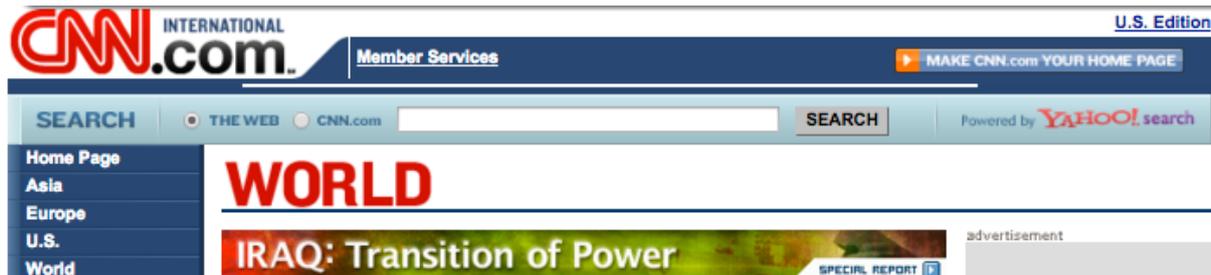


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Basra tense after jail raid drama

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(CNN) -- British forces in Iraq are patrolling a tense city after UK armored vehicles crashed into a detention center in Basra and later rescued two undercover troops apparently held by Shiite militia.

The operation prompted condemnation by a senior local Iraqi official on Tuesday and renewed calls by a British opposition party for the UK government to withdraw from Iraq.

However, the Iraqi prime minister's office moved quickly to say there is no "crisis" between it and the British government.

"Both governments are in close contact, and an inquiry will be conducted by the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior into the incident," it said in a written statement. "We will await the outcome of that inquiry. In the meantime we urge all sides to remain calm."

The dramatic raid on Monday followed a day of rioting in the southern Iraqi city, sparked when the two soldiers were said by police and local officials to have fired on an Iraqi police patrol. ([Watch scenes of rioting and of prison assault -- 1:47](#))

The British commanding officer in Basra, Brigadier John Lorimer, said his fears for the arrested men increased after he received information they had been handed over to "militia elements."

But CNN Correspondent Jennifer Eccleston reported that an Iraqi official had said the men were in a safe house for their own protection.

Lorimer added that it was of "deep concern" the men detained by police at Jamiat police station in Basra were later handed over to Shiite militia.

"From an early stage I had good reason to believe the lives of the two soldiers were at risk," Lorimer said in a statement issued to the media Tuesday.

He said the UK military went "to exhaustive lengths" to secure the freedom of the soldiers. The Iraqi interior minister personally ordered the release of the soldiers, he said, adding that the order was ignored.

Lorimer said he then took the decision to storm the police station. Troops sent there were attacked with fire-bombs and rockets by a "violent and determined crowd," Lorimer added.

The UK military entered the police station and a Warrior armoured vehicle crashed through the perimeter wall of the jail.

When it was discovered the two men were not in the jail, the men were rescued from a nearby house, Lorimer said.

"I am delighted that the two British soldiers are back with British forces and are in good health."

Pictures from the jail on Tuesday showed a concrete wall broken through, several cars crushed -- apparently by armored vehicles -- and several prefabricated structures flattened.

Mohammed al-Waili, the governor of Basra province, condemned the British raid on the prison, an act he called "barbaric, savage and irresponsible."

"A British force of more than 10 tanks backed by helicopters attacked the central jail and destroyed it. This is an irresponsible act," The Associated Press reported al-Waili as saying.

'Special security task'

An Iraqi official, who spoke to CNN on condition of anonymity, said the soldiers' arrests stemmed from an incident earlier in the day.

The official said two unknown gunmen in full Arabic dress began firing on civilians in central Basra, wounding several, including a traffic police officer. There were no fatalities, the official said.

The two gunmen fled the scene but were captured and taken in for questioning, admitting they were British Marines carrying out a "special security task," the official said.

British troops launched the dramatic rescue about three hours after Iraqi authorities informed British commanders the men were being held at the police department's major crime unit, the official said.

Iraqi police said members of Iraq's Mehdi Army militia engaged the British forces around the facility, burning one personnel carrier and an armored vehicle.

Video showed dozens of Iraqis surrounding British armored vehicles and tossing gasoline bombs, rocks and other debris at them.

With one vehicle engulfed in flames, a soldier opened the hatch and bailed out as rocks were thrown at him. Another photograph showed a British soldier on fire on top of a tank.

British Defense Secretary John Reid said he was concerned why the soldiers were not handed over by Iraqi police.

"It became obvious that the police were not doing what we would expect them to do, what was required under the law for them to do, which is to hand over the soldiers to us, and what apparently they were told by their own ministry of the interior to do," he told the BBC on Tuesday.

"That is worrying. We don't know why it happened. I don't know whether they were coerced, threatened or whatever by a mob, by militants, I don't know whether there was collusion."

He said British forces "remain committed to helping the Iraqi government for as long as they judge that a coalition presence is necessary to provide security."

But the clashes sparked renewed calls by a UK opposition party for the government to spell out its exit strategy for withdrawing its 8,500 troops from Iraq.

"The most worrying thing of all is if we are now seeing a breakdown in communication, trust and co-operation between the British forces -- who have done a heroic job there under the most dreadful of circumstances -- and aspects at least of the Iraqi domestic security forces," Liberal Democrat leader Charles Kennedy said Tuesday.

"I think we owe it really to those forces, and to their families back home, to make quite clear what the position is and to reassure people by making quite clear that the government and parliament are thinking in terms of a safe homeward strategy for the forces."

Iraqi journalist found dead

Basra, which is Iraq's second-largest city, has largely been spared the turbulence in the north.

But violence has increased in recent months, with Shiite Muslim militias allegedly infiltrating police ranks and causing chaos.

Three British troops have been killed in Basra in September, and an Iraqi freelance journalist who had been reporting on the militia violence for The New York Times was found dead earlier Monday.

Authorities said the body of Fakher Haider, 38, was found shot in the head with his hands tied behind his back and a bag over his head. The Times said he had worked for the paper since April 2003.

Haider was abducted from his home shortly after midnight by armed, masked men who claimed they were police officers, the Times said.

The paper said his kidnapers pulled up to his apartment building in two cars -- one of them a police car -- before ransacking his apartment.

As they took him away, the assailants told his wife they would interrogate him for several hours and bring him back, according to the Times.

It was the second time in two months that somebody affiliated with the Times has been killed in Basra.

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