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Fear Hamstrings Quest For Intelligence In N. Iraq

Threats of Bomb Attacks, Reprisals Keep Soldiers Behind Armor, Citizens Silent

By Scott Wilson, Washington Post Foreign Service

QABR ABD, Iraq -- In the numbingly cold hours before dawn, dozens of Iraqi men raised their hands and pressed them against the wall of a low building in this village, under the watch of American troops. The only sounds were the buzz of attack helicopters and howls of dogs. Silhouetted by the headlights of a hulking U.S. Army assault vehicle, the men cast shadows against a scrawl of graffiti. "Support the Islamic Movement. There is no party but God," it read.

"Thumbs down," a voice crackled over an Army radio after one man, tousled and confused, stood in the headlights. His picture had been snapped moments earlier by a young sergeant, and his name checked against a laminated list held by another soldier. An Iraqi informant inside the armored vehicle, too afraid even to appear masked in the dark streets, had linked the man to Iraq's elusive insurgency.

Over the next four hours last Tuesday, more than 200 men endured the same procedure, as U.S. troops compiled a book of mug shots that included almost every man of military age in this village of mud-walled houses on the Tigris River. Thirty-four were linked to the insurgency by at least one of two informants, who later reviewed the men's pictures at an Army post in Mosul, 10 miles north of here.

"I don't care about their hearts and minds, because in a place like this we know where their hearts lay," said Lt. Col. Todd McCaffrey as he watched the suspects, some frightened, others nonchalant, all shivering. "I'm more interested in what they know."

The search for information about Iraq's insurgency has become the most crucial task facing battlefield commanders as they struggle to subdue violent regions like this one before the scheduled Jan. 30 elections. But intelligence-gathering by the front-line forces that need to know the most is proving difficult in a region increasingly gripped by fear.

Enlisting the help of Iraqis against the militants who live among them has never been easy, but the effort has suffered further setbacks here. Obstacles include the murderous insurgent campaign against Iraqis working with U.S. forces in the region, a troop rotation that left no time for a proper orientation and sharply deteriorating security conditions. Army intelligence officers are pursuing Iraqi sources not on foot but from the inside of intimidating armored assault vehicles.

McCaffrey and his counterparts, the leading edge of the 138,000 U.S. troops here, say good intelligence leads to precise military operations, which in turn produce good

intelligence about key players in the insurgency operating in sympathetic villages such as this one.

But U.S. forces are finding themselves stretched thin and increasingly isolated from Iraqis cowed by insurgent reprisals against anyone who cooperates with the Americans. The hidden informants who helped U.S. forces in their pre-dawn raid here were the exception.

More than 160 bodies, many of them the mutilated remains of U.S.-trained members of the Iraqi National Guard, have been discovered in and around Mosul in the past month. The killings have coincided with a surge in rebel activity in Mosul, the commercial heart of northern Iraq, that drove off more than three-quarters of the city's U.S.-trained police force. The Iraqi National Guard battalion stationed in the town of Hammam al-Alil, two miles from this village, also dissolved in the face of a Nov. 10 attack, leaving its U.S.-funded base to looters who stripped it even of its window frames.

McCaffrey's unit of roughly 850 soldiers -- the 1st Battalion, 5th Infantry Regiment of the 25th Infantry Division's 1st Brigade -- is responsible for securing the web of hilltop villages and nameless roads south of Mosul that form a supply line for the insurgency. The unit is part of the 8,000-member Task Force Olympia, which assumed responsibility for northern Iraq from the 101st Airborne Division, a force of about 32,000 troops, when the region appeared to be more stable last year.

For information, McCaffrey and his men are relying on the mass arrests that frequently antagonize the population, hit-and-miss traffic stops and the few frightened Iraqis who help U.S. forces, often to avenge the murder of a family member by the insurgents.

The troops use soccer balls and school supplies, candy and small talk to win over Iraqis -- and the blunt instrument of midnight raids to round up men profiled as potential fighters. It is frustrating work, judging by two days spent with the battalion.

"The idea is to convince them to say to themselves, 'Maybe Iraq will be a better place if I don't cooperate with the insurgents,' " said Maj. Omar Jones, the battalion's operations officer. "I don't know. Maybe that's optimistic."

