

The Sunday Times December 18, 2005

Terror reborn in Falluja ruins
Hala Jaber, Falluja

FIRST they made me change out of my western clothes into a flowing black burqa and slippers. Then I squeezed on to the back seat of a car packed with other women and children for the nerve-jangling journey ahead. A toddler was told to sit on my lap so I was almost hidden from view.

The driver warned me not to speak if we were stopped, in case Iraqi National Guards noticed my foreign accent. All the precautions were in place for a perilous drive past roadblocks into Falluja, the shattered Iraqi city that no western newspaper reporter has entered for more than a year without the supervision of coalition forces.

The car bumped along a dusty track across farmland and through small villages on a roundabout route to the city in Iraq's Sunni heartland, 40 miles west of Baghdad.

Eventually we were stopped at one of the checkpoints where access is restricted to residents carrying biometric identity cards. I held my breath as a guard glanced inside our car. The women beside me chatted, trying to appear unconcerned.

Moments later we were waved forward and my visit to Iraq's most defiant insurgent stronghold had begun. For the next five days residents and insurgents alike smuggled me around the ruined city, showing me the searing reality of life under American siege.

In November 2004 I was the last western reporter to leave Falluja before the US Army launched Operation Phantom Fury, an air and land assault aimed at eliminating insurgents from a city that had become a bastion of resistance to coalition rule.

Last weekend I was the first to return independently and it was impossible not to be shocked by the devastation. Huge areas of what were once homes have been flattened. On countless street corners, mountains of rubbish spew plumes of black smoke into the air.

Fields of rubble stretch as far as the eye can see. Here and there children scamper across the ravaged landscape, seeking out larger bricks and rocks for use in laborious rebuilding.

Of the swift reconstruction promised by Baghdad in the wake of the US-led assault, there are only sporadic signs in wealthier areas. Mostly there are women like Rasmiya Mohammed Ali, crouching in the ruins of her home, chipping away with a small hammer at broken breeze blocks salvaged by her sons, aged seven and eight.

“They did not even give us a tent. What can I do but clean and clear these stones so that we can rebuild our home?” said Ali, a mother of five who received only \$700 compensation after her home was destroyed during the American onslaught.

I had been trying for months to re-enter Falluja to report on its progress since US-led forces in effect cut it off from the rest of Iraq. I almost succeeded once, but the Iraqi contacts arranging my journey were told that I might be kidnapped by a local insurgent faction and sold to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the head of Al-Qaeda in Iraq. We even heard that a price had been agreed for my head: \$50,000.

When I finally reached the city, I was reminded of a remark by a US officer in Vietnam who claimed he had to destroy a village to save it. Falluja has indeed been destroyed. But I found nobody there who thinks it has been saved.

It was on April 28, 2003, six weeks after the invasion of Iraq, that Falluja emerged as a focus of rebellion against the Americans. When a crowd gathered outside a school occupied by US forces, soldiers opened fire, killing 15 Iraqi civilians.

After sporadic clashes over the next year, four US contractors were ambushed on their way into Falluja. America was stunned by television pictures of their burnt and mutilated bodies suspended from a bridge over the Euphrates river.

By last November Falluja had spun out of the coalition’s control. Foreign fighters had poured into the city, turning it into a base for suicide bombers and kidnap gangs who fanned out across much of Iraq.

Shortly before the launch of Phantom Fury, Colonel Gary Brandl of the US Marines told reporters: “The enemy has a face. It is Satan’s. He is in Falluja and we are going to destroy him.”

By sheer force of arms, the Americans occupied Falluja and put a temporary stop to resistance in the city. As the rest of the world soon discovered, the insurgency continued elsewhere.

Yet what I found in Falluja last week was even more dispiriting. It is not only that promises to reconstruct the city and restore normality have manifestly been broken. The bitter truth is that the actions of US and Iraqi forces have reignited the insurgency. Anger, hate and mistrust of America are deeper than ever.

Mistakes by American soldiers and Iraqi National Guards — drawn mainly from the country’s Shi’ite majority — have alienated residents and encouraged support for insurgents.

“They said they attacked us to provide us with security,” complained Um Ahmad, whose family had agreed to shelter me at considerable risk to themselves.

