

LATEST SECURITY REPORT FROM CENTURION ADVISORS IN IRAQ

Sept 29, 2003

GENERAL

The main news this week in Iraq focused on the hitting of 'soft targets' such as hotels where westerners are residing. These attacks were rumoured to be once the security in and around Iraq was to be tightened by the security forces. The attackers / terrorists always had the capability to hit the CPA and other western residences as was proved with the UN attacks and the very recent explosion at the two hotels involving an IED and RPGs.

Baghdad and the surrounding areas are still rife with attacks, especially to the west where most problems are still being encountered on and around the areas of Ramadi and Fallujah. Most areas remain unstable.

Attacks in and around the Mosul area against the coalition forces and Iraqi Public Institution are still high.

Najaf and Karbala continue to report numerous attacks whereas the area around Hilla remains quite calm.

The upper south remains relatively quiet but a number of effective low level attacks continue in and around Baghdad. Most regions continue to suffer from events ranging from ambushes to mortar and RPG attacks.

The increase in the number of well organised attacks have great implications not just to the coalition forces, but to anyone residing and working in Iraq.

Attacks against the coalition forces using IEDs, RPGs, mortars and sniper weapons continue.

The threat from suicide bombers, vehicle bombs and motorbike bombs remain high.

FLIGHTS

Airserv apparently is no longer allowing media to fly with them. However, Royal Wings (part of royal Jordanian Airlines) are conducting flights to Baghdad.

CONVOY – VEHICLE SECURITY

The route from Baghdad to the Jordanian border is becoming slightly better, as the area previously fraught with numerous attacks is being patrolled more frequently by coalition forces thus improving the security. The route between the Ramadi and Fallujah is being policed on a regular basis.

Attacks against convoys are still a daily occurrence even though the security forces have been patrolling the area around Ramadi and Fallujah.

A metallic green Nissan Patrol vehicle (license plate: IRC005) was stolen at gunpoint on the road from Kirkuk to Baghdad. The vehicle was the lead vehicle in a three-vehicle convoy, driving from Baghdad containing communications equipment to Kirkuk. No one was injured.

With the increase of use of IEDs being deployed as 'camouflaged objects' it is advisable to take extra care when driving as not to run over any item in the road or tracks. There have been reports that blue X's have been marked next to potential IED's.

Always be observant for anything that may look like or contain a potential IED, look for unusual markings, or any changes on your route.

It is also advisable to stay clear of holes in the ground and dirt roads as these can be used all too easily to conceal mines / IEDs.

A military vehicle patrol was ambushed from both sides of the roads by multiple RPGs fired

simultaneously, disabling one vehicle and injuring one soldier.

Some organisations are now restricting the use of large 4x4 vehicles and changing for normal saloon vehicles so as to lower their profile in order to reduce the risk of an attack.

A security vehicle patrol was ambushed by an IED, RPGs and backed up by small arms fire. Soldiers received minor injuries.

Grenades are still being thrown from overpasses on to moving vehicles below. One thrown recently wounded two soldiers.

It was reported that a vehicle containing Iraqi men approached the last vehicle of a coalition vehicle patrol and opened fire with an RPG, which hit the vehicle injuring three soldiers. The Iraqi vehicle fled at high speed out of the area.

There are still high incidences of criminal activity on the roads around Basra and the Kuwait border.

Avoid isolated roads and tracks as much as possible as these give the attackers a lot more time to set up and conduct vehicle ambushes.

Maintain escape space between all vehicles when travelling in a convoy. Safety definitely applies in numbers when travelling in convoy. Do not travel in one lone vehicle, you will be seen as an easy target.

IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices)

Members of some organisations are STILL picking up UXO's (Unidentified Explosive Ordnance). All personnel should leave any suspect item alone. Most are picking them up to take them back as souvenirs. These UXOs can detonate at any time. If they did not detonate on initiation, they could have initially malfunctioned, but could easily detonate later on. Some UXOs are designed to work with a time delay fuse.

