

Canadian 'guests' just wait

BAGHDAD — They spend their days gardening, reading, doing chores. But mostly they wait. They are Canadian hostages — "guests" — being held by this country in crisis.

Yesterday I met with one group of Canadians in a pleasant home in one of Baghdad's residential areas.

Five of them were working in Iraq when the government decided to seize foreigners as "guests" after the takeover of Kuwait. The sixth was in transit just at the wrong moment. There are about 100 Canadians here, including six embassy personnel from Kuwait.

About 40 holders of Canadian passports don't want to leave. The others want to leave but have been denied exit visas.

Fortunately, no Canadians have been taken and forced to stay as human shields around strategic military areas. At least not yet.

The five men and woman I spoke with all appear in reasonably good spirits.

The Canadians are reserved and reticent. One, named Jim, looked close to nervous exhaustion. Jerry, an articulate Canadian engineer from Kuwait,



REEKIE

Sun man in Iraq



ERIC MARGOLIS

In Iraq

asked me to tell Canadians that "the hostages are not expendable."

Some rightwing think-tanks in the U.S. and Canada have been saying with the wisdom of safety that the hostages "must be written off."

Interestingly, one hostage expressed sympathy for Iraq's position, explaining how the unbearably arrogant Kuwaiti emirs had finally pushed Iraq to lash back and invade.

All of the hostages heaped praise on Canadian embassies in Iraq and Kuwait.

One hostage summed up the general feeling toward the embassies: "I give 100% marks to our embassy personnel. I wouldn't be here if it weren't for embassy staff in Kuwait. They put their lives on the line for us."

Ambassador Chris Pole and first secretary Dale Carl came in for special commendation.

The group fully supported Canada's deployment of ships and aircraft to the Gulf.

"Canada has a duty to be there," one hostage told me. "And it will be a moderating influence on the USA."

In spite of being prisoners, they do leave their accommodations, taking occasional walks or going shopping, always sporting maple leaf pins on their lapels.

Were they afraid to go out?

"Yes," said Jim. "Some days we are more apprehensive than others."

They just don't know when they'll be picked up by security police. And the strain shows.

Jerry and others suffer from stress-related intestinal problems and fatigue.

None of them knows what will happen next in Iraq — nor does anyone else in the country.

With thoughts of home, we drank a Thanksgiving toast.

One of the hostages took me aside and said: "You know, I really like Iraq, but God, I hope this ends soon."

Last night, photographer Greig Reekie and I sat on the Palestine Hotel verandah.

Suddenly the lights went out. There was silence.

"Mr. George Bush!" said one diner.

Happily it was only a blown fuse.