A few weeks ago her home was raided by US soldiers, who broke down doors and searched through family possessions. They claimed to be hunting an insurgent suspect, but later apologised. They had raided the wrong house.

“We are afraid of the National Guards and American soldiers who are supposed to be protecting us,” Um Ahmad said. “Things are getting worse.”

Abu Seif had no way of knowing when he went to bed one night last February that he was about to be seized and accused of killing Kenneth Bigley, the British engineer who was taken hostage and later beheaded.

It was 4am when Abu Seif, a wealthy businessman, was awoken by the sound of American helicopters flying low and close. Moments later US Marines with dogs burst into his house firing percussion grenades of tear gas.

Handcuffed and blindfolded, he was thrown on to a helicopter and eventually found himself being asked why he had murdered Bigley. His answer — “Who’s Bigley?” — apparently enraged his American interrogator, who unsheathed a knife and pressed it against his neck.

Over the next 15 days he was subjected to the interrogation routines that have become notorious in US internment camps. Electric cables were placed on his chained legs and he was subjected to a mock electrocution, he said. He suffered sleep deprivation and disorientation. Headphones were clamped to his ears and played “indescribable, ugly, loud noises”.

His captors soon realised that he had nothing to tell and he was flown to another location, where his handcuffs were removed and an Arabic-speaking woman marine was assigned to prepare him for release.

She brought him good food and let him use her CD player. A few days later he was offered a Koran and a new prayer mat, and was told to walk away without looking back.

The experience so embittered Abu Seif that he now supports the insurgents. “What the Americans have done to Falluja is unacceptable, and if they think it is over they do not know what is coming,” he said.

City officials warned that hardships and detentions were intensifying hostility to the Americans. The Falluja-based Study Centre for Human Rights and Democracy has claimed that 4,000 to 6,000 people were killed during Phantom Fury, most of them civilians.

Stoking the anger has been the slow pace of compensation payments, despite the allocation of \$490m by Iraq’s interim government last year.

Dr Hafid al-Dulaimi, head of the city’s compensation commission, reported that 36,000 homes and 8,400 shops were destroyed in the US onslaught.

Sixty nurseries and schools and 65 mosques and other religious establishments were wrecked. Falluja’s mayor, Dhari abdel Hadi al-Irssan, claims that only 20% of the compensation promised has reached the city.

By early evening the streets of Falluja begin to empty. Only 170,000 people — half the original population — have returned. They live in difficult conditions with 4,200 American Marines and 5,000 Iraqi troops enforcing a curfew from 11pm to 6am.

“The Americans should take heed that when people reach desperation it will be difficult to control the outcome,” al-Irssan warned. “The rage inside Falluja is not in anyone’s interest. But no one is listening to our warnings.”

Nor is the coalition making much effort to enlist the mayor’s support. US soldiers have raided his house four times, he said, most recently last week when one of his bodyguards was shot by a marine.

“He is in hospital having been injured in the lungs and liver,” the mayor said, shaking his head in bewilderment.

With so many institutions damaged, those that remain are under intolerable pressure. School buildings are being used by three or four schools holding classes in shifts. Electricity and water are severely limited.

I was lucky enough to stay with a family that can afford a generator, but they still have to ration themselves. At night many people rely on oil lanterns. A dire petrol shortage compounds the frustration.

Um Ahmad’s elder son said that US and Iraqi troops were preventing residents from filling jerry cans outside Falluja and bringing them back into town — perhaps because they fear the petrol will be used for fire bombs. In some areas the stench of sewage fills the air, as grimy toddlers and barefooted children clamber over the skeletons of vehicles piled in the rubble. I discovered for myself how hard it is to keep clean when Um Ahmad offered me a pot of water that she had boiled on an ancient stove in the bathroom, to be mixed with a pot of cold water for pouring in a makeshift shower.

While the city’s residents struggle with their daily routine, new tensions are spreading. The activities of the Iraqi National Guards are heightening sectarian strains.

Sunni residents claim the National Guards routinely break into their shops and businesses at night for supposed security operations. Many complain of verbal abuse from Shi’ite soldiers. Random arrests are said to be commonplace.

The mayor showed me complaints from Falluja residents who say their belongings were stolen during raids by US troops and the National Guards. Al-Irssan claimed that factories and homes had been stripped of machinery, generators and other valuables.

