

Conflicting reports in Iraq

Iraq puts up defense — against what is unclear

BAGHDAD, Iraq (AP) — Anti-aircraft fire lighted the skies of Baghdad late Wednesday, hours after the United States fired a new round of cruise missiles into southern Iraq and destroyed an Iraqi radar site that was preparing to attack an American F-16 fighter jet.

Detonations reverberated throughout the capital for 15 minutes, and air-raid sirens blared as the anti-aircraft batteries fired.

Washington insisted there had been no American, allied or other military operations in the area Wednesday evening, although an Iraqi military statement accused the United States of attacking Baghdad directly.

It was not clear if the gunners hit, or even had, specific targets, or whether the barrage was a government attempt to make Baghdad's residents feel under siege.

"The malicious American ene-

my ... sent his missiles aiming at several military positions and at heavily populated civilian sites," including Baghdad, the Iraqi statement said. Iraq's "sons confronted the missiles with efficiency and capability and downed a high percentage of them."

There was an explosion Wednesday night in the streets of the al-Hurriya residential area near Baghdad's old airport, which left a hole six-feet wide and three-feet deep.

However, the crater was too small to have been caused by a cruise missile. The exact cause of the blast was not immediately clear. One possibility would be Iraqi anti-aircraft fire returning to the ground.

The Iraqi military said one person was killed and 11 were injured.

Government-inspired anti-American protests were reported in Babil and another town south of Baghdad.

Aggie leads Iraqi charge

A Texas A&M graduate led B-52 bombers in the first of two U.S. attacks on southern Iraqi air defense installations.

Lt. Col. Floyd L. Carpenter, Class of '77, led a flight of two B-52s from the island of Guam in retaliation for Iraqi attacks against U.N.-protected Kurdish safe zones in northern Iraq.

Carpenter was a member of the Texas A&M Corps of Cadets and served as commander of Squadron 10. He received a bachelor's degree in agricultural economics.

claimed Iraqi defenses shot down several missiles and a pilotless reconnaissance plane. U.S. officials denied the claim.

On Wednesday night, Saddam visited air defense headquarters in Baghdad and met with senior officers, the official Iraqi New Agency reported.

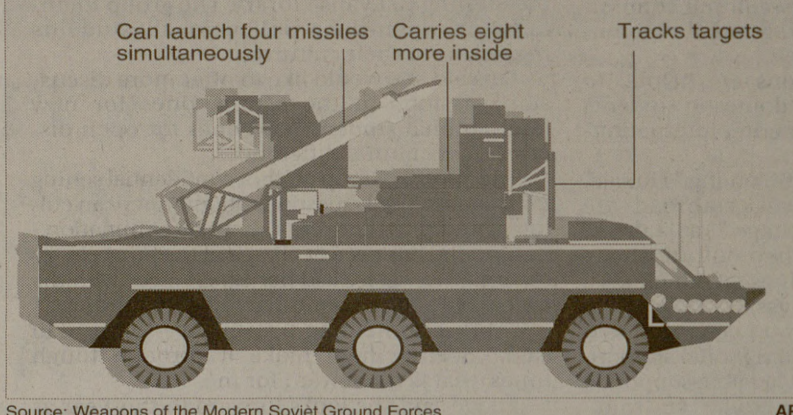
It said the Iraqi leader "gave valuable instructions on the way of defending and protecting the land and sky of our dear country."

American, British and French pilots took part in U.S. and allied air patrols Wednesday over the large southern no-fly zone, said Air Force Gen. Joseph Ralston. The zone now extends within 30 miles of southern Baghdad.

Iraq's two no-fly zones were created after the 1991 Persian Gulf War to protect Kurds in the north and Shiite Muslims in the south from the wrath of Saddam's military. After the end of the war, the southern zone roughly half of Iraq is now

SA-8 Gecko missile

An Iraqi air defense battery beamed its radar at an American warplane Wednesday, prompting fire from an F-16 jet fighter. U.S. forces said they had determined Iraq was preparing to fire a surface-to-air missile at the F-16. A look at the radar and missile system:



Source: Weapons of the Modern Soviet Ground Forces AP

Gaza meetings provide hope, not results

EREZ CROSSING, Gaza Strip (AP) — With his arm twisted, Benjamin Netanyahu on Wednesday shook the hand of Yasser Arafat, a man he once condemned as a murderer. Then the Israeli hard-liner and the former guerrilla talked peace.

The historic meeting at the Israel-Gaza border — arranged after months of U.S. pressure and Palestinian threats — helped clear the air of animosity that thickened after Netanyahu's Likud Party came to power in May.

It also signaled to the Palestinians that the other half of a deeply divided Israel has finally accepted them, and especially Arafat, as peace partners.

But it yielded few concrete results.

At a news conference after the hour-long meeting, Netanyahu said he was prepared to negotiate a final peace agreement and, in his most generous moment, added he hoped to "improve the prosperity and economic conditions of the Palestinian population."

Arafat said the meeting set the stage for progress in restarting the peace process, which has been frozen since Israel's election.

"The path was cleared for us to negotiate on all levels and in all aspects," he said.

Netanyahu and Arafat arrived separately Wednesday evening at the Erez crossing between Israel and Gaza.

Inside the meeting room, a grimaced Netanyahu buttoned his jacket and reached across a table to briefly grasp the hand of Arafat, dressed in his usual black-and-white checkered

headdress and olive military-style outfit. Israeli TV stations played the footage of the handshake over and over, sometimes in slow motion.

Even as the leaders spoke, aides bickered about the height of the podiums set up for the news conference, with the Palestinians charging Netanyahu's was taller and insisting it be changed.

The two men stood side-by-side during the joint 15-minute news conference — but they barely looked at each other, and the usually polished Netanyahu appeared stiff and uncomfortable.

The meeting did not address key outstanding issues, such as Israel's desire to change the terms of its promised pullout from Hebron and the Palestinians' demand that Israel ease the six-month closure of their territories.

The sides had earlier agreed on a vague statement declaring a liaison committee would start meeting Thursday to oversee implementation of agreements already signed, including on Hebron.

Netanyahu drew harsh attacks from hard-line Israeli politicians for meeting with Arafat. They accused him of breaking campaign promises and buckling under U.S. pressure. "It's a grave mistake," veteran Likud lawmaker Uzi Landau said.

Former Premier Shimon Peres, architect of the Israel-PLO accords, said the summit was an "enormous moral victory" for his policies.

Outside the meeting site, Israeli peace activists waved a sign saying, "It's about time."

Israeli elder statesman Abba

Eban, said Netanyahu had no choice but to honor existing agreements, terming the summit "a shotgun wedding."

Still, the encounter was the first recognition of Arafat by an Israeli premier from the Likud Party, which long opposed Israel-PLO peacemaking.

As late as February, Netanyahu had said he would not hold talks with Arafat. But as the May elections approached, he softened his position, saying he would only meet Arafat if it was vital for Israel's security.

Netanyahu said later Wednesday that the meeting became possible after he received assurances the Palestinians would cease what he considered violations of the peace accords.

Netanyahu has argued that Arafat did too little to fight Islamic militants and operated government offices and security services in Jerusalem even though Israel-PLO accords limit his jurisdiction to parts of the West Bank and Gaza. In recent weeks Arafat closed down several Jerusalem offices.

The Palestinian leader, meanwhile, is angry with Netanyahu's decision to expand Jewish settlements and by the delayed withdrawal from Hebron, the last West Bank town under occupation.



"The path was cleared for us to negotiate on all levels and in all aspects."

Yasser Arafat
PLO Leader

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