

Just another little degradation

Cruise missile destroys telephone system

It's difficult to weep about a telephone exchange. True, the destruction of the local phone system in Baghdad is a miserable experience for tens of thousands of Iraqi families who want to keep in contact with their relatives during the long dark hours of bombing. But the shattered exchanges and umbilical wires and broken concrete of the Mimoun International Communications Centre scarcely equals the exposed bones and intestines and torn flesh of the civilian wounded of Baghdad.

The point, of course, is that it represents another of those little degradations which we (as in "we, the West") routinely undertake when things aren't going our way in a war. Obviously, "we" hoped it wouldn't come to this. The Anglo-American armies wanted to maintain the infrastructure of Baghdad for themselves – after they had "liberated" the city under a hail of roses from its rejoicing people – because they would need working phone lines on their arrival.

But after a night of massive explosions across the city, dawn yesterday brought the realisation that communications had been sacrificed. The huge Rashid telecommunications centre was struck by a cruise missile which penetrated the basement of the building. The exchange in Karada, where Baghdadis pay their phone bills, was ripped open. No more. Because "we" have decided to destroy the phones and all those "command and control" systems that may be included, dual use, into the network.

So yesterday, most Baghdadis had to drive across town to see each other; there was more traffic on the roads than at any time since the start of the war. Down, too, went Baghdad's internet system. Iraqi television, a pale shadow of itself since the Americans bombed the studios on Wednesday night, can be watched only between an increasing

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number of power cuts.

So what's next? Each day, of course, brings news of events which, on their own, have no great import but which, together, add a sinister, new dimension to the coming siege of Baghdad. Yesterday, hundreds of tribesmen from across Iraq gathered at the Baghdad Hotel before meeting President Saddam Hussein.

The Iraqi tribes, ignored by the military planners and Washington pundits who think Iraq is held together only by the Baath party and the army, are a powerful force, their unity cemented by marriage and a network of families loyal to President Saddam who provide a force as cohesive as the Baath party itself.

Tribesmen guard the grain silos and electricity generating stations around Baghdad. Two of them were credited with disabling an Apache helicopter captured last week.

And yesterday, tribal leaders came from all over Iraq, from Ninevah and Babylon and Basra and Nasiriyah and all the cities of Mesopotamia.

President Saddam has already issued one set of orders which tells the tribesmen "to fight [the Americans and British] in groups and attack their advance and rear lines to block the way of their progress ... If the enemy settles into a position, start to harass them at night ..."

Another sign of things to come. At least 20 international "human shields" – hitherto "guarding" power stations, oil refineries and food production plants – decided to leave Iraq yesterday. So did all Chinese journalists, on instructions from their government. Not all the optimistic claims from the Iraqi government, a victory against US Marines outside Nasiriyah was among them, could change their minds.

The nightly attacks long ago spread into the daylight hours, so the sound of aircraft and rockets – I have several times actually heard the missiles passing over the central streets – have acquired a kind of normality. A few stores have reopened. There are fresh vegetables again. And like every blitzed people, Baghdadis are growing used to what has become a dull, familiar danger.

Is this "shock and awe", I sometimes ask myself? ♦