

US fires on Russian diplomats fleeing Baghdad

By Patrick Martin
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Five Russian diplomats were injured April 6 as they attempted to leave Baghdad, when their convoy was fired on by American forces west of the Iraqi capital. The wounded included Ambassador Vladimir Titorenko, who later told Moscow media that he was lucky to be alive.

The driver of the ambassador's car was severely wounded in the abdomen and had to be taken to an Iraqi hospital in Feluja, 35 miles west of Baghdad, for emergency surgery. Titorenko said that US military vehicles were only 40 yards away when they opened fire, suggesting the shooting was deliberate.

Speaking on Channel One state television Monday, Titorenko held up an American bullet found in the seat of the car, saying, "This bullet was meant for the ambassador. If it hadn't been for this thing"—indicating a barrier inside the car—"the bullet would have hit me right in the head."

Some 23 Russian embassy personnel and journalists were in an eight-car convoy that left the Iraqi capital early Sunday, hoping to make the 250-mile drive across the western desert to Syria. They filed detailed plans with the US military, supplying them with information on the route to be taken, and even the license plate numbers of the cars, to forestall any attack.

Despite these precautions, the convoy encountered US forces, according to an account given by Alexander Minakov, a reporter with the Russian RTR television network. The US forces opened fire on nearby Iraqi troops, Minakov said. "Naturally, the Iraqis started to return fire," he said. "So we found ourselves caught in the crossfire, basically."

The Russian journalist testified that US soldiers initiated the military action just as the Russian convoy was passing between the two sides, with the ambassador's car carrying a Russian flag and other

cars bearing placards identifying them as "TV." Shells exploded as close as 150 feet, and then artillery and machinegun fire opened up, hitting all eight of the vehicles. During a lull in the fighting, some of the Russians tried to wave down a column of US armored vehicles using white flags, but they were ignored.

US Central Command officials in Doha, Qatar initially said that no American forces were operating in the area where the firing took place, seeking to cast blame for the incident on the Iraqis. A US official told the French news agency AFP that Iraqi authorities had deliberately altered the route of the convoy to send it into a contested area. "It looks like it was a trap set by the Iraqis," the official said.

But this claim was contradicted by other accounts. RTR reported that the convoy had followed the previously agreed route and did not alter its course. The American State Department confirmed that the Russian mission had supplied US diplomats with details, including the description and number of vehicles in the convoy, the people in them and the exact route to be taken. This information was passed on to US military commanders, said deputy State Department spokesman Philip Reeker.

One explanation sought to square the two accounts by suggesting that the convoy was attacked by US Special Forces operating independently of Central Command, perhaps under CIA direction. RTR reported that the attackers were "a US intelligence platoon."

If so, this would not be the first time that the CIA has been involved in targeting the diplomatic mission of a country opposed to an American war. The CIA targeted the Chinese embassy in Belgrade during the 79-day bombing campaign in the spring of 1999 ordered by the Clinton administration and carried out by NATO.

The Chinese embassy was the only building

specifically targeted by the CIA, rather than by other US reconnaissance and espionage agencies. It was widely believed that the bombing was not a “mistake,” as the US government claimed at the time, but a deliberate action to warn China to desist from diplomatic, intelligence or military collaboration with the regime of Slobodan Milosevic.

The attack also recalls the confrontation between Russia and the United States that developed at the end of the same war over control of the airport in Pristina, Kosovo, when US and Russian “peacekeeping” forces came to the point of armed conflict.

There is little doubt that the attack on the Russian convoy in Iraq was a deliberate US provocation. During the first week of the war the Bush administration publicly denounced Moscow for supplying air defense equipment to Baghdad. The US media has sought to keep these allegations alive, claiming that two retired Russian generals were decorated in Baghdad by Iraqi government officials shortly before the war began, for their advice and assistance to Iraqi defensive preparations.

Despite the Pentagon claims that the attack was at worst an accident of war, it came only three days after US warplanes dropped bombs near the Russian embassy in Baghdad. The building was not hit, but civilian homes nearby were heavily damaged. The Russian ambassador to the United States, Yuri Ushakov, delivered an official protest to the State Department over the incident, and a similar message was given in Moscow to US Ambassador Alexander Vershbow.

According to the Russian Foreign Ministry, “The Russian side demanded that the American authorities take urgent and exhaustive measures so that such dangerous and unacceptable incidents are not repeated in the future.” Apparently, the answer delivered three days later was a hail of bullets by American troops against the Russian evacuation convoy.

There are other signs of intensifying conflict between the US government and Russia. The same day as the near-bombing of the embassy, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov and US Secretary of State Colin Powell called off scheduled talks in Brussels on the Iraq war, after the meeting had been announced by the Russian side.

The day after the attack on the convoy, Bush’s

national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, arrived in Moscow for the first high-level talks between the US and Russia since the beginning of the war. She met with Russian President Putin and his top aides, including Chief of Staff Aleksandr Voloshin, national security adviser Vladimir Rushailo, Foreign Minister Ivanov, and Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov.

Rice was careful in her public statements to reassure the Russian officials that the attack on the embassy convoy was accidental and that Bush sought closer relations with Moscow after the conflict in the UN Security Council, where Russia helped block the US war resolution. But even *Washington Post* columnist Anne Applebaum, a ferocious anti-Soviet and anti-Russian commentator, was compelled to note that the “apparent American attack on a convoy of Russian diplomats looks, according to the Moscow media, like an act of revenge” for Russia’s opposition to the war.

Within hours of Rice’s departure, the next stage in the conflict ensued, as Putin invited French President Jacques Chirac and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder to meet him in St. Petersburg to coordinate their positions on what role the UN and the European powers should play in postwar Iraq.

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