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Two Britons held in Iraq for firing at police

Mon Sep 19, 2005 5:56 PM BST

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By Alaa Habib

BASRA, Iraq (Reuters) - Angry crowds attacked a British tank with petrol bombs and rocks in Basra on Monday after Iraqi authorities detained two British undercover soldiers in the southern city for firing on police.

Reuters photographs showed a British soldier engulfed by flames as he scrambled out of a burning tank.

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Two Iraqis were killed in the violence, an Interior Ministry official said.

"We can confirm that a shooting incident involving U.K. military personnel has taken place which is currently being investigated," a British military spokesman said in a statement.

"Two U.K. military personnel have been detained and we are liaising with the Iraqi authorities on this matter."

An Iraqi official in Basra said the British military had informed him the detained men were undercover soldiers.

"They were driving a civilian car and were dressed in civilian clothes when a shooting took place between them and Iraqi patrols," the official told Reuters

"We are investigating and an Iraqi judge is on the case questioning them."

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Reuters photographs showed one of the two detained men with a bandage on his head. Police an

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Interior Ministry officials said the men were wearing traditional Arab headdresses for their undercover mission.

Mohammed al-Abadi, an official in the Basra governorate, said the two men looked suspicious to police.

"A policeman approached them and then one of these guys fired at him. Then the police managed to capture them," Abadi told reporters.

"They refused to say what their mission was. They said they were British soldiers and (suggested) ask their commander about their mission," he added.

Reuters Television footage showed the tank trying to reverse away from trouble after it came under attack, apparently from petrol bombs as a crowd gathered around it.

Within moments flames emerged from the top of the tank, after a furious crowd hurled petrol bombs, burning furniture and tyres at it.

One soldier climbed out of the vehicle's hatch and jumped clear of it, as the crowd pelted him with stones.

A witness said people drove through the streets of Basra with loudhailers demanding that the undercover Britons remain in detention and be sent to jail.

Basra, capital of the Shi'ite south, has been relatively stable compared with central Iraq, where Sunni Arab insurgents have killed thousands of Iraqi and U.S. troops, officials and civilians with suicide attacks, roadside bombs and shootings.

The main ally of the United States, Britain said on Sunday it would if necessary increase the number of troops in Iraq, where it has about 8,500 soldiers.

(Additional reporting by Mariam Karouny in Baghdad)

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