The Tigris River valley south of Mosul is a vast stretch of craggy sandstone and tilled farmland, now being planted with wheat, barley and vegetables during seasonal rains. From a military perspective, it appears daunting, given its ribbons of rural roads, population of migrant farm workers and villages that one young sergeant described as "run-to-after-you-pull-the-trigger places."

Jones, an ebullient West Point graduate from Ellicott City, traveled those roads in a convoy of four Stryker assault vehicles this week in what he called "battlefield circulation," a meet-and-greet employing both friendly and frightening tactics. Rolling along a stony road in the lead Stryker, Jones radioed that the silver sedan he had just passed should be stopped. The trailing Strykers blocked the road, and Jones emerged

from the back hatch onto a stretch of highway where improvised bombs targeting U.S. convoys have been appearing with greater frequency in recent weeks.

A young Iraqi man in a blue V-neck sweater stepped out of the vehicle, and several U.S. soldiers searched under mats in the trunk, tapped side panels and checked under the hood for weapons. On a stop last week, soldiers found \$70,000 in cash tucked into the back seat of a vehicle and arrested the driver, a known money-launderer, troops said. In another car, after finding ski masks and a freshly used sniper rifle, they detained three men inside. Not this day.

"You make us feel safe," the driver of the sedan sputtered to Jones through an interpreter, after the major told him he was looking for information about the insurgency. But, the driver continued, "Your men kill a lot of our sheep and donkeys."

"Our soldiers?" Jones responded. "We've only been here a month. I don't think it's our soldiers."

"They killed some four days ago," the man persisted.

"Well, that shouldn't happen," Jones said. He took the man's name and promised him a fact-finding visit within two days, an obligation that turned out to be the only thing the traffic stop and several others produced.

Later Jones ordered his soldiers to search an orange-and-white taxi, the kind linked to the recent abduction of Iraqi National Guardsmen. But the soldiers found nothing, and the two passengers, forced to kneel during the search, left with no-hard-feelings handshakes from Jones.

"Everyone's answer is . . . 'We don't know anything about the insurgents,' " Jones, 34, told his crew over the Stryker's headsets. "I'm beginning to think this is the Mayberry of Iraq - not a bad guy around. No one knows any of them."

Jones and the battalion assumed control quickly from the previous unit. Usually, the process would have lasted three weeks and involved exchanging intelligence sources and meeting reliable Iraqi leaders. But the battalion was deployed to Fallujah soon after arriving in Iraq two months ago, and then rushed to Mosul. Jones did not spend any time with his predecessor and inherited only a stack of compact discs, charts and diagrams from the previous unit.

"We're going to school on those now," he said. "Slowly we're getting up to speed."

Casual contact with Iraqis, essential in cultivating intelligence sources, is nearly impossible. Praised by troops for its speed and protection in combat, the eight-wheeled Stryker is a menacing sight. It is encased in grilling that protects it from rocket-propelled grenades, and is mounted with a .50-caliber machine gun. The effect is Mad Max.

The decline in the number of troops across the north has also reduced the amount of battlefield circulation the battalion is able to do, according to its officers. As a commander, McCaffrey said he would welcome three more rifle companies -- about 300 men -- but understands that more troops could also create a backlash among Iraqis displeased by the U.S. presence.

"I'd take more terps than troops, though," said McCaffrey, a lanky, meticulous West Point graduate from Hudson, Ohio, using Army lingo for interpreters. Only five Arabic-speaking interpreters are assigned to the battalion, and one of them is on leave.

Four of the battalion's Strykers recently pulled into Taiba, a ridge-top village of low houses with mud-and-thatch roofs that overlooks the treacherous town of Hammam al-Alil. Chickens clucked in the dirt, but the people went silent. Men shook their heads when Jones asked for information, and only when Sgt. Maj. Mark Taylor pulled lollipops from his pockets did the voices of more than a dozen children fill the afternoon.

"I have onions to sell. Can I get to Mosul?" asked one man in a dark brown dishdasha, his grandson hovering at his side. Jones told him yes, but when the major asked for information about militants, whom he suspects use the town as a lookout, he got no response.