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Prisoner Uprising In Iraq Exposes New Risk for U.S.

Nonlethal Weapons Proved Ineffective as Chaos Spread

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Washington Post
February 21, 2005

CAMP BUCCA, Iraq -- A bloody inmate riot three weeks ago at the biggest U.S.-run detention facility in Iraq has exposed an increasingly hard-core prison population that is confronting U.S. forces with a growing risk of prison violence, according to military officers.

U.S. troops who dealt with the clash tell of a chaotic and threatening situation. They say the extent of violence surprised them. They also say the nonlethal weapons available to them at the time for crowd control proved largely ineffectual.

"What happened here on January 31st has changed the dynamics" of managing such situations, said Maj. Gen. William Brandenburg, who oversees U.S. military detention operations in Iraq and toured the facility last week. "It showed that the prisoners could hurl rocks farther than we could fire nonlethal weapons. It also showed that we have to do a better job of understanding who we have in detention."

Four inmates died and six were injured in the uprising the morning of Jan. 31, the most deaths in a prison disturbance since U.S. forces invaded Iraq two years ago. Frightened guards, some having arrived in Iraq only a month before, tried vainly to quell the rioting, spraying pepper gas and shooting rubberized pellets into throngs of prisoners, according to accounts by troops here.

The clashes spread through five of eight compounds at the sprawling detention facility in the southern Iraqi desert near the Kuwaiti border. Prisoners pelted guards with large stones and makeshift weapons, heaving debris over 15-foot-high metal fences and up at 30-foot-tall guard towers that ring the compounds.

Only after two Army guards in separate towers opened fire with M-16 rifles, killing the inmates, did the violence subside. U.S. officers say the guards acted on their own, with no order to fire. Rules here allow for use of deadly force if soldiers feel endangered.

For the first time since the incident, U.S. authorities allowed a reporter to visit the facility last week and talk with some of those who were involved. The episode remains under criminal investigation by the military, but the interviews yielded many previously unreported details and information about internal concerns.

Detention operations in Iraq have proved a persistent challenge for the U.S. military, which was caught unprepared to fight what has become a relentless insurgency and to deal with thousands of captured suspects. Photos documenting abuse and humiliation of detainees at the Abu Ghraib prison west of Baghdad in late 2003 surfaced last spring, igniting a public scandal and triggering a series of investigations.

Since then, commanders have tightened controls on U.S. military prison guards and improved conditions for detainees. Plans call for much of the effort involving detentions in Iraq to shift to Camp Bucca, a 100-acre facility developed from scratch to showcase the Army's revised detention methods. But a surge in military operations over the past few months -- and a decision to suspend the release of detainees until after the Iraqi elections on Jan. 30 -- have kept the number of detainees high.

About 3,180 prisoners are now at the Abu Ghraib facility, which has remained the U.S. military's primary interrogation center. Camp Bucca, which has a maximum capacity of 6,000 detainees, is up to about 5,150. Camp Cropper, near the Baghdad airport, houses about 100 "high-value" detainees. Another 1,300 or so suspected insurgents are being held for initial screenings at military brigade and division levels, according to military figures.

Camp Bucca's Theater Internment Facility is divided into eight compounds, each designed to hold up to about 800 inmates. Tents in which prisoners were housed have given way in many cases to climate-controlled huts built of wood with corrugated metal roofs. Small fields are available for soccer or volleyball games. Hot meals of rice, soup and stew are served.

There had been trouble at Camp Bucca before. In mid-October, fighting broke out between Sunni and Shiite prisoners in a dispute over observance of Ramadan, the Muslim fasting month. The Shiites were later placed in a separate compound.

In early December, a protest erupted after two prisoners were sentenced to isolation for an escape attempt. Shouting prisoners, armed with sticks from collapsed tents and shielded by mattresses, threatened to assault. Guards avoided firing and instead dispersed the inmates using extra troops, guard dogs and firetrucks in a show of force.