ADVICE: LEAVE WELL ALONE – THEY MAY LOOK GOOD ON THE MANTLEPIECE BACK HOME – BUT THEY ARE NOT WORTH THE LOSS OF A LIMB or EVEN WORSE, THE DEATHS OF YOU OR YOUR COLLEAGUES.

Many IEDs have been found, reported and dealt with before they have caused damage to potential targets. This has been due to an increase in awareness when moving around the country. IEDs are still being camouflaged as rubbish, attractive items, hidden inside soft drink cans etc left on the sides or middle of roads, against buildings and inside derelict vehicles. Anything that looks suspicious should be avoided at all costs and reported at the earliest opportunity. Many of these IEDs are 'command detonated' but may also be 'booby trapped'.

Do not leave any item including personal equipment unattended at any time.

An IED was thrown at a coalition vehicle patrol, no injuries were reported.

Another IED was thrown at a patrol and immediately followed up by small arms fire.

Several IEDs have detonated as vehicle patrols pass them resulting in injuries to the security forces.

An Iraqi was arrested while trying to plant an IED in the back of a truck near the university, which then led to further arrests and seizure of RPGs, explosives and hand grenades.

An IED exploded on the rail track near Bayji severely damaging the track. A patrol found and defused an IED, which consisted of two tank shells and one artillery shell, which was connected as a single IED which was found in a taxi.

Two Iraqi men blew themselves up as they were planting an IED on one of the main highways.

The IED exploded prematurely and left a four-foot crater on the road. Reports state there was a secondary device as there were wires leading from it toward the device that exploded.

Over a period of 4 days, 22 IED were exploded in the area around Baghdad.

GENERAL SECURITY

It is advisable to change your routes and also try not to frequent the same place at the same times every day. Use alternative locations, change eating venues etc as not to give an attacker a routine to use against you.

Some people, continue to ignore advice given by their safety advisors. Often the advice is also issued by numerous other security forces, it is not clear why then, people continue to go areas that have been warned 'no-go areas as they are dangerous', such as the 'Thieves Market'. With safety levels changing from day to day, previous safe areas may no longer be safe, and such advice should always be heeded.

There was an incident a couple of nights ago involving a large explosion. As news crews arrived on scene to report and film, no military cordon had yet been set up, and the area was highly volatile and active. Caution needs to be exercised in situations like this as the explosion could have been a 'come on', with the possibility of a larger device being in place which could result in all personnel in the vicinity becoming the victims. Basically, do not get too close to the scene of attack until the security forces have established a security cordon.

IMPORTANT: There were quite a few media personnel who arrived at that particular scene without wearing their body armour! If you have been issued it – USE IT, it may just save your life. You may never know if it is a 'trap' or 'come on' until it's too late.

OTHER INCIDENTS

Reports are indicating that there have been a lot of 'drive-bys' / 'ride-bys' by Iraqis conducting surveillance for potential targets. This is a trend of impending attacks so once again observation and awareness is very important. If you witness the same people or vehicle conducting similar actions, it is imperative that you try to obtain as much information as possible, description of occupants, vehicle colour, type and model, and registration number and pass on to the safety advisors of security forces as soon as possible. It may be nothing, but don't take the chance or it could be too late.

Two US civilian employees from a contractor firm parked up in front of a security base in Baghdad to take some photographs. They left their vehicle to take a few pictures, however, they stopped their vehicle two metres from a sign that stated: '**NO STOPPING, NO PARKING, FAILURE TO DO SO WILL RESULT IN THE USE OF DEADLY FORCE**'. Soldiers on duty witnessed them from across the street and operating under their rules of engagement, fired at the two individuals. No one was injured. However the vehicle was hit by at least four rounds from the security force weapons. The individuals were detained, their identities established and checked, and the two people claimed they missed the sign even though it was right in front of where they parked their vehicle.

