

CPT Group Experiences Bombing in Baghdad

When the American onslaught of “shock and awe” hit Baghdad the night of March 21, several members of Christian Peacemaker Teams were huddled in their room at the Al-Daar Hotel, reading aloud from Gandhi’s writings.

The crushing volley lasted nearly two hours, then resumed shortly before dawn. CPTer Lisa Martens of Winnipeg, Man., said when the long-awaited assault interrupted their evening worship, the group just read louder.

By the time the aerial attack ended, large sections of central Baghdad were in flames, including a presidential palace directly across the Tigris River from the hotels where the six CPTers and other members of the 27-member Iraq Peace Team have been staying.

The Iraq Peace Team is a project of the activist group Voices in the Wilderness. CPT is supported by Mennonites, Quakers and the Church of the Brethren.

Other CPTers had stationed themselves before the attack in a tent at the city’s Al-Wathab water treatment plant, and at the Al-Mansour Pediatric Hospital, so far unaffected by bombing.

As of March 24, the CPTers in Baghdad reported they were safe, enduring intense bombing raids while American and British ground forces pressed on toward the Iraqi capital.

Speaking from Baghdad the night of March 24, CPTer Betty Scholten of Mount Ranier, Md., said the team was holding up under great stress.

“For being in the middle of a war, we’re doing very well,” Scholten said as an air-raid siren wailed amid intermittent explosions. “This is a crazy war.”

Scholten and Cliff Kindy of North Manchester, Ind., had decided to sleep in the Al-Daar's bomb shelter, but they could still hear the night's assault beginning outside.

Scholten said the CPTers had seen eight to 10 injured civilians in hospitals, and heard of others killed or injured elsewhere in the city by American cruise missiles. One incident Scholten recounted involved a family of 12 living in a house hit by a missile. Four from the family, including two children with abdominal injuries and an older man, were hurt.

Kindy said he had been outdoors at the water plant during some of the night raids. From there, he said, he could see the attacks pounding other parts of the city. Though the plant had not come under direct attack, he said, Iraqi anti-aircraft rounds apparently had landed nearby a few times.

But near the city's center, the attacks were far more intense.

In a report posted March 23 on the CPT Web site, www.cpt.org, Martens said that when bombs fell nearby, severe pressure and shock waves could be felt, shaking and rattling nearby buildings. She said a constant pall of smoke hung across the city, in part from fires set in oil trenches south of Baghdad.

Between bombing raids, the CPTers were able to venture out and survey the nearby neighborhood and other parts of the city.

On March 24, the team reported visiting wounded civilians in Baghdad's Yarmouk Hospital, apparently injured when a government building was attacked. Injuries ranged from shrapnel and glass wounds to head injuries caused by the concussion of exploding munitions.

CPTers also heard a report from a Sisters of Charity orphanage that a cruise missile had struck a residential neighborhood, killing a mother and two children.

Scholten and Peggy Gish of Athens, Ohio, spent part of March 24 at the orphanage, helping care for children during a daylight lull in the bombing. Team

members have been responding to other casualty reports as well.

When a coalition pilot reportedly parachuted into the Tigris on March 23, CPT members quickly went to the river. There, crowds of civilians had gathered on a bridge overlooking the waterway, which flows through the middle of the city of nearly 6 million. Iraqi soldiers were shooting into the river and setting fire to rushes in an attempt to flush out anyone in the water. No downed pilot was found, and American officials said no aircraft had gone down in the city.

Also on March 23, CPT members attended a worship service at St. Raphael's Catholic Church in Baghdad.

Though Baghdad had been under air assault for several days, CPT members kept in touch with one another at their various locations in the city.

Phone lines remained open but irregular, with power going off intermittently during some bombing runs. Water service remained steady.

CPT reported that a few food shops have stayed open, although shortages and the departure of United Nations aid officials drove prices high.

Taxi service also remained available, and on March 22, CPTers saw a group of about 75 children playing soccer in a street near a hospital.

Thus far, the six CPTers had stayed in touch with family and supporters back home through regular updates posted online.

"The team says that Iraqi [civilians in Baghdad] are not shocked nor awed by what they have seen," according to a March 24 dispatch. "While the bombs are coming from on high, they say that God is higher."

Martens also reported that Baghdad residents remained friendly and supportive, voicing concern for the CPTers' safety as the assaults intensified.

On March 20, after the first night of bombing, Martens said a 15-year-old boy

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approached her and said, "I want you to go home. I'm used to this, but you are not."

Also with CPT in Baghdad are Scott Kerr of Downers Grove, Ill., and Stewart Vriesinga of Lucknow, Ont.

CPT has had peace delegations, with a total of 65 members, in and out of Iraq since October. Another nine-person delegation, which departed the United States for Iraq just as hostilities were beginning, was in Amman, Jordan, March 24 awaiting visas. They arrived in Baghdad March 25, after passing U.S. lines and checkpoints along the deserted key route through western Iraq.

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