

Saddam may set oil on fire

By TYLER BRIDGES

Staff writer

Saddam Hussein has developed a frightening plan to forestall a U.S. advance on Kuwait by dumping millions of barrels of oil into the Persian Gulf and setting the oil afire, a leading oil-security planner said.

By employing his plan, Saddam could not only cause an environmental disaster in the gulf but create a cloud of poisonous smoke miles wide that could halt the advance of U.S. ground troops in Kuwait and damage U.S. precision guided weapons systems, said Edward Badolato, a deputy assistant secretary of energy under President Reagan.

He is now president of Contingency Management Systems, a Fairfax, Va. company that helps energy companies protect against terrorist attacks.

"This has the potential to be the Chernobyl of oil spills," Badolato said. "We're facing the potential for the greatest oil spill in world history."

Badolato said intelligence reports and contacts in the oil industry indicate the Iraqis have loaded oil on at least three supertankers off the Kuwaiti coast that could be scuttled. They have placed dynamite on one third of Kuwait's 980 oil wells and built a pipeline to Kuwait's shoreline to pour oil into the gulf.

By activating these plans, Saddam could dump 25 million barrels of oil into the Persian Gulf, Badolato said, or 100 times the amount spilled by the Exxon Valdez off Alaska's coast in 1989.

Other pipeline Saddam has built could flood areas of Kuwait that U.S. troops would be expected to cross, Badolato said.

"He could be expected to carry out these plans when U.S. ground troops begin attacking his fortifications in Kuwait," Badolato said. "He knows how to do this."

Badolato, recently appointed by President Bush to head the National Response Team reporting on the Valdez spill, said that during its war with Iran, Iraq pumped oil into swamps and waterways several years ago to deter attacks by its neighbor.

Badolato said that with the right weather conditions, the oil could spread south to foul Saudi Arabian power plants and water desalinization centers. Similarly, though, the oil and fires could blow away from the U.S. troops

Badolato said Saddam's plan worries U.S. officials because they are not sure how to re-pond. A former member of the Marines' special operations branch, Badolato said that the detonators on the oil wells could be defused but that Iraq could easily scuttle the supertankers and turn on the oil pipeline.

Beyond the immediate problems posed to the U.S. war effort, Saddam's plan could damage Kuwait's oil industry infrastructure for at least two years and kill the Persian Gulf's fish and fowl, Badolato said.