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'It's hell...everything will be destroyed'

Military accused of violating Falluja ceasefire

Luke Harding in Baghdad

Friday April 30, 2004

[The Guardian](#)

After two nights of bombardment by US jet fighters, the Ahmed family had had enough. At 7am on Wednesday Fadhil Ahmed ate his last piece of flat bread before bundling his wife and children into their Chevrolet.

They set off out of Falluja and down a dusty unpaved track. The streets were empty. After avoiding the Americans the Ahmeds got stuck at a US roadblock, and had to sleep in a neighbouring village.

Some 24 hours later, Mr Ahmed made it to Baghdad. "It's hell," Mr Ahmed said, minutes after arriving at a refugee camp set up by the Iraqi Red Crescent on a roadside football pitch.

"The Americans have violated the ceasefire. They are attacking us with jet fighters, tanks and artillery. The US snipers are on every roof and minaret. They don't care who they shoot. They are shooting old people, women and children. Where is the UN in all this?"

After days of bombings and sniper fire, it was not surprising that Mr Ahmed and other refugees were sceptical that a new ceasefire deal under which US forces and a 1,100-strong Iraqi force commanded by one of Saddam Hussein's former generals will take over security would hold. "By the time I get back to Falluja everything will be destroyed," Mr Ahmed said. In the meantime conditions for the civilian population still stuck in

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Falluja were hellish.

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Abu Mohammad, 30, who left the town yesterday morning, said: "There is no electricity. There is no water. There are no food supplies at all." He said the US warplanes and helicopters that have been pounding Falluja for the past three days had been targeting civilian areas.

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"They are bombing civilians. When I was about to leave there were two ladies trying to get out. American snipers shot them dead. Their bodies are still lying out on the street in al-Jumhuriya. The roads are deserted. All the area is bombarded. We are hearing shelling, artillery, and always the sirens of ambulances."

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The US began its siege of Falluja more than three weeks ago after the killing and mutilation of four US security contractors. The Bush administration has tried to portray the insurgents inside the city as either foreign fighters or diehard supporters of Saddam Hussein. On Wednesday, Tony Blair described them as "former regime elements" and "outside terrorists".

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Yesterday, however, those from Falluja could not understand Mr Blair's claim. The insurgents were not terrorists but Iraqis, they did not support the old regime and were merely fighting a patriotic war against American occupation. "The people doing the fighting are locals," Mr Mohammad, who fled with his wife and six children, said. "They are not people who support Saddam."

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Others complained that the Americans had created the problem in the Sunni town west of Baghdad by using indiscriminate and excessive force which was more appropriate to a battlefield than a residential area. "There is no mercy at all," said Sami Sabri, 65, who arrived at the camp a week ago said. Two of his cousins, Kalif Ali, 22, and Issam Shaker, 19, had been shot dead by US snipers.

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"All they did was open the door of their house. They were trying to leave. The Americans killed them. We picked up Kalif's body and buried him in the football stadium. We did not have a proper ceremony. We just dropped him in the tomb and left for Baghdad."

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What did he think of the Americans now? "I want to kill them all," he said.

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Muthana Harith al-Dhari, spokesman for the Muslim clerics' association which has been attempting to mediate in the Falluja standoff, said the coalition's analysis of the situation in the town was fundamentally wrong.

Dr al-Dhari admitted some Saddam supporters could be inside the town but put their numbers at "no more than 100". Alone, they would not be able to defy the US military, he pointed out. "This is a widespread and popular revolt based on Islamic principles," he said, adding that a similar insurgency was going on in the southern city of Najaf - a Shia area with no Saddam supporters at all.

Yesterday volunteers from the Iraqi Red Crescent erected 25 more tents in the al-Khadra camp, which are now home to 100 Falluja families. A second camp is planned.

The refugees got three meals a day and their children were being educated in local schools, spokesman Abdul Karim said. Yesterday Mr Ahmed, who left Falluja with 13 members of his family, some of them sitting in the boot of his car, admitted that he held a long-time grudge against the British. The British had killed his brother in 1941, he said, during the second world war.

British troops had just invaded the country for the second time to get rid of its pro-German government. "My brother and I were walking across the desert near Falluja when we were attacked by a British plane. We were just kids. The plane came and shot him from the sky. That was a terrible occupation too."

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