

Money Man's motto: cash and carry

| Los Angeles Times-Washington Post News Service | 27 10 2004 | [Print this page](#)

It was high noon at Baghdad's international airport and the Money Man was waiting for a shipment of cash - 1.85 trillion Iraqi dinars, to be exact. The fresh dough, equivalent to about \$126 million (Dh462.42 million), was scheduled to arrive from the printer in England within the hour.

It was the Money Man's job to ensure that all 750 crates got loaded into three tractor-trailer rigs and trucked across some of Baghdad's most dangerous roads to the Iraqi Central Bank.

"If this money were to get into the wrong hands, we would be in a lot of trouble," the Money Man, a Middle Eastern-born US contract employee who requested anonymity for security purposes, told a group of US soldiers providing armed escort. "What are we gonna do if some bad guy jumps into one of these trucks? That's right, we're gonna light 'em up like a Christmas tree."

The soldiers nodded. It wouldn't be the first time it happened.

For the last year and a half, the Money Man has overseen the delivery of new dinars to the Central Bank, as well as shipments of US dollars into Iraq.

Working out of the American Embassy in Baghdad for the US Treasury Department, the financial analyst holds the title of director of operations, currency movement and security. So far, he has helped funnel more than \$20 billion (Dh73.40 billion) in cash into the war-racked nation.

The notes, which are delivered by the ton, have been hidden in garbage trucks, earthmoving vehicles and vegetable trailers as a security measure. The convoys have been ambushed by insurgents on at least three occasions; one incident escalated into a fierce gun battle involving the US military.

Despite the attacks, none of the money has been lost, officials say. "We've completed 100 per cent of our missions," the Money Man said.

His efficiency has won him enemies. Army officials confirmed that insurgents placed a \$20,000 (Dh73,400) bounty on his head several months ago, and he narrowly escaped injury during a recent car bombing. Because of that, the Money Man would not allow his name or his photograph to appear in this article.

"This is very dangerous work," he said. "The minute you relax, it's over."

Short and barrel-chested, the Money Man was educated as a financial analyst in the United States. Fluent in five Arabic dialects, he lives in the Middle East with his wife and children. His work attire often consists of a polo shirt, khaki pants, a holstered pistol, and a machine gun hanging from his shoulder.

One day last month, the Money Man waited for the arrival of Iraq's newly printed 500-dinar notes, along with a platoon of California National Guardsmen that was providing armed escort.

The shipment, which filled the payload area of a Russian Il-76 cargo jet, was small by the Money Man's standards. His biggest shipment into Iraq, he said with pride, was 2.4 billion in US dollars (Dh8. 81 billion). "This today is nothing," he said.

The Money Man's armed escorts, soldiers from Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 1-160th Infantry, said the sum made no difference to insurgents.

"It doesn't matter what you're hauling, they're still out to get you," said Army Spc. Alex Ramirez, 25, of West Covina, California. "Whether it's a money run, VIPs or a regular Army convoy, they're all just as dangerous."

As the soldiers stood by and a crew prepared to unload the aircraft, the sound of an explosion swept across the airstrip and a cloud of brown smoke rose several stories in the distance.

Car bomb

A car bomb had just detonated in the Abu Ghraib area west of Baghdad, killing dozens. "That was big," a soldier muttered. Forklifts trundled the cash from the jet to the tractor-trailers as the temperature on the concrete apron rose above 115 degrees.

Swarms of tan-coloured bugs swarmed the airstrip, flying into the mouths of soldiers and crawling down their shirts. After about an hour, the trucks were loaded.

The route to the Central Bank would take the convoy of trucks and Humvees along Baghdad's airport highway, past numerous bomb craters. Then the convoy would inch down Baghdad's Haifa Street, where insurgents have attacked US tanks and armoured vehicles with rockets and suicide car bombings.

Trouble started as soon as the convoy left the airport.

Under orders not to allow vehicles to enter the convoy by driving between the Humvees and tractor-trailers, the soldiers became worried when a white sport utility vehicle zipped behind one truck, cutting off their Humvee. "Hey! Get him out of there!" a soldier yelled.

The soldiers honked and waved at the SUV to pull over, but the driver refused. After shouting and more honking, the turret gunner in one vehicle picked up his M-16 rifle and fired into the SUV's rear window, shattering it. The SUV quickly pulled over.

Poking their rifle muzzles out of small window cracks, the soldiers scanned the area for trouble as the convoy rolled under an overpass that had been blown apart some time earlier by a car bomb, then swerved onto an exit ramp for Baghdad.

Within minutes they were rolling along Haifa Street and then turning onto another street toward the bank. As the convoy entered a very narrow and crowded street of vendors, the vehicles slowed to a crawl. Hundreds of bystanders eyed the procession of vehicles as the soldiers pressed on.

When the convoy crested a bridge, scores of men holding AK-47 assault rifles came into view. The men, Iraqi Central Bank security guards, lined both sides of the street. As the vehicles neared the bank compound, guards waved the tractor-trailers into the yard, where they disappeared behind 20-foot blast walls and coils of razor wire.

Their mission accomplished, the Money Man and soldiers sped quickly to the US Embassy compound in the fortified Green Zone.

"My wife thinks I'm crazy," the Money Man said of his job. "But she accepts it. She believes that what will happen is already written."

Still, he said he was looking forward to the day when he could return to his previous life of three-piece suits and business lunches.

"I'm tired of carrying a gun," he said.

© Al Nisr Publishing LLC - Gulf News Online | contact_editor@gulfnnews.com