Trouble of a different sort also drew Camp Bucca into the news recently when the New York Daily News printed photos showing several female soldiers in their underwear wrestling in a mud-filled plastic pool as a small group of men cheered them on. The incident occurred at the camp Oct. 30, and most of the participants were from the 160th Military Police Battalion, an Army Reserve unit that was due to leave the next day. The Army is investigating the incident.

The uprising of Jan. 31 began when U.S. soldiers entered compound No. 5 to search for contraband. A Muslim cleric complained that the soldiers damaged several Korans. Soon, masses of prisoners formed and pressed up against the compound's front fence, chanting and shouting.

"The initial worry was that they would push the fence over and escape," said Air Force Tech. Sgt. Keith Gray, who rushed to the scene with an emergency response force of 15 troops. "We started spraying gas, which pushed back the first row or two. But then they started throwing things."

Using makeshift slingshots, the inmates hurled rocks and chunks of concrete torn from the floors of their huts. They tossed sticks and plastic water bottles filled with sand. They lit plastic bags filled with flammable hand sanitizer.

Prisoners in four other compounds quickly joined in.

Senior Airman Tony Miles, who was manning a tower at compound No. 1, found himself pinned down by the flying debris. "It was chaotic," he recalled. "Stuff was coming from everywhere."

In another tower, Airman 1st Class Eric Coggs well repeatedly shouted in Arabic for the demonstrators to stop. "But they weren't listening," he recounted. "I fired eight shotgun rounds of nonlethal rubber bullets and small rubber pellets. But a lot of the prisoners were using sleeping bags as shields."

Other guards said the inmates appeared to know the limited ranges of the nonlethal shotgun blasts and gas sprays and would withdraw out of range, then rush again toward the perimeters. Their rocks shattered the double-pane glass in the windows of some tower huts.

"It was like an upside-down water fountain, with projectiles spewing into the towers," said Army Capt. Jerry Baird, who supervises the internment facility.

Army Pvt. 1st Class Christopher Cole described the prisoners as moving in waves around the perimeter of his compound, aiming at one tower and then another.

"When they were in front of my tower, there were so many rocks being thrown that I couldn't do anything except crouch in back of the tower hut until they passed," he said. "But then my nonlethal shots wouldn't reach them."

The rioting lasted about an hour, ending soon after word spread that several inmates had been hit with deadly bullets in compound No. 5.

U.S. commanders now suspect the uprising was planned, although the purpose remains unclear. Some here suspect it was meant to protest the Iraqi elections, which had been held the previous day. Others say they believe it was designed to test the guards' responses.

Under U.S. military rules, none of the prisoners could be interviewed for this article.

Senior officers here defended the decision by the two military policemen -- both sergeants -- to fire the deadly shots.

"That is a judgment call for the MPs to make," said Lt. Col. Tim Houser, commander of the 105th Military Police Battalion, which has charge of Camp Bucca. "They felt there was potential for loss of life or grievous bodily injury."

Brandenburg, the commander of detention operations in Iraq, said he sees no need to revise the rules governing use of force by U.S. military guards. But he has directed officers here to ensure that all guards understand the rules.

About half the guards belong to Houser's Army National Guard battalion and have been on duty in Iraq for nearly four months. The others belong to an Air Force security unit, the 732nd Expeditionary Security Forces Squadron, which arrived in January.

Commanders also have provided guards with new nonlethal guns that shoot longer-range, plastic projectiles. In addition, the camp has received a new 1,000-gallon firetruck whose spray can be used against rioting inmates.

Brandenburg has ordered more cameras installed at all compounds to intensify surveillance, and he has instructed officers here to do more to gather intelligence on the prison population.

"You can't do enough to figure out who the bad guys are," he told the senior staff at a meeting last week. "We're detaining a harder-core crowd, and so the approach has to be more prison-like. We've got to get very good at this to get ahead of it."

A new maximum-security facility with segregated metal cells is being built at the camp. Brandenburg said it should help set the troublemakers apart.

The guards here say the Jan. 31 riot has made them more vigilant.

"I learned that things can get bad in a hurry, so don't be complacent," Coggsell said.

Added Spec. Kevin Plemmons, a guard in compound No. 4: "Really, you can't trust these guys at all. You have to be on your toes."