

Rumor damage control — never-ending job for

EASTERN SAUDI ARABIA — While the first extended ground combat of the Persian Gulf war raged Wednesday, the rumors of war raged, too.

"Each day, it's something-new," one U.S. government official said wearily.

At first, there were rumors of all sorts about the timing of the start of the war itself.

Now, rumors abound about the start of a ground offensive by the allies — when and where it will come — which units will participate.

The war speculation was further complicated Wednesday by early pool reports of the first major land battle of the war — a clash in which U.S. military and other allied forces stopped several Iraqi incursions into northern Saudi Arabia.

Initial reports indicated heavy Iraqi losses, while U.S. losses included 12 Marines killed in action.

But U.S. military commanders stopped short of declaring that the long-awaited land war had begun.



John Mecklin

On the Scene

As for some of the less substantial "news" of the day — ranging from fanciful pets-only evacuation flights to would-be Iraqi naval bombardments — U.S. officials were at a loss.

One U.S. government official said some of the more imaginative rumors have sprung from the large contingent of American expatriates working in this part of Saudi Arabia, particularly those working for Saudi Aramco.

They've complained, often loudly, that Aramco has put them in a bind. While they're free to leave the war zone, they say, the Saudi-owned company they work for has refused to hold their jobs for them.

And if they do choose to leave, they find that getting out of Saudi Arabia isn't easy. The few commercial airlines flying are crowded, and none are flying from Dhahran.

As an alternative, the State Department is offering U.S. citizens flights from eastern Saudi Arabia to Europe on military transports. But anyone boarding such a flight is allowed just one carry-on bag and one suitcase.

This has left many longtime residents with little

way to take cherished belongings, including pets, out of the country.

As a result, the U.S. government official said, a rumor persists that the State Department is now planning a military transport flight for dogs and cats only.

Not surprisingly, people have been phoning U.S. offices regularly to ask how they can make reservations for their pets on the non-existent flight.

As of Wednesday, the hot, new rumor concerned naval gunfire, specifically, unfounded reports that the Iraqi navy has begun shelling cities far south of Kuwait on the Saudi coast.

The fact that the Iraqis have never had much but patrol boats in their navy has not, of itself, stopped the rumor. U.S. officials were busy on phones Wednesday trying to quash the story.

The U.S. official said TV news, twisted by fear and stress, seems to provide most of the impetus for the rumors.

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Case in point: In a recent TV interview with Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, the dictator hinted at the possibility his Scud missiles could be tipped with nuclear weapons.

Despite pronouncements by many experts that Iraq does not yet have a nuclear missile capability, the interview had a dramatic effect on several expatriates. They claimed they'd been misled by corporate and government officials who had advised them there would be no nuclear threat.

These expatriates said they were repeatedly told last fall that Iraq's missiles did not have the range to reach the Dhahran area, and were so inaccurate they would miss their targets by 40 to 50 miles.

They figured that has been proved wrong now that American Patriot missiles have intercepted Iraqi Scuds over Dhahran a number of times over the past two weeks.

And two of these expatriates said they were in no mood to wait around to see if Saddam's unconfirmed threat is groundless.

"Of course, this nuclear business scares me," said one Aramco nurse, who added she would be leaving on the next available flight. "It makes me think I should not be here."

Said another: "I came to Saudi Arabia for adventure. But I didn't expect anything like this."