



US Army doctor Sudip Bose and medical personnel treat an Iraqi police officer in Najaf.

## Iraq forces advance on Najaf shrine

Najaf: Iraqi security forces moved to within 400 metres of a holy shrine in Najaf on Tuesday, just hours after the government warned Shia rebels inside they would be killed if they did not surrender.

"God willing, we'll be moving in tonight," a commander of one unit said, adding that around 500 Iraqi troops had been deployed to the area around the Imam Ali mosque, the first time government forces have entered the battle zone.

An aide to radical cleric Moqtada al-Sadr said his Mehdi Army militia was ready to negotiate to end the fighting, which has killed hundreds, driven oil prices to record highs and touched off clashes in seven other cities.

The advance was carried out by 50 Iraqi servicemen and came after US helicopters fired missiles and strafed militants dug in at a cemetery near the mosque, where most of the fighters have holed up during the three-week uprising in the city.

A US soldier guided the men in. They were shot at by Mehdi militiamen and returned fire.

"We are in the last hours. This evening, Iraqi forces will reach the doors of the shrine and control it and appeal to the Mehdi Army to throw down their weapons," defence minister Hazim al-Shalaan said at a US army base outside Najaf. "If they do not, we will wipe them out."

With fighting raging, US tanks reinforced positions along the southern flank of the mosque. Black smoke rose from the area and automatic gunfire crackled after an overnight bombardment from US warplanes and artillery.

The ultimatum from the US-backed interim government is the latest in a series of threats that Iraqi forces will storm the shrine to disarm the militia, which appeared ready to talk. Reuters