

Is this Saddam's last stand?

NEW YORK — As Iraq's fleeing army was being torn to pieces by U.S. and British forces yesterday, intense diplomatic activity was under way here at the UN to save what remains of Iraqi forces and the regime of Saddam Hussein.

According to latest reports, Baghdad appears to have accepted all conditions demanded by the coalition, including war reparations, renunciation of claims to Kuwait and, improbable as it sounds, war crimes trials for Iraqi generals and political leaders.

It has yet to be seen how last night's announcement by U.S. President George Bush and the coalition to suspend combat operations pending Iraq's unconditional acceptance of the 12 UN resolutions will affect this list of demands.

What Saddam billed as the Mother of All Battles has turned out, as expected, to be the Father of All Routs. Twenty-one Iraqi divisions were destroyed or have simply disintegrated. By now, most Iraqi forces have pulled out of Kuwait. The battered remnants of 20 divisions are trapped in a gigantic pocket 100 miles long by 50 miles wide between Nasiriya, on the Euphrates River, and the port city of Basra. Included in this death trap are at least six divisions of Iraq's best troops, the Republican Guards.

As forecast in my Monday military analysis, the coalition managed to block all roads leading northwest back to Baghdad along both the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. The powerful U.S.-British 7th Armored Corps was already at the Euphrates between Nasiriya and Jalibah, and was moving east toward Basra to complete the destruction of surrounded Iraqi forces.

Other U.S. airborne and French light armored units were heading northwest along the Tigris to block reinforcements from Iraqi strategic reserves located between Kerbala and Nasiriya.

The Iraqis in the Basra pocket are stuck between the Iranian border, the vast lakes and marshes around Basra and the advancing coalition juggernaut. They have three choices: Surrender; flee into internment in Iran, or dig in around Basra and fight a last-ditch battle to hold Iraq's second largest city.

A stout defense of Basra and its marshy environs is still possible — provided, of course, that

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the Iraqi forces can still muster any morale. But after 40 days and 40 nights of incessant bombing, most Iraqi troops are utterly demoralized and shell-shocked. But Republican Guard units may still have enough vigor to take refuge in built-up urban areas and present the coalition with the necessity of waging bloody house-to-house fighting.

At the end of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, Egyptian troops entrenched in the rubble of Suez City managed to prevent the victorious Israelis from taking the surrounded city. The Iraqis may try to follow this example in Basra.

Still, now that Baghdad has apparently accepted what amounts to a virtual surrender, it's highly likely Iraqi army morale may totally collapse.

The dreary pattern seen in many past Mideast wars could be repeated. Officers, hearing the news of Baghdad's seeming capitulation, will abandon their troops and flee for safety. Once this occurs, units will disintegrate, just as the static Iraqi infantry units left in southern Kuwait did when the bulk of the Iraqi army began to flee north.

Iraqi officers who oversaw the destruction of Kuwait's oil wells and who committed atrocities against Kuwaiti civilians will try to escape north.

There may still be some sharp fighting ahead as intact Iraqi units are squeezed into the Basra pocket. Major tank battles occurred yesterday. Two days of bad weather that limited allied air attacks have given some Iraqi units the chance to regroup and fall back into Basra.

President Bush, in his role of supreme warlord, must now decide whether to accept Iraq's offers of a negotiated surrender or to reject them. He could still use elements of the 7th and 18th Corps to race along the Euphrates toward Baghdad.

Based on his announcement last night, Bush's temptation to end the war by driving on to Baghdad was obviously tempered by two considerations. First, that prosecution of the war might actually have stiffened Iraqi resolve and seen U.S. forces involved in bloody urban fighting. Second, mounting Soviet protests that the U.S. was frustrating a peaceful settlement might have led to an ugly confrontation between Moscow and Washington.

And what about the now much deflated Saddam Hussein, who will go down in history as the worst military leader and biggest windbag since Mussolini? If I were Saddam, I'd proclaim a guerrilla war as Nasser did in 1967-1970 and try to fight it out with the coalition in a lengthy urban war of attrition. But long-suffering Iraqis, who have bled through eight years of war with Iran and now the epic rout in Kuwait, may finally have had enough of the leadership that has brought such disasters down on their heads.

Given Iraq's record of constant coups, Saddam Hussein's rule may shortly be ended — maybe by a new Saddam Hussein.