

US expands air war against Iraq

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The United States, with the assistance of Britain, is expanding its air war against Iraq, hitting both military and civilian targets on a virtually daily basis. The air strikes are being carried out with minimal coverage in the American media, no debate in Congress and not even the pretense of a public discussion.

Since the conclusion of the four-day air assault last December, the US and Britain have used Iraq's attempts to assert its sovereignty over the so-called "no fly" zones in the North and South of the country as the pretext for attacks on a wide variety of targets. In the last week alone at least eight Iraqi civilians have been killed. This follows the missile attacks on two communities in southern Iraq on January 25 that, according to United Nations investigators, killed 17 people, all women and children.

On Saturday, February 13 US jets flew 34 sorties over Basra, Maisan, Dhiqar and Najaf in the South, in a raid that lasted one and a half hours. According to the Iraqi government, one group of planes attacked a civilian installation killing three civilians and wounding several others. Baghdad reported that jets also bombed a residential area in the southern city of Al-Faw, injuring several people.

Saturday was the third straight day Iraq claimed civilian casualties in the "no fly" zones that were declared by the US, Britain and France in the aftermath of the 1991 Persian Gulf war.

Two days later, on Monday, American and British planes flew 42 missions in the South, killing 5 and wounding 22. On the same day US jets attacked two targets in the North.

Last Monday's air raids occurred while Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz was meeting with Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit in Ankara, in an attempt to persuade the Turkish regime to halt US air attacks from the Turkish air base in Incirlik. Following the meeting Ecevit issued a statement defending the

American air strikes.

The US-British policy of military assault and political provocation against Iraq is heightening tensions throughout the Middle East, increasing the prospects for a wider war that could involve Turkey, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Baghdad has issued warnings in recent days threatening retaliation against these countries, all of which serve as bases for US and British air strikes in the "no fly" zones. Last month Turkey requested and received a battery of American Patriot missiles to defend Incirlik against the possibility of scud missile attacks from Iraq.

US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright made clear that Washington would respond militarily to any attempt by Iraq to retaliate against these countries, declaring the American reaction would be "swift and sure."

The US air war is escalating social tensions and political instability throughout the region. The Turkish economy has been severely impacted by the sanctions imposed on Iraq, having lost some \$30 billion in trade since 1990. The government headed by Ecevit, installed as a caretaker regime pending national elections in April, has been under increasing pressure from opposition forces to withdraw permission for the US to use Incirlik as a base for strikes against the north of Iraq.

The US-British policy is also intensifying tensions within the UN Security Council, which has been unable to reach a consensus since Washington and London carried out Operation Desert Fox in December without seeking authorization from the UN. Iraq, as anticipated, retaliated for the air assault by banning UN arms inspectors.

Both Russia and France have a vested interest in easing the crippling UN sanctions against Iraq. Russia stands to collect hundreds of millions of dollars in Iraqi debts and has signed agreements to rebuild Iraq's oil

industry. French oil concerns have made agreements for the exploitation of Iraqi petroleum reserves once the embargo is lifted. French President Jacques Chirac is scheduled to meet Friday with US President Bill Clinton in Washington, where he will press French demands for the lifting of the oil embargo.

The sharpest expression of the tensions among the nominal allies is an article published over the weekend by the *Sunday Telegraph* of London. The newspaper reported that Russia recently signed a \$160 million deal to reinforce Iraq's air defenses and upgrade its MiG fighter jets. The *Telegraph* cited unidentified diplomatic sources in Moscow, claiming the agreement was signed in the Russian capital in mid-January after a visit by Iraq's Transport and Communications minister.

The *Telegraph*, which is politically allied to the Conservative (Tory) Party, denounced the agreement as a direct threat to American and British warplanes patrolling the "no fly" zones. Russia has denied that any such agreement was signed.



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