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Shortages Ignite Violence In Iraq

Lack of Utilities Lead To Protests in South

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NAHRAN OMAR, Iraq, Aug. 10 -- Violence spread through the sweltering southern region surrounding the city of Basra today as protracted electricity and gasoline shortages sparked a second day of angry demonstrations.

The strife marked some of the worst unrest in Iraq since U.S.-led forces overthrew Saddam Hussein on April 9. The region around Basra, dominated by Iraq's Shiite Muslim majority, had largely remained peaceful since the war, and U.S. officials have praised the pace of reconstruction by the British-run administration in the city.

On Saturday, when the protests first erupted, angry crowds swelling into the hundreds burned a gasoline tanker and threw stones at British troops, protesting the utility shortages that have made life nearly unbearable in temperatures that reach 125 degrees.

Today, residents in the region said that the violence had worsened, and that two people had been killed and seven wounded in clashes between mobs and British troops. They said that tanker trucks had been stolen at gunpoint and that Iraqi police had fled from other violent confrontations.

The reports from Basra, Iraq's second-largest city, could not be confirmed, but the British-run administration said in a statement that a Nepalese Gurkha security officer was killed by Iraqi gunmen. The officer, who worked for Global Security, a private security contractor, was in a vehicle delivering mail for the United Nations.

Gunmen on the highway to Basra chased a car in which a Washington Post correspondent was traveling this afternoon with an Iraqi interpreter and driver. The gunmen, driving in another vehicle, shot at the car and then passed it. None of the three passengers was harmed.

U.S. and British officials have blamed the shortages in Basra on sabotage, looting of equipment and a dilapidated network that has suffered from years of neglect. A spokesman with the U.S.-led occupation in Baghdad called it a "vicious circle" that authorities were struggling to break.

"When the system comes down, it tends to come down with a bang," the spokesman, Charles Heatly, said. "Basra has basically been cut off from the national grid because of sabotage."

In response to the unrest, he said, British forces were releasing some of their fuel reserves to Iraqis, escorting fuel shipments and reinforcing guards at refineries and other installations. At some stations, they were trying to impose informal fuel rationing, and there were renewed efforts to crack down on the smuggling of Iraqi oil to neighboring Kuwait and outside Basra. The smuggling has angered residents, who have attacked vehicles that have Kuwaiti plates.

But in interviews in long gas station lines and in towns along the highway today, many residents put the blame largely on British authorities, despite their efforts.

"We have no fuel, no water, no electricity for days. Children are dying in hospitals," said Tha'ara Amar, 25, a shopkeeper in the city of Amarah, where residents said a large protest rally had been organized Saturday by local Shiite Muslim leaders. "Tell the British to give us gasoline, and then we will turn in our guns."

A businessman named Hussain, 56, said he and other residents had initially welcomed the British forces but had grown increasingly frustrated and angry at the lack of services and basic supplies, especially as the infernal summer heat worsened day by day.

"In the beginning we were happy. We opened our windows to freedom as the Americans and the British asked us," said Hussain. "But now we have nothing, not even our basic necessities. If nothing changes, we are ready to make a lot of chaos."

Fifty miles farther along the highway to Basra, drivers waiting in line at a gas station called out angrily as a British military convoy passed. Many wore bath towels over their heads to guard against a relentless sun, and said they expected to remain in line until Monday.

In the distance, the intense orange flames and thick smoke from oil refineries flickered in the air. The Basra region produces much of Iraq's oil, but the industry was badly damaged in the war to topple Hussein, and most oil and gas supplies have been imported from Kuwait and other countries since.

The drivers said people in the nearby town of Saleh Casr had commandeered a gasoline tanker today en route from Basra and taken out the gas. Some said they wanted the British forces to leave, but others said they wanted them to keep better order and crack down on widespread smuggling of gasoline and other supplies.

"We haven't had any electricity since the war. The British promised us everything, and they have given us nothing," said Mukul Sayeed, 52, an engineer waiting in line. "We were happy when the coalition forces got rid of a big tyrant, but if they don't help us, we are all going to become like Fallujah people."

Fallujah is a town in central Iraq dominated by Sunni Muslims from which Hussein's government drew its support. Numerous attacks have occurred against U.S. troops patrolling the area.

Even in this tiny farming village, residents complained angrily about the shortages and about the growing lawlessness that has accompanied them. A family that invited visiting journalists to hide inside their farmyard said their new truck had been stolen by gunmen this morning.

Correspondent Anthony Shadid in Baghdad contributed to this report.

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