

Shopping for canned food and painkillers

It is difficult to grasp the reality of what is coming

In Yasser Arafat Street, at the Sana Nimr al-Ibrahim pharmacy, Riad offered to give me two rolls of bandages free. I told him I'd better pay, since I thought the RAF was going to bomb him in a few hours time. "I think they are," he said. Then he shot me the kind of grin I didn't deserve. As a Brit, buying emergency rations in the shops of Baghdad yesterday evening was an instructive experience. Riad's pharmacy was crowded, his customers buying up not just bandages but splints, painkillers, tweezers, cotton wool, disinfectant and rubbing alcohol. It had been the same on Tuesday night, from 5pm right up to 10pm.

Yet in all Yasser Arafat Street, there wasn't a curse or a bad word for a Brit. I was told always that I was "welcome in Iraq" – the few journalists here must fervently hope this remains the case when the blitz begins – and that it was pleasant to see a sahafa, a journalist, taking the same risks as the people in the street. This was not, of course, the moment to remind them that I had a flak jacket when they did not, that I had a gas mask, which they have not, that I even have a helmet that would fit any of their heads but is likely to be only on mine.

At the Alastrabak grocery store, I bought 25 loo rolls, a mountain of biscuits and a stack of red and green candles. Abbas, the proprietor, told me I was his 200th customer of the evening. Usually, fewer than 100 visit his shop in an entire day.

At the Tabarak store – in English, the "God Bless You" store – I put 24 bags of crisps, boxes of long-life cheese and 30 cans of the most tasteless soft drink in the whole world on the counter. After a siege or two – the 1982 Israeli siege of Beirut was my first – you develop an uncanny knack of knowing what to hunt for.

I bought two electrical adaptors from Sami's little store for my computer leads,

Robert Fisk » Shopping for canned food and painkillers

though they won't be any use if the Americans bomb the Iraqi power grid. Meat and vegetables of any kind are a waste of money, unless the meat is canned. And that's what Baghdad residents were buying yesterday. Dr Mohammed of the Karamah Hospital was buying razor blades, so he could shave in cold water – if there is electricity to drive the pumps.

The most popular food at one store was tamaniya, an Iraqi sweet made out of date palms, so long-lasting that it's reputed to be edible for a decade and so sticky that it can wrench out the weakest molars. Tamaniya doesn't go off in the heat.

Most of the shops in Yasser Arafat Street have already been shuttered by their owners for fear of thieves and the pavements were scattered last night with a gloomy mixture of last-minute shoppers and soldiers. A uniformed and bearded member of the Republican Guard crossed the road with his arm round his small son on a last visit home before the war.

Yet even last night, it was still difficult to grasp the reality of what was in store for us. Two old Soviet-made anti-aircraft guns sat on top of the ornamental gates of a palace, brilliantly illuminated by the floodlights below. There were piles of sandbags at street corners, the soldiers behind them chatting to shoppers. Is this what constant war does to people? Does it turn them into men and women who know they will survive for the simple reason that they survived last time?

At Baalbek Nuts I bought pistachios from the Lebanese owners, who answered my request for their thoughts on the war with the typically Lebanese response of “no problem”. It's a lie, as we all knew.

After all, Dr Mohammed invited me to his hospital because we both assumed there would be civilian casualties. On Iraqi television, they were replaying this morning's theatre at the National Assembly, where parliament members dutifully chanted their undying loyalty to Saddam and routinely offered their blood and souls to the same gentleman.

The Iraqi Minister of Information had told foreign journalists earlier that this war would be “no picnic” and added that the Americans and British would be killed. Which may be true, although the Iraqis, it has to be said, were more interested last night to know how many of them would be killed by the Americans and the British. ♦