

As US renews attack on Iraq

Australian government sends frigate to Persian Gulf

Mike Head
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In a little-reported decision, just days after NATO began bombing Yugoslavia, the Australian government on March 28 announced it was sending a warship to the Persian Gulf to help enforce sanctions against Iraq.

Defence Minister John Moore said the guided-missile frigate *HMAS Melbourne*, with a crew of 210, would sail later this month to join a US Naval task force for three months as part of the Maritime Interception Force. The Force, created in August 1990, at the height of the Gulf War, is empowered to intercept and board vessels suspected of carrying forbidden cargo to or from Iraq.

The decision will aid the escalating US aggression against both Iraq and Yugoslavia. US jets bombed oil installations and other targets in Iraq on Good Friday, resuming a pattern of attacks after a two-week lull at the beginning of the Balkans operation. Iraqi officials said the planes destroyed two houses and hit a communications centre at the main pumping station used to export oil via the southern Iraqi port of Mina-al-Bakr.

The Iraqi news agency said aircraft, including F-14s, F-16s and Tornados, flew 18 morning sorties from Kuwait, while planes from Saudi Arabia flew 33 sorties. It said 12 formations of planes flew 31 sorties about eight hours later in four provinces, including Basra. The oil ministry took Western reporters to the oil terminal to show the damage inflicted. The US Central Command headquarters in Tampa denied the morning attacks but confirmed the second raid.

Two further air strikes were carried out on Easter Sunday, with US and British warplanes hitting anti-aircraft and communications sites in southern Iraq. In both cases the US Central Command claimed the

strikes were in response to "violation of the no-fly zone by Iraqi aircraft." The no-fly zones in northern and southern Iraq were imposed unilaterally by the US and Britain after the 1991 Persian Gulf War. They were never sanctioned by the UN Security Council, because of Russian and Chinese opposition, and the Iraqi government has denounced them as a violation of its sovereignty.

Earlier this year, US strikes on Iraqi targets, particularly oil facilities, became almost daily occurrences. The attacks began in last December's "Operation Desert Fox" after Iraq rejected US and British demands for ongoing "weapons inspection" by UNSCOM teams that were exposed as spying units for the US, British, Israeli and Australian military.

More than half Iraq's oil exports pass through Mina-al-Bakr, while most of the rest goes through a pipeline from northern Iraq to the Turkish port of Ceyhan. Early last month, US and British strikes knocked out the Iraqi-Turkish pipeline for more than three days. Baghdad's *Al-Iraq* newspaper on Saturday accused Washington and London of wanting to deprive Iraq of its capacity to export even the \$5.2 billion worth of oil it is permitted to sell every six months under the latest version of the UN sanctions. "By bombing Iraq, the Americans and British are hitting hard the humanitarian oil-for-food program which already only meets 20 percent of the population's needs," the newspaper said.

The arrival of the Australian ship will assist the US to spread its firepower across two war fronts. US Defence Secretary William Cohen on Sunday ordered the aircraft carrier *Theodore Roosevelt*, accompanied by three ships and two submarines, to cancel a planned trip to the Gulf and join the strikes against Yugoslavia. The

task force includes 46 strike jets and Tomahawk cruise missiles.

In making his announcement, Moore noted that it was the eighth occasion since 1990 that the Australian military had sent ships to the Gulf. Six of those engagements occurred under the previous Labor governments of Hawke and Keating, which first ordered the Navy into the 1990-91 Gulf War. Today's Labor Party leader Kim Beazley, immediately backed the latest decision, assuring the government of continued bipartisan support. The Labor leaders likewise automatically endorsed the sending of troops and aircraft to participate in a planned US offensive against Iraq in February 1998.

Not once have the Australian people been consulted in these decisions. Last week's announcement, like the one in February 1998, was not even made in parliament, having been cleared with Beazley in advance.

Moore attributed the new commitment to the need to "enforce these sanctions against Iraq until it fully complies with UN conditions". This is in line with the demands of the US that UN sanctions be continued against Iraq indefinitely, regardless of calls by UN Security Council members France, Russia and China for their lifting.

While its Gulf involvement invokes the alleged legitimacy of UN endorsement, the Howard government has also been quick to declare its support for the NATO air strikes on Yugoslavia, despite the lack of UN rubberstamping used in the Gulf. "President Milosevic must be left in no doubt of the international community's resolve," Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said on March 24.

The government belatedly revealed that at least 10 Australian military personnel were serving with the NATO forces. A more substantial involvement is likely to be the American satellite communication bases at Pine Gap, Nurrungar and North West Cape in central and northern Australia. These bases are part of global systems used to detect military targets, monitor enemy transmissions and communicate with US warships and submarines. Asked at a news conference about the bases' role in the NATO operation, Downer refused to comment.

Canberra's willingness to be in the front line of US-led militarism is bound up with discussion in ruling

circles of the need to secure US support, mould public opinion and prepare troops for operations to protect Australian corporate interests in nearby Asia as the economic meltdown sparks wider social and political unrest.

Less than three weeks ago the government announced the formation of a second 3,000-strong Rapid Deployment Force, joining 4,000 troops already on 28-day alert in northern Australia for use in neighbouring regions, such as Indonesia, East Timor and Papua New Guinea.



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