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WORLD NEWS

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Oil ministry the most secured building

BAGHDAD: Since US forces rolled into central Baghdad a week ago, one of the sole public buildings untouched by looters has been Iraq's massive oil ministry, which is under round-the-clock surveillance by troops.

The imposing tile-colored building in the Al-Mustarisiya quarter is guarded by around 50 US tanks which block every entrance, while sharpshooters are positioned on the roof and in the windows. The curious onlooker is clearly unwelcome. Any motorist who drifts within a few meters (yards) of the main entrance is told to leave immediately.

Baghdad residents have complained that US troops should do more to protect against the looters, most of them Shiite Muslims repressed by Saddam Hussein's Sunni-dominated regime who live in the vast slum known as Saddam City on the northern outskirts.

But while museums, banks, hotels and libraries have been ransacked, the oil ministry remains secure. The symbolism is loaded, considering how vehemently the United States and Britain denied war opponents' accusations that the campaign to oust Saddam was driven by oil lust.

"They came from the other side of the world. Do you believe they're going to do much for me? They've just come for the oil," fumed Salam Mohammad Hassan, a doctor who lives near the ministry. Residents noted that the irrigation ministry, just next-door, was torched.

US forces, who say they cannot prevent looting across the capital of five million, respond that they are not trying to seize Iraq's oil resources but preserve them. "Anyone who says we're protecting this ministry to steal Iraqi oil doesn't know what's really going on in this country," US Captain Scott McDonald told AFP at the ministry gates.

The United States, he said, is only safeguarding Iraq's potential which would otherwise be considered game for looters. "Oil belongs to the Iraqi people; it's their property. It must be protected because it'll go, indirectly, to build schools and hospitals," he said.

McDonald said a few looters had managed to sneak into the ministry-cum-fortress after US troops entered Baghdad. A few offices were robbed but nearly all files and archives remain intact, he said. Coalition forces also say they control all of Iraq's oilfields. Amnesty International has criticized the attention on controlling oilfields, which it said must have taken "much planning and resources."

"However, there is scarce evidence of similar levels of planning and allocation of resources for securing public and other institutions essential for the survival and well-being of the population," the London-based rights group said.

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