

Much red tape to get gas mask in Saudi Arabia

DHAHRAN, Saudi Arabia — The weather's nice and the people are friendly, but finding a gas mask here is such a bother.

One might think, with all the reporting on Iraq's chemical warfare capability, that everyone would know how and where to acquire the equipment to protect one's self from it.

After all, this city is only as far from the Iraqi military buildup in Kuwait as Houston is from Dallas.

One might have to think again.

At the start of my search Thursday for a gas mask, a military representative suggested I might check with other reporters. Some major news organizations supplied gas masks and suits to their personnel here long ago.

Since then, U.S. military has designated "pools" of combat reporters who also received military weapons gear. The military representative suggested there might be some duplication of effort, and, perhaps, a spare gas mask or two.

Recognizing the name of a wire service reporter who had written one of the pool news reports posted in the Joint Information Bureau here, I visited the wire service office located in the International Hotel, where the Information Bureau also is headquartered.

It seemed a little odd to begin speaking about gas masks in Saudi Arabia to a reporter I last saw in



John Mecklin

On the Scene

December during happy hour at Lizard's bar in Houston. But I eventually worked around to the subject. I felt a little sheepish.

I shouldn't have. The reporter was quite helpful, suggesting I ask the Saudi Information Ministry about a mask. I made a few inquiries at the Information Ministry, which also has an office in the International, but was told each time that I needed to speak with Ali, who was not there. He apparently would be back sometime.

The reporter also suggested I call a local business manager who might know about such matters. The manager was quite helpful but said his own company had been unable to provide him or other employees with their own gas masks.

Needing to find a story to report, I inserted myself into a group of reporters being "escorted" by the Information Ministry to photograph people on the streets of the main business district near Dhahran, which is located in the city of Al Khobar. In addition to U.S. military restrictions on reporting that now are keeping most reporters from contacting troops in the field, the Saudi government has its own guidelines.

Among them is a requirement that the news media obtain government approval and a government guide before shooting photographs or videotape. Even with a guide, photographing Saudi



Associated Press

Tel Aviv Mayor Shlomo Lahat can find a gas mask, but your average Joe can't in Saudi Arabia.

women is prohibited.

Although the journalist on my excursion groused about the guide, his usefulness was quickly established. After a photographer began snapping away at a group of Sudia children playing soccer, a Saudi man followed our group in his car and eventually hailed a policeman to report that we had been taking pictures.

Our guide had to show the police officer the official forms allowing the photographs.

Interviews during subsequent visits to an open market full of produce of every kind and to a business district packed with shoppers and traffic indicated that recent events had made almost no change in the local routine.

Almost as an afterthought, I asked our Saudi guide how I might obtain a gas mask. He explained the paperwork I would have to fill out and submit to the Information Ministry which then would give me authorization to purchase a mask for the equivalent of \$40.

The weather was beautiful — mostly sunny and about 70. And as dusk approached, the 5 o'clock prayer began. The beautiful and slightly haunting Islamic music began, the stores were closed and most everyone stopped in the crowded business district, and faced east.

I almost forgot about gas masks on the ride back to the Information Bureau. When I got inside the International Hotel again, thought, officials were just starting an air raid drill.

Because most of the people in the International members of the news media — there are now at least 360 accredited journalist in or near Daraa — reporters and photographers laughed while they interviewed and photographed one another.

Bomb shelter officials made feeble attempts at sealing doors with tape.

After five minutes of sitting on the floor, we all were allowed to go upstairs.

I'm going back to the information bureau to fill out my gas mask paperwork in a few minutes.

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ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — M
perts say the Persian
could begin with an ac
under the cover of dark
inside Iraq — a missi
made for the F-117A Ste
er-bomber that saw its fir
action in the December 1
sion of Panama.

The Stealth planes,
built with composite ma
Air Force says make the
virtually impossible to det
dar, could team with othe
el bombers and strike figh
Saddam Hussein's eyes ar
communications and c
centers that link Baghda
front lines.

At nearly the same sta
initial aerial bombardme
strike aircraft, including
Strike Eagles, the Navy's
based A-6 Intruders, and
British Jaguar ground-att
would try to knock out I
fenses. Main targets woul
warplanes and surface-to
sile batteries.

American and allied a
are poised for the fastest-p
battle ever seen, an ass
could drop more than a
pounds of explosives a day

Iran appear won't back

ASSOCIATED PRESS

TEHRAN, Iran — A hig
ing Iraqi delegation left Iran
ently empty-handed Thurs
a meeting in which they so
support of the former enem
Persian Gulf crisis.

President Hashemi Rafs
Iran said he was aware of t
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the region, but, in an appar
at Iraq, he said there were
lems "which have entailed
tensive presence in the re
(other) ill-will forces."

In a meeting with Iran
eign Minister Ali Akbar V
Wednesday, Deputy Prime
ter Saadoun Hamadi, a mem
the Iraqi delegation, appea
Iran's anti-American sentim