

Hospitals Overwhelmed By Living and the Dead

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BAGHDAD, April 7 -- Its sirens wailing, the cream-colored ambulance barreled into the compound of Baghdad's Kindi Hospital. Doctors in blue scrubs -- some of them working night and day -- rushed forward, swinging open its doors.

Gingerly, they put Sabria Hussein on a stretcher, its leather still soaked in blood. They moved toward another stretcher, driving away hordes of flies, and rolled Abdel-Karim Youssef into an emergency room suffused with the stench of blood, dirt and disinfectant.

Both were swathed in cream to conceal their burns, over both of Hussein's arms and along the face and hands of Youssef. The staff said nothing. The only sounds came from the slight clicking of their tongues, a subtle show of their disapproval.

Civilian or soldier? one nurse asked.

Youssef, groaning in pain, answered, "I'm a civilian." Then he blurted out, "My car was attacked. They attacked my car."

The scene today at Kindi Hospital held a human side of the grander military drama playing out across Baghdad: the seizure of presidential palaces along the Tigris River, the collapsing fortunes of Saddam Hussein's government and the seemingly imminent success of a U.S. invasion.

As the U.S. forces have advanced, the war has taken a toll on the civilian population that the United States may soon govern. The Red Cross says hospitals are overwhelmed and running short on supplies. Patients seem baffled at their fate of being caught in the crossfire, and the number of casualties is rising to the point where the Red Cross says some hospitals are no longer keeping track.

At Kindi, a grim, dilapidated facility, doctors accustomed to pressure worked even faster, shuffling patients onto stretchers smeared with blood. Anesthesia was running short, and the Red Cross prepared to begin distributing surgical kits. The signs of wear were everywhere: Overhead fans worked lazily or not at all, doctors borrowed pens from journalists to fill out patients' reports and a whirring generator struggled to fill the void left by a blackout. It had mixed success. Power still went out, and refrigerators in the morgue were breaking down.

In each ward, a tattered piece of paper was taped to the nurse's station, listing the names of the wounded.

The injured moved through stations in brisk succession. After Hussein and Youssef were placed in beds, doctors rolled in Sayyid Hamid, a 24-year-old from Fahana, another village on Baghdad's outskirts.

"There was a missile that landed in front of my house," he said.

His face was blank, the shock of his wound still settling in. Just before, doctors had amputated his left foot, below the ankle.

"Let's go! Let's go!" shouted a doctor. "Take him to the men's ward."

Down the hall, a woman in black chador sobbed, "Oh, mother! Oh, mother!"

The Red Cross estimated that hospitals were receiving hundreds of wounded each day. During some of the most intense fighting Friday, hospitals reported receiving 100 every hour. Iraqi military casualties in Baghdad -- estimated in the thousands over recent days by U.S. officials -- are taken to military hospitals.

The overall civilian toll of dead and wounded remains a mystery. Since U.S. forces arrived in Baghdad, the Iraqi government has stopped releasing its count. Neither hospitals nor the Red Cross keep a comprehensive total.

"They're not even able to keep track," said Roland Huguenin-Benjamin, the Red Cross spokesman in Baghdad.

But the requests hospitals have made to the Red Cross suggest a growing number of casualties: body bags, surgical equipment, anesthesia and blankets, with too little time to wash them of the blood of other wounded.

Some patients were left to their own devices. Hussein Obeid carted bags of intravenous fluid for his brother, Saad, 34, who was struck by shrapnel in fighting near his home in Dora, on the southern outskirts.

Like others, Obeid, 22, seemed confused. Articulate and well-informed, he insisted that U.S. and British forces had made clear in Arabic-language broadcasts on the BBC that civilians would not be harmed. He didn't understand what was happening.

"That was the promise they gave the Iraqis," he said. "They always said, 'We have nothing against the civilians.'"

He was hurt, disoriented and angry.

"We didn't do anything to them," Obeid said. "I was sure 100 percent they would not shoot at a civilian. Now I'm 100 percent sure they will."

Through the door stood Qabil Khazzal Jumaa, a 30-year-old nurse. He was taking a drag on a cigarette on a much-needed break. Over the past few days, he said, hospital staff members were stacking bodies on top of one another in the morgue. The generator -- protected by sandbags stacked 10 high -- would break down, shutting off the refrigerators and leaving corpses to rot.

Outside the morgue, six bodies in black bags lay in the street. They were tied with plastic on each end and at the legs, waist and chest. Some were still open to the air, and flies had descended. On one bag sat the driver's license of Amash Hussein Mohammed.

"This is a brutal war," Jumaa, the nurse, said. "This is not just. This is not accepted by man or God."

Abdel-Wudud Mustafa ran along the halls, looking for his mother, Sabria Hussein. She had entered with his cousin, Abdel-Karim Youssef. Her bloody hands had smeared the white walls, as doctors struggled to put an IV into her arm. She writhed in pain as doctors looked at the burns along her arms. When they finished, she gazed, uncomprehending, at the ceiling.

The family was driving with an uncle, who escaped serious injury, to their home in Yamama, a ravaged southern suburb . At about 11 a.m., as they neared the city's southern entrances with charred bodies in the road, Mustafa said his uncle saw tanks and armored personnel carriers along the bridge. When their car approached, he said, it was fired upon.

"They were firing at any car, any person," he said. "It was like a public execution in the street."

They were rushed to a clinic at the neighborhood's Rahman mosque. Then they were taken to a hospital near the Rashid Barracks, but it was overwhelmed with military casualties. They finally made it to Kindi, where they were treated for their burns.

A blood stain, not his own, was on the left shoulder of his shirt. He was eager to return to his mother, and had little time for questions. He was in a nation at war and a city under siege.

With a hint of defiance or perhaps lament, he said simply, "This is my country."

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