Two Iraqi police were shot and killed in a police station by one attacker who was also shot in the attack.

Several explosions have occurred in and around the city, some very close to residences where westerners and coalition forces are residing.

Two successive incidents involving small arms and RPGs were reported near Tikrit.

Main coalition base (hotel) was attacked near Fallujah, superficial damage was reported.

The mayor of Mosul was fired upon by a single attacker.

US patrol found a cache of mortar rounds and artillery rounds near Mosul.

Five mortar rounds were fired on a US force base and while an inspection was underway, the patrol was attacked by an IED.

RPGs were fired on several armoured vehicles while on patrol.

Several 120mm mortars were fired into a market area killing eight Iraqi civilians and wounding a further eighteen. All rounds fired were airburst.

In the area near Balad, sixteen mortars were fired at the coalition forces.

Coalition patrol arrested three suspects and seized several assault rifles.

Eight 107mm rockets were fired at the Nineveh Hotel area, two hit the hotel, one detonated and the other landed in the car park, exploded and damaged a couple of vehicles. A search found a further 10 rockets and forty 60mm mortar rounds all at the firing point. The firing point was concealed from the observation posts and at least 800 metres away across the Tigris River.

A pipeline fire was reported, believed to be the work of sabotage as there was a large hole in the pipe itself.

A grenade was thrown from within a crowd at a security patrol wounding one soldier and thirteen local Iraqis. On searching the area another IED was found but was defused.

Looting is still going on with the cargo being brass and power lines, these are being smuggled into Iran by land.

HOTELS

As previously mentioned the importance of individual and team vigilance and improved awareness is essential to assist in decreasing the continuing attacks against 'soft targets' such as the hotels. With the two recent attacks, it is with concern that all occupants need to look at, and where necessary, improve the overall security in and around the complex, where they are residing. As proved already, it is all too easy to plant an IED and cause damage, injury or fatalities to anyone residing in the building. If using local armed guards, the procedures and duties of these men need to be checked to improve observation and external checks, including immediate perimeter checks, and the checking of the ID's of anyone close by the residence regardless of whether it is an hotel.

It has been reported that the Dhawra, a Shia group has warned people of impending attacks on hotels occupied by westerners. If anyone hears of a threat whether it is confirmed or not, it is their responsibility to inform as many personnel as possible immediately. Spread the word, it may save lives.

A vehicle was seen to drive close to the Baghdad Hotel, gunmen exited the vehicle and opened fire on the armed security guards who returned fire. After an exchange of fire a number of attackers were captured. When questioned about the attack, the gunmen admitted that the plan was to kill the armed guards then give the go-ahead for a waiting 'vehicle car bomb' to enter the hotel grounds and detonate.

The Al Rasheed Hotel was attacked by homemade multiple rocket launcher. One round hit the middle of the building and one in the forecourt. Two other rounds missed the target. Minor damage was caused and fortunately no one was injured.

Deterrence is a good start. If your building looks as if the security is good, the attackers / terrorists will select an easier target. We understand that some locations are out of your control where security is involved. The hotel management may already be using local or coalition forces.

However it may still be possible to improve the security, for example by installing CCTV / monitoring devices, additional security personnel, wandering patrols. It costs money but there is no price on saving lives.

Any left item that has not been recognised or collected must be dealt with as a suspect device. If this means evacuating the building until the suspect device has either been identified or dealt with by the coalition forces then so be it, even if it means a disruption to the work of the organisation operating in that building. ***It is not worth the risk – report anything suspicious!***

PERSONAL ENCOUNTER

Two Centurion advisors were in the building of one of the hotels when it was hit. This was conveyed back to Centurion about the device:

“The bomb we believe is to be of the ‘satchel type’, placed against the side of the building next to the ground floor window and the outside generator. The charge exploded, the force of the explosion ripped through the ground floor window, it destroyed everything inside that room and parts of the central staircase. All the windows were thrown inwards and even with protective film on the windows (which undoubtedly reduced the shrapnel), there was still plenty of flying glass. Luckily the curtains caught most of the glass fragments, which is why there were no major lacerations or cuts to other personnel. Almost everyone was still in bed which helped, as they were covered by blankets as the glass showered them. Should the satchel charge have been detonated thirty minutes or an hour later then we would have been dealing with multiple casualties and possibly deaths, this I am in no doubt about due to the nature and direction of the blast.

