

FEATURE

US military team to lead Iraqi aid efforts

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An elite crew of military officers will be the pointmen as US troops look to woo the Iraqi people and quickly address any humanitarian crisis that could emerge if they strike Baghdad.

The civil affairs teams, a special section within each of the armed services, will spearhead relief efforts and then serve as the military's link to international aid agencies and NGOs once zones are declared safe to enter.

How long will the civil affairs teams be directing the management of war-devastated areas before aid groups come charging in to rebuild?

"That's the \$60,000 question," says Marines reservist Major David Cooper, a computer systems engineer in his civilian life.

"It could be as little as a couple of days and it could be as much as a couple of weeks. We wouldn't want to hand over an area if it was still hostile or unstable," he said.

Not even the government-run USAID relief agency, which has a team of 60 relief specialists ready to jump in, will touch down until US soldiers win on the battlefield.

In this crucial period, the military's ability to swiftly provide medicine, food and water will be the decisive factor in how Iraqis and the world judge the United States in the aftermath of a war.

The task is a daunting one — with US forces looking both to juggle caring for a civilian population with the ultimate goal of delivering a speedy knock-out blow to Saddam Hussein's regime.

Questions abound amid bickering between the US military and relief groups about their ability to work together to solve any looming crisis, including the nightmare scenarios of Saddam torching oilfields, blowing up dams or gassing his own people.

If relief groups do not rush in early, Iraqi civilians could take a secondary seat to the US military needs if the war blazes on, although Washington has planned ahead by stockpiling three million daily humanitarian rations and other supplies in the region.

"A real central issue is that we cannot directly oversee a humanitarian mission during a combat phase," said Cooper, who finished a six-month peacekeeping stint in Kosovo last November.

"While Saddam is fighting, the fight will take precedence," he said, citing the Geneva war conventions in defense of the strategy.

Even if Saddam unleashed an unprecedented calamity on his citizens, it would not slow the military's rush to nab Saddam. The tip of the spear would race forward,

while all humanitarian supplies would be poured into the supply pipeline from the rear, Cooper said.

In surveying the war zones, the Marines civil affairs teams in Kuwait, which currently counts around 50 people, could fire off a swift assessment on what food or medicine is needed and the extent of damage to Iraq's infrastructure.

"Once we have secured the area, we can go into the nation-building or winning-the-peace phase where we show them we're not here to occupy you, but get you back on your feet," said Major Mark Stainbrook, a Los Angeles cop in his civilian life and another veteran Kosovo peacekeeper.

The civil affairs teams have been busy traveling around the military's fortified desert camps, giving soldiers lessons that cover the spectrum on how to win Iraq's hearts and minds, as well as practical matters like stopping them from slowing down a military convoy.

They have given soldiers recommendations on when they should treat Iraqi casualties or pass them on to local hospitals.

Marines have been handed out a pocket-sized cheat-sheet with Arabic phrases, running from good morning greetings to barking military orders like 'hands up'.

However, a plethora of scenarios could complicate relief efforts. Among the most prominent would be civil strife between different Iraqi ethnic groups or revenge killings of Saddam's loyalists, Cooper said.

The teams could be drawn in to broker truces between feuding ethnic groups as Cooper and Stainbrook both did in Kosovo.

Pro-Saddam militias could also unleash suicide bombings and terror attacks to sabotage US efforts to foster goodwill.

If those attacks occur, "it's going to make Marines more nervous and apprehensive," Stainbrook said.

"It'll put a barrier between Marines and the people of Iraq. I want people to see we're not going to hurt them, rape them or destroy their homes. I want them to say wow, America is here to help us."