders" in Basra, according to an account of the meeting by a U.S. official. Maliki explained that the operation would be an Iraqi affair but that he might need air support from the Americans.

He said that he was going to meet with sheiks, religious figures and other local leaders, taking advantage of the additional leverage he hoped to gain by sending in troops, fostering economic development programs and bringing along teams of judges to try and punish corrupt and violent behavior.

"It was a unilateral decision by Maliki," said a U.S. official who was familiar to the session. "It was a fait accompli."

This article was reported by Michael R. Gordon, Eric Schmitt and Stephen Farrell and written by Gordon. Gordon and Farrell reported from Baghdad, and Schmitt from Washington. Thom Shanker contributed reporting from Washington.

U.S. strike destroys house

U.S. forces destroyed a house with an airstrike late Wednesday in Basra, Reuters reported from the city.

A U.S. military spokesman said the strike, in support of Iraqi forces on the ground, had "killed one enemy and destroyed a house." Iraqi witnesses and hospital officials said at least three civilians were among the dead.

The U.S. military said it was looking into reports that civilians were killed in a second airstrike in Basra but could provide no further details.