Once the bomb was detonated we immediately evacuated the building to our safe area without any further problems. We conducted a role call and at this point we discovered there was one person missing from the hotel nominal. We made a decision to go and search for this guy not risking more people than necessary in the process. I found the guy beside the staircase buried under a stack of rubble and the mattress he had been sleeping on. It was immediately obvious he had not survived the blast so he was covered back over and left for the appropriate services to deal with. We also didn’t want anyone else to stumble upon him and take photographs of the poor guy. He was very well liked by all personnel at the hotel.

At the same time my colleague was dealing with the minor injuries of the crew, who had cuts from the debris and glass. Our thoughts then turned to the security of the building and staff and how best to deal with the situation. We liaised with the military and police and soon there was a secure cordon in place with coalition security forces.

I have to say that all credit should be handed to all staff caught in this incident, as they handled the task and situation very well. We did expect to see problems with the crew like shock, nervousness or just not wanting to function, especially after what had just happened. There was none of this, everyone was kept motivated and busy, which made it easy for us as advisors. The bureau chief in particular was outstanding, his day must have been like hell, he had a million things to do and some pretty big decisions to make. All of which, he handled very calmly, and in a very professional manner. Nothing was too much trouble for him and he was both sensitive and considerate with his staff. I don’t think I’ve met a bureau chief or any other come to think of it that could have done a better job.”

Personal note: All credit must go to all involved, from the Centurion advisors, the bureau chief, all media personnel involved, including the hotel occupants and staff in coming together and working as a team to handle and overcome one of the most difficult situations that can be encountered by anyone when working in a hostile environment.

A photojournalist kindly sent this report of a recent hostile encounter while entering Iraq from Kuwait as a warning for others:

“I was detained by the IP and locals north of Basra. We were taken from a checkpoint to a fire station where they questioned my driver, my translator, the guard and myself for three hours. They were suspicious and concerned that the press were intent on infiltrating and ‘stealing’ items from Mosques. They tried to trick me into saying that I was really headed to Al Najif and not Baghdad several times. They knew enough knowledge on how to operate my cameras and look for images that I had taken, fortunately there was just one of a tree which I took to test the camera earlier that day. Several men were suspicious of that image thinking it was taken

in a restricted area. They did separate me from the other three and provided their own translator. After some time they let us go, but it proved that they can take people off the road and take them to secluded areas to interrogate us at their will and at any time.

SUMMARY

Iraq is still a very unsafe place to be and seems to be getting worse every week.

All areas can change without warning from being relatively friendly to becoming very hostile.

Even though most attacks at present are against the coalition forces, 'soft targets' such as aid agencies, NGOs and the media organisations continue to be on the increase.

Attacks involving mortars are on the increase causing fatalities and severe injury to the local population. This emphasises a growing concern that the attackers / terrorists do not particularly care who is in the immediate vicinity when their ordnance is fired.

The trend seems to a lull in attacks followed by a dramatic wave of violence using all types of weapons, therefore it is imperative that security remains high.

There has been a growing trend in secondary devices being found after the initial IED explosion. Be aware of this growing trend, and stay away from the immediate aftermath.

Listen and adhere to the rules and law implemented by the coalition force, be aware of all signs and instructions as the incident above involving the accidental shooting of 'friendlies' could have been avoided. Do not become blasé about your security or the area that you may be working or travelling in.

Many thanks to Centurion advisors in Iraq for providing information for this Field Report.