



# Your life is no longer your own — welcome to . . . the war zone

EASTERN SAUDI ARABIA — Being in a war zone, even if your side appears to be winning, is an oppressive, helpless feeling. Something has taken control of your life, and there is no way to take it back, unless you manage to leave.

And it is very hard to leave. In a war zone, planes don't fly, and cars are difficult to rent.

Sometimes the feeling of helplessness is almost overpowering. Twice Thursday morning, air raid warnings were the oppressors. They became the most important things in life.

At one hotel, just minutes after war with Iraq had been confirmed in the video god of Saudi Arabia,



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On the Scene

the Cable News Network, one of these warnings was sounded. In theory, the hotel was well prepared. It had a basement shelter. Practice drills had been held.

There is no preparing, however, for the moment when the Englishman in charge calmly says, "It is time to put on your respirators." For the few people who have been cavalier enough not to have purchased masks, the moment had to

have been sickening.

The Englishman gave those people small cloth masks, just big enough to cover mouth and nose. Those masks were held on the head with thin elastic bands. The training provided last week had made clear the devastating effect of nerve gas, and the absolute need to have an airtight seal between your gas mask and your face.

The Englishman told the people to remain calm, the pitiful cloth masks would protect them.

The second air raid warning was worse than the first. It occurred just minutes after the all-clear from the first warning had sounded.

The warning controlled every-

thing. Nothing else would matter until the warning ended one way or another.

People had to sit on rows of chairs in the basement and refrain from moving. The Englishman said moving around used up too much oxygen.

Some people kept standing, anyway. One man had to be taken physically back to his seat. He could not seem to stay seated. He wandered out of the room, and the Englishman let him go.

People sat and sweated and looked thunderstruck behind their insect-looking masks. Some of them checked their watches a lot. They were timing the missiles that

might be headed this way.

Once again, there were those people who had gas masks and those who had none. The latter group now included the crew of a Saudia Airlines passenger jet caught on the runway at the start of the gulf war.

The noise the stewardesses made when they were told there were no extra gas masks for them is not ordinarily found in nature. The noise lay somewhere between a gasp and a moan. There was a little outrage in the sound, too.

After the end of the second air raid warning, the situation no longer seemed as serious. CNN said allied air strikes had eliminated

many of the missiles that might reach Saudi Arabia with chemical weapons.

But a war zone never really lets you go. Our side was apparently winning the war, but you still could not change money at the cashier's, because the money had run out.

Iraq had been hit hard, but the long distance phone did not work right, and most of the stores were closed.

There was nothing to do but watch CNN to see when the war might end. CNN said there still might be some missiles and planes hidden in Iraq. And CNN is one of the few things you can really rely on in a war zone.