

Extracts from GOC MND(SE) Weekly Report dated 23 March 2005

Summary

- AO largely quiet, the causes of potential trouble remain beneath the surface.

Security

The Divisional AO has been largely quiet, although there remains plenty to keep us on our toes. Over the past week there were significant explosives, weapons and ammunition finds near Al Majarr al Kebir, in Basra City, Basra Province and near Nasiriyah; RPG and Small Arms Fire attacks in and around Basra City, a rocket attack on Camp Abu Naji and a possible rocket attack against Basra Palace (with reports of planned attacks against MNF continuing). Criminal activity continues to dominate road communications with hijackings and attacks against civilian convoys. All this is mere background noise.

As the number of attacks appears to have levelled off, this week offered grounds for both caution and optimism.

Islamification attacks in Basra

On the negative side, one aspect of the continued violence is religiously motivated attacks by Islamicists. The profile was raised significantly this week when a student party in Basra was attacked by a number of OMS members who beat and abducted students who were enjoying a mixed picnic. This resulted in the death of a young Christian woman. The incident was widely condemned in Basra, but the fact that such an attack was possible at all underlines the continuing influence of the OMS [Office of the Martyr Sadr].

A disturbing aspect of this incident is reports that IPS were present and looked on without doing anything. The Chief of Police, Gen HUSSAN, was out of the country at the time (on a sponsored visit to Manchester) but he has since returned. I have told him that given our investment in the IPS, such behaviour will not be tolerated and that I expect arrests and prosecutions as a result of the woman's death. I have also made it clear to all my subordinates in all four provinces that if such behaviour is repeated again by OMS, and the police fail, I will regard this as just cause to take direct action against those involved. Public opinion would certainly support me.

Demonstrations

The current protests and demonstrations orchestrated by militia groups, particularly the OMS, is of concern. Despite the majority being peaceful, tensions during these gatherings are high, thus the possibility exists that insurgents may try to incite violence and capitalise on the increasingly voluble protests.