

Iraqi dam expected to burst, engulf city, air base any day

Officials believe if new wall isn't built soon, disaster is inevitable

By Kelly Kennedy
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MOSUL, Iraq — As troops face at least five attacks a day from insurgents here, Army engineers, as well as the Iraq Ministry of Water Resources,



battle to keep a beautiful dam 25 miles away from bursting and leaving the city submerged by the Tigris River. "It's not stable ... we anticipate it going. It is beyond repair," said Col. Stephen Twitty, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division commander, from his office at Forward Operating Base Marez.

In 1983, Saddam Hussein built

the Saddam Dam in a picturesque area just above Mosul.

"That's why Saddam wanted it there — because it's pretty," said Brig. Gen. Francis Wiercinski, deputy commander of U.S. forces deployed in several provinces around Mosul. "The dam is built well, but it's built on gypsum. Saddam did some things that made no sense."

Gypsum is a soft mineral known for being highly water-soluble and for shifting and compacting beneath heavy building material.

But the dam's damage also poses another issue: Its hydroelec-

tric plant provides the town's power, and it is running at only half capacity, Wiercinski said.

Mosul itself is an archeologist's dream. The area has been inhabited for 8,000 years. Iraq's oldest Christian monastery, St. Elijah's, stands on the U.S. military base, and the tomb of Jonah — of "Jonah and the Whale" fame — is also inside Mosul.

Twitty said \$28 million has been spent on 162 dam-repair projects.

Still, he said, "It is beyond repair. They need to rebuild."

If the dam, which holds back 12 billion cubic

meters of water, crumbles, the Tigris would not only flood Mosul, leaving the city of almost 2 million people under water, but would also flood the U.S. military air base. That base includes the U.S.

Almost every conversation in Mosul — over card games, coffee or even out on patrol — leads to speculation about when the dam will finally go.



U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS

Water rushes out one of the chute spillways at the Saddam Dam in Mosul. The concrete-lined chute exits to a ski jump section for energy dissipation. Engineers say the dam is on the verge of collapsing.

Combat Support Hospital for the region, as well as the airport.

If that happened, Twitty said a couple of big stadiums — also Hussein-built — are "part of the contingency plan."

But the town, and the troops, would have only 3½ hours to evacuate. And the troops know it: Almost every conversation in Mosul — over card games, coffee or even out on patrol — leads to speculation about when the dam will finally go.

To avoid impending disaster, a

concrete plant was built near the dam for the sole purpose of pumping cement into the dam, "into those holes every day," Wiercinski said.

The Corps of Engineers has created an alarm system, and half of FOB Marez is high enough to stay dry. But everyone on the west side of town will have to flee to higher ground.

"The whole town will be swept out," Wiercinski said.

If — or when — the dam goes, "it's not good." □



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