

Missile attack on Iraq

Danger of new US-made crisis in Persian Gulf

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Wednesday's missile attack by an American jet on an Iraqi anti-aircraft battery near Basra has all of the earmarks of a renewed effort by Washington to manufacture a confrontation with Baghdad.

The incident coincides with deliberations by the United Nations Security Council on whether the draconian sanctions imposed on the country in the aftermath of the 1991 Persian Gulf War should be maintained indefinitely, or phased out in the near future. Of the five permanent members of the Security Council, the US and Britain oppose any move toward ending the sanctions, while France, Russia and China have adopted a more conciliatory stance.

According to the Pentagon, a US F-16 jet fired the missile after Iraqi forces aimed radar at one of four British jets patrolling the 'no flight' zone imposed by the UN over southern Iraq. The F-16 was accompanying the British planes and five other American jets on patrol just north of Basra. The US says the missile missed its target. Iraq has denounced the attack as 'an aggressive and unjustifiable action,' and reports that the missile struck a drinking water reservoir near Basra.

Earlier this year the US was frustrated in its plans to launch a massive air assault on Iraq by the agreement reached with the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. Since then it has cut back its military presence in the region, but still maintains 20,000 troops and 22 warships in the Gulf.

The missile attack, the first US military action inside Iraq since 1996, is the latest in a series of recent events that have further roiled relations between Baghdad and western governments, and provided the American media and politicians with ammunition to whip up public opinion against Iraq. The sequence of happenings points to a deliberate campaign of

provocation on the part of Washington.

Richard Butler, the executive chairman of the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM), the body charged with ridding Iraq of 'weapons of mass destruction,' visited Baghdad from June 11 to June 15 to work out a disarmament schedule that could open the way for the removal of sanctions. Butler has in the past toed the American line, continually placing new obstacles in the way of Iraqi compliance and insisting that Baghdad prove the unprovable, i.e., the non-existence of chemical and biological weapons or the means of producing them.

When he returned from his Baghdad trip in mid-June, however, Butler announced that the Iraqis were cooperating with UNSCOM inspectors and suggested that the search for weapons could be completed in a few months, opening the way for the lifting of sanctions. Butler was clearly pointing toward October, when the UN Security Council will next formally decide on whether or not the sanctions should be extended. His remarks evoked a bitter response from the Clinton administration and the US media.

Three days later Butler submitted a report to the Security Council that, inexplicably, clashed with his remarks of June 15. His June 18 report denounced the Iraqis for withholding information, singling out Baghdad's alleged refusal to answer questions about the production of VX nerve gas.

Less than a week later, on June 23, the Pentagon announced that US army lab scientists had isolated 'significant amounts' of VX nerve gas from fragments of Iraqi missile warheads discovered near Baghdad last March by UNSCOM inspectors. This made for banner headlines and chilling exposés on network news programs. The news accounts for the most part buried or concealed entirely the fact that the warheads had

been produced prior to the Gulf War, and were subsequently destroyed by the Iraqis in accordance with UN demands. Baghdad disputed the US army test results, claiming it had never succeeded in developing VX nerve gas of sufficient stability to place on missile warheads.

France, Russia and China let it be known that the lab results had been leaked by UNSCOM and the US government in violation of UN procedures, which require that such information be reported only to the Security Council.

US officials pounced on the Pentagon announcement as vindication of Washington's intractable policy toward Iraq. Clinton declared, 'Let the inspections go forward and don't lift the sanctions until the resolutions are complied with.' Bill Richardson, the US ambassador to the UN, gloated that the report 'will set back Iraq's efforts to try to lift sanctions.' State Department spokesman James Rubin added, 'It appears to be another case of UNSCOM having overcome Iraq's deceit on what it has done and it is doing.'

The US missile attack, coming one week after the nerve gas allegations, is the culmination, to date, of a systematic campaign to block the lifting of sanctions.

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