

Troops tread softly in 'Wild East'
Marsh Arabs' zone rife with carjackers, corruption and feuds
- Colin Freeman, Chronicle Foreign Service
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Amara, Iraq -- It seemed like a straightforward-enough bust. Stopped in their tracks at a military checkpoint, the gang of suspected carjackers duly handed over a stash of Kalashnikovs and fake police uniforms.

Then, to the British soldiers' amazement, came a bold admission.

"They said, 'You've got us bang to rights' but denied they were going to carjack anyone," said Lt. Col. Ben Bathurst, commanding officer of the 1st Battalion, Welsh Guards. "Instead, they claimed they were off to murder someone as part of a tribal dispute. In their eyes, that was perfectly legitimate."

Welcome to the "Wild, Wild East," so dubbed by the British troops who patrol Maysan province's lawless corner of southeastern Iraq. Here corruption, murder and vicious feuding are rife -- and that is just among the "good guys" in the local police, army and governor's offices.

Straddling the eastern border in what were once vast marshlands, the area is every bit as nerve-wracking for occupation forces as the more notorious Sunni triangle to the north.

It was here over a six-week period last summer that British troops fought their biggest battle so far in the Iraq conflict when radical Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr staged a major uprising around Amara, the provincial capital, and in other parts of southern Iraq. His rebels mounted some of the fiercest attacks British forces have come under since the Korean War, according to military officials. The Britons suffered dozens of serious injuries while killing several hundred of al-Sadr's followers.

Since the truce brokered between al-Sadr and occupation troops in the autumn, a fragile peace has prevailed in the area. Now, with Iraq's elections successfully concluded, Bathurst's soldiers tread a difficult line -- keeping the locals calm and accommodating while building up the local security forces, often at each other's throats, that will allow for the foreigners' ultimate departure.

"Before, the Iraqi police and the Iraqi army would not even sit in the same room together and would often fire at each other," he said. "Election training made them bond and showed that they could do proper security operations. Yet we stress that we are not going to be here forever. "

Driving round Maysan province's dusty, palm-lined roads, however, is to sense the scale of the task ahead.

Once renowned as the home of the Marsh Arabs, a 5,000-year-old civilization with a unique waterborne culture and such tourist attractions as what is said to be the biblical Garden of Eden with Adam's original tree of temptation, the marshes also made perfect hiding places for Shiite rebels after the uprising following the Persian Gulf War of 1991 failed. In subsequent years, Saddam Hussein's government retaliated by draining the swamps, an act of environmental vandalism that flushed out the rebels but also destroyed the Marsh Arabs' way of life.

Today, a people that once lived in elegant reed-built villas on stilts are crammed into strips of scruffy mud-brick slums where telegraph poles and the occasional satellite dish are the only signs of modernity. Children share homesteads with water buffalo, cattle and mangy dogs and drink untreated water from shallow green ponds that are all that remain of the marshes.

As the British patrol bounces along a sun-baked mud road just outside Amara, youngsters with eyes as green as the pools they drink from beg for gifts. Normally soldiers are asked for sweets; here, the pleas are more basic. "Water, mister, water" is the endless cry.

While there is a long-term project under way to restore at least some of the marshes, the ancient hunting, boating and fishing lifestyle featured in numerous National Geographics is essentially gone. In its place are criminal cottage industries such as kidnapping, robbery and carjacking -- whose practitioners, seemingly immune to the law, offer a "buy-back" service through which victims can pay to have their vehicles returned.

"The Iraqi army and the police do not really have the muscle yet to deal with it themselves," said Capt. Alexander Spry, whose units from the Welsh Guards are training Iraqi forces. "The criminals are still prepared to take them on in gunbattles."

Responding to such fundamental needs has been the British Army's chief weapon these days. In the past three months, the Welsh Guards have spent \$5.5 million on electricity generators, water treatment units and paying vast armies of \$4-a-day street cleaners. "It is a deliberately low wage so that we get the unemployed," said Bathurst. "By getting them into work, we undercut the insurgency."

Among the targets of the largesse is Majar al Kabir, a rough market town of 85,000 where, in June 2003, six Royal Military Police on a routine patrol were killed by a mob -- a grim foreshadowing of the murder of four U.S. contractors in Fallujah 10 months later.

Rather than besieging the town and risking a regionwide uprising, as U.S. forces did following the killings in Fallujah, the British effectively left Majar al Kabir alone. Then, last December, troops staged a low-key return, guns in one hand, cash in the other.

"We went into villages outlying Majar al Kabir and pumped cash into them and showed the benefits they were going to get," said Capt. Robert Gallimore. "The condition was that they would have to become a more law-abiding town again. In the end, we went back

in with just Iraqi police, while our tanks stayed outside. We got a couple of stones thrown at us, but that was it. It used to be the bogeyman town; now it is fairly under control."

The gentler approach does have its limits. It means, for example, that the killers of the British military police have gone unpunished. As part of their security handover plan, British forces have passed the murder file to the Iraqi courts.

But if the local courts' track record is anything to go by, a robust investigation is unlikely.

Last summer, the governor of Maysan, Riad Mahoud, faced a murder warrant after his bodyguard shot dead the police chief of Majar al Kabir during a fight outside a hospital morgue. Charges were eventually dropped, ostensibly on the grounds that the killing was in self-defense. Local skeptics believe there was no prosecutor brave enough to bring the charges.

Today, Mahoud continues to hold office in Amara's heavily guarded municipal building, one of the many local powerbrokers with whom the British must cooperate. Despite their mandate to work together, the province's government and police and army units remain split between rival fiefdoms, reflecting the divide between followers of al-Sadr, the Shiite Dawa Party and myriad other factions.

"Whenever you ask somebody to carry out a search or an arrest warrant, you have to ask whether they are followers of Muqtada Sadr or whoever," said Capt. Mark Lewis, an intelligence officer. "The whole idea of being neutral and well-balanced has got a way to go."

Corruption is rampant. Almost \$2 million of public funds allocated to the governor's office remains unaccounted for, while local contractors repeatedly double-invoice using forged paperwork sold in local markets. The army recently posted outside the governor's office a "name and shame" list of the worst offenders, only to find that it encouraged rival firms to falsely finger each other.

In the coming weeks, the area will have a new set of political masters, elected for the first time. While the province's national vote favored the mainstream Shiite coalition loyal to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, on the local level a group of mainly doctors, teachers and graduate students that campaigned on an anticorruption platform emerged dominant.

Just how easily the party, which is loosely affiliated with al-Sadr, will be able to deliver on its campaign promises remains to be seen. Attempts to weed out corruption are likely to make them numerous enemies, as will attempts to supplant the existing power elites. And too cozy a relationship with the British might try the patience of their al-Sadr supporters.

"Some people from Amara don't like the troops here, but until we can manage security on our own, it is OK for them to stay," said Zaid Khalaf, a 31-year-old biologist, who is a senior member of the victorious Hussein Ideology Party.

The British are optimistic that things will get better -- at least compared to the region's recent history. The governor, points out Gallimore, says the past 18 months have been the "most peaceful he can remember."

But no one will put a date on when the British might quit the Wild East for good. Even though all sides are keen for them to ride off into the sunset, it's not certain when Iraqis will be ready to play the role of sheriff.