

US warplanes continue killing in Iraq

Seventeen dead, eighteen injured near Najaf

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American fighter bombers inflicted their bloodiest attack on Iraqi civilians in nearly six months Sunday, killing 17 people and wounding 18 more along a highway near the city of Najaf in the South of the country. It was the highest civilian casualty toll since 24 people were killed by missiles which slammed into a residential neighborhood in the city of Basra, also in the South, last January.

Local residents told a photographer for the French news agency AFP that four missiles crashed into vehicles on the road, causing terrible carnage, mainly among women, children and the elderly. The dead included a pregnant woman and her husband in their car, and six members of a single family in an all-terrain vehicle. A seventh person in the same vehicle, a six-year-old boy, had to have his hand amputated because of his injuries.

The US Central Command claimed that the American planes had hit a missile battery near Abu Sukhayr, 200 miles south of Baghdad, and a military communications site near Al Khidr, 150 miles southeast of the capital. Abu Sukhayr is near the site of the massacre along the Najaf road.

It was at least the fourth such air strike on Iraqi targets during the month of July. Previous strikes took place on July 2, July 8 and July 13, all in northern Iraq in the area around Mosul, that region's largest city.

American and British officials reacted to the casualty reports from Najaf with practiced cynicism. State Department spokesman James Rubin declared, repeating his mantra during the bombing of Yugoslavia: "In these actions, every effort is taken to avoid any casualties to civilians or damage to civilian property."

British Defence Minister George Robertson accused the Iraqis of causing casualties by firing anti-aircraft

missiles unsuccessfully at US and British warplanes. These weapons then fell back to earth and hit Iraqi civilians, he said. Similar claims were made by US and British spokesmen during the 1991 Persian Gulf War, when the extensive civilian casualties in Baghdad and other cities, caused by air strikes, were initially blamed on Iraqi anti-aircraft fire.

The US and Britain have carried out dozens of bombing raids on Iraqi targets since the four-day air war last December, after the withdrawal of United Nations weapons inspectors from the country. Two justifications have been advanced for the raids: preventing Iraq from building atomic, biological and chemical weapons, and enforcing compliance with the "no-fly" zones in southern and northern Iraq.

Both claims are no more than pretexts, riddled with contradictions. Last week the *Washington Post* reported that an internal US government study had found no evidence of any Iraqi effort to develop weapons of mass destruction in the eight months since the UNSCOM inspectors were removed.

As for the "no-fly" zones, these were imposed unilaterally by the US, Britain and France after the Persian Gulf War, and were never approved by the UN Security Council, or even presented for a vote, because of Russian and Chinese opposition. They have no standing under international law and are a flagrant violation of Iraq's sovereignty.

When the zones were first declared, US President George Bush claimed that his goal was to protect the Shiite Moslem population of southern Iraq and the Kurdish population of northern Iraq against military reprisals by Saddam Hussein. The Clinton administration continues to repeat this claim when it has long since passed the point of absurdity.

The dead and wounded on the road to Najaf were

themselves Shiite Moslems, the people whom the southern “no-fly” zone was allegedly to protect. Their funeral was held Monday in Najaf, one of principal religious centers of Shiite Islam, with thousands of Shiite Moslems assembling to mourn their loss and denounce the United States.

American policy in the northern “no-fly” zone is equally shameless. On July 13, the day that US jets bombed targets near Mosul, enforcing the “no-fly” zone in the predominately Kurdish-populated area, Turkish jets were carrying out bombing raids of their own in the same zone, against suspected Kurdish guerrilla sites.

Thus American warplanes, based at Incirlik Air Base in Turkey, bomb Iraqi targets, supposedly to protect the Kurds, while their Turkish allies, armed with American weapons, bomb Kurdish targets only a few miles away!



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