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Iraq forces man 'most dangerous' hotspot

Published Date: April 26, 2007

BAGHDAD: Distrusted by the Americans, hated by residents and targeted by extremists-the Iraqi police in the Baghdad suburb of Dura insist they are doing their best in "the most dangerous place in Iraq." Dura is home to a large and bitter Sunni Arab community, and many residents complain the police force sent by their Shiite-led government colludes with sectarian militias such as radical cleric Moqtada Al-Sadr's Mahdi Army. Dura police commander Brigadier General Ghazwan Sharif Abdel Hamid denies this, and insists that if the district is still violent it is partly because his force is undermanned and is outgunned by Sunni insurgents. Leaning across his desk to brief US Brigadier General Dana Pittard, he paints a gory picture of Dura, confiding tales of murder and a few choice words apparently gleaned from one recent interrogation of a suspected insurgent.

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'I asked why are you killing Shiites? 'Because they're my enemies.' Why are you killing Sunnis? 'Because they're helping my enemies.' Why are you killing Christians? 'I'm learning how to kill with Christians'," he said. Dura, once a lush district surrounded by green fields and grazing cattle has become a frontline killing ground for Islamist militants-including Al-Qaeda-and Shiite militias "cleansing" the area of Sunnis. Outside morning business hours, the market, billed as a success story by the Americans with shops reopening since they opened a base there, is a mean stretch of blown-out windows, bullet-scarred buildings and rubbish. In front of Ghazwan's police camp, two policemen sit in a beaten-up patrol car with the front window blown out, as filthy smoke pumps out from a nearby oil refinery. While briefing Pittard-the JS general in charge of training local forces-Ghazwan is upbeat, but does recite a list of problems: people demanding compensation, unemployment, insecurity, kidnappings and killings. "We tell them: 'Patience. Remember we're in the most dangerous place in Iraq and it's called al-Dura'."



Ten weeks into the US-backed plan to secure Baghdad, Iraqi officers complain they are understaffed, outgunned and denied crucial government support. "There are only four neighbourhoods (in Dura) with a lot of problems... a very large area with 7,500 houses altogether. Therefore if each house has one AK-47 assault rifle, that makes 7,500 AK-47s out there," Ghazwan said. "My brigade has 2,000 police, but if you take into account the wounded, people on leave, those on active duty are about 1,000 on a daily basis. Compare that to all those AK-47s," he admitted after Pittard leaves the room. In six months, Ghazwan said 67 policemen have been killed and 376 wounded. He expected only about 50 or 60 of the wounded to return to duty.

"Even the coalition forces told me I need more forces to secure the area. I need 3,000 on active duty, which is three times what I have." US commanders have expressed concern about the Iraqi police, heavily dominated by Shiites and often seen as complicit in sectarian violence, questioning where their loyalties lie and seeing further training as the key. Pittard said roughly 10,000 police, or around 50 percent of the national force, have been through the first ever collective unit training with US instructors at Numaniyah, and Ghazwan's unit is tipped to follow. Graduates are issued with new digital-pattern uniforms that Americans say will become a symbol of the more professional force they are trying to build.

Progress has also been made, the Americans say, in appointing an increasing number of Sunni commanders. Down the road from Dura is a US combat outpost, one of a string of bases meant to extend the American presence in Baghdad communities to clear out insurgents, hold and rebuild the area. It is no accident that "Combat Outpost Attack" has been constructed next to the only Sunni community left in the nearby district of northern Rasheed. Contrary to perceptions that the Mahdi Army went to ground in the face of the

US-led crackdown, Lieutenant Colonel Patrick Frank says 85 per cent of the fighting is with the fiercely anti-US Shiite militia, and only a small amount with Al-Qaeda. To make matters worse, officers are questioning the support they are getting-or not getting-from some elements in the government.

Although Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki has vowed to get tough with rogue elements of the Mahdi Army critics see a different reality on the ground. Pittard says he recently discovered that a police colonel, Nadir Abdul Razzak Abboud, had been removed. Abboud's aides told the Americans it was because he took action against the Mahdi Army as well as Sunni insurgents. Down at the combat outpost, one Iraqi officer openly accused the Shiite-led government of trying to undermine his security operations. "Our duty in Baghdad is hard because we can't get any support from the Maliki government," said Major Farhad Osman Osso, who comes from a mainly Kurdish army unit redeployed from northern Iraq to Rasheed. "There are a lot of police stations. We believe they're involved in sectarian violence and they're supporting the Mahdi Army." - AFP

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