One woman was driving home with \$2,000 she had just received as compensation for losing her home when she was stopped and robbed by Iraqi troops. She has filed a formal complaint. Another man lost \$3,500 in a similar incident.

Yet even these deprivations pale by comparison with the fatalities Falluja families claim to have suffered at the hands of occupying forces. Witnesses spoke of American

Marines dumping bodies in the Euphrates just after the offensive and of mass graves where hundreds are allegedly buried.

Last week Abu Salam walked into a makeshift graveyard — once a football stadium — to perform his daily ritual of reciting the Koran’s opening verses for the souls of the dead. He hopes that one of his sons is among the scores of unnamed and unmarked mounds.

Abu Salam has lost four children to US operations in Falluja. Bilal, a five-year-old boy, and Nawal, a three-year-old girl, were killed in the April offensive; two sons, aged 15 and 18, disappeared after Operation Phantom Fury.

“My 18-year-old was a fighter, a resister who stayed to defend his city; there was no shame in that,” Abu Salam said. “He was no terrorist, but I will not hide his participation.”

Abu Salam has no idea how his sons may have died, but he fears their bodies were consigned to the river or one of the mass graves. He has since joined the resistance himself.

“They are treading on our honour,” he said of US forces. “They want to destroy us because we said no to occupation, but by the will of God they will not be able to.”

It was made clear to me that most of Falluja’s residents are alienated from authority. My conversations repeatedly revolved around stories of the dead and allegations of new killings by pro-government forces.

Last month the Pentagon confirmed it had used white phosphorus, a chemical that bursts into flames on contact with the air, causing horrible injuries. “There is now hatred and anger against the government and the forces representing this government,” the mayor said.

The insurgents are returning to exploit the popular rage. At a clandestine meeting with insurgent leaders representing the main factions fighting in Iraq, I learnt that a new form of resistance is taking shape.

The meeting was attended by 11 commanders who sat on thin mattresses scattered around the floor of a house. Some leant semi-automatic rifles against the wall in one corner; others kept their pistols beside them.

“The new resistance that has been forming in Falluja is one that will be characterised by revenge and settling scores,” the commander of one fundamentalist faction explained.

“As well as fighting the occupation, its aim will include avenging . . . the crimes committed by the so-called (Iraqi) forces in the period after the offensives,” he said.

The commander claimed that US and Iraqi troops had “violated the sanctity of homes, families and even religion . . . The arrests of thousands of men mean that every home now has suffered the loss or detention of at least one of its males”.

Having melted away in the face of earlier US onslaughts, the resistance has learnt to organise itself differently. Another faction commander added: "Groups and cells are being formed but, unlike in the past, the hierarchy and leadership will be difficult to track."

The insurgents also appear to be learning that random attacks producing heavy civilian casualties can divide communities. "Lessons have been learnt that the people are important for the survival of the resistance and to alienate the residents will foil our work," the commander said.

The insurgent leaders appeared to be waiting for the results of last week's elections before deciding how to proceed. There was talk of a "period of grace" to see if anything in Falluja changes as a result. If there is no early relief, one commander added, attacks will be intensified.

At a separate meeting I saw Abu Safi, a member of the Ansar al-Sunnah insurgent group which has claimed responsibility for several suicide bombings and executions of both foreign and Iraqi hostages. But in a sign that tactics may be changing, Abu Safi said his spiritual leader had advised him against a suicide mission.

The cleric told him his life would be better spent planning to kill Americans over a long period. Abu Safi said his group was now forming smaller cells to avoid infiltration by informers and was planning more use of hit-and-run attacks.

"It is hard to say, but there is sympathy for the insurgency," a US military official admitted recently. "Basically everyone here has the potential to be an insurgent."

For Falluja's beleaguered residents, no early end appears to be in sight to the conflict that has crushed their city. When short bursts of gunfire echoed through the night close to the house where I was meeting the insurgent commanders, my heart sank and I braced myself for a raid.

A few telephone calls later, laughter broke out in the lantern-lit room. It turned out that the Iraqi national soccer team had beaten Syria 4-3 on penalties to claim the gold medal at the West Asian games. Local people were celebrating by shooting into the air.

It was a rare moment of release for a city where gunfire usually means the return of a desperate cycle of rebellion, retaliation and revenge.

Some names have been changed to protect sources