

New bombing raids on Iraq as US seeks pretext for war

Bill Vann
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US warplanes over the weekend carried out an intensive bombardment of both military and civilian targets in Iraq's Dhi Qar province, about 200 miles south of Baghdad, as Washington continued casting about for a pretext for another war against the Arab country.

An Iraqi spokesman said that at least seven civilians were injured in the July 13 bombings, which occurred as US and British warplanes carried out scores of sorties from bases in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

The air patrols are conducted ostensibly to enforce "no-fly" zones decreed by Washington over southern and northern Iraq in the wake of the 1991 Persian Gulf War, but US warplanes routinely violate other areas of Iraqi air space in an attempt to provoke a response from anti-aircraft defense units which are then targeted.

The "no-fly" zones were created by American fiat, without any supporting resolution by the United Nations, and have been utilized as an instrument for continuous military operations against Iraq, more than a decade after the supposed end of the Persian Gulf War. Hundreds of Iraqis have been killed and many more wounded in the estimated 40,000 sorties flown by US and British warplanes since 1998.

These continuing military provocations take on ever greater significance as the Bush administration prepares for a full-scale invasion of Iraq aimed at toppling the regime of Saddam Hussein, turning the territory into a semi-colonial protectorate, and establishing US control over its huge oil reserves.

Last Friday, the US and Britain organized a meeting of Iraqi military and political defectors in London, which was also attended by American intelligence and Pentagon officials. The aim of the conference was to begin consolidating a quisling regime to install after a US invasion.

Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, one of the most vociferous advocates of war on Iraq, is traveling to Turkey with senior military officers for talks on an Iraqi invasion. Turkey's collaboration is seen as key, and the administration is reportedly assuring Ankara that it will have a free hand in repressing any move toward Kurdish independence that might arise if the Hussein regime falls. Both Turkey and Iraq have substantial Kurdish minorities spanning their mutual border. Turkey waged a bloody counterinsurgency campaign against Kurdish nationalists in the 1980s and 1990s.

It was also reported in London that Prime Minister Tony Blair has been asked to move up a visit to Camp David originally scheduled for early autumn. The British media is describing the meeting as a "war summit."

While Bush and other administration officials have publicly insisted that Iraq's alleged development of "weapons of mass destruction" poses a sufficient threat to justify a preemptive war by the American military, there are substantial divisions within US ruling circles about the advisability and timing of such an action.

Within the Pentagon's uniformed command there are concerns that the Bush administration has failed to spell out an "exit strategy" for a war in Iraq, potentially bogging the US military down in an open-ended occupation of the country.

After Pentagon officials leaked classified documents outlining plans for a full-scale invasion involving a quarter of a million US troops and thousands of warplanes, Senior Congressional Democrats as well as Republicans have expressed reservations about any imminent war. Some have warned that toppling Hussein could destabilize the entire region, while others express concern over spreading US military

forces too thin under conditions in which military operations are continuing in Afghanistan.

Senator Joseph Biden, Democratic chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, has called for hearings on the administration's war plans. Biden recounted a recent discussion with Bush, in which he warned him: "Mr. President, there's a reason why your father stopped and didn't go to Baghdad. He didn't want to stay five years."

No leading politician in either party has expressed any reservations about waging a war of unprovoked aggression against a largely defenseless country. Dissent rises merely to the level of tactical reservations.

No Democratic or Republican elected official, nor the media for that matter, bothers to recall estimates provided by Pentagon planners to the Clinton administration that a US war to oust Hussein would claim at the very least 10,000 civilian dead. Similarly, none of them question the punishing economic sanctions that have created unprecedented poverty, disease and hunger, leading to an estimated 1.5 million additional deaths, mostly among infants and young children, the elderly, the sick and the poor.

Attempts to justify military action by linking Saddam Hussein to the September 11 attacks, or by claiming his regime is on the verge of deploying either nuclear or biological weapons, have thus far fallen flat in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

The only thing that the Bush administration can point to is the breakdown of talks between the United Nations and Baghdad over the readmission of weapons inspectors to Iraq. This failure was stage-managed from Washington, which gave UN General Secretary Kofi Annan orders to stand pat on the demand for Iraq's unconditional submission to the inspection regime. Baghdad's attempts to raise issues ranging from the illegal US bombing of its territory to the punishing sanctions and the very real threat that the Pentagon and the CIA would use the inspection teams to infiltrate agents working to prepare an invasion or assassinate Saddam Hussein were all rebuffed.

Citing senior Pentagon and State Department officials, *USA Today* reported last week that "President Bush's national security team has agreed that the most dramatic option for toppling Saddam—a large-scale invasion—would be politically difficult at home and abroad without justification beyond Iraq's current

friction with Washington over the suspected development of weapons of mass destruction."

"The key problem right now is the lack of a spark, an offense" by Iraq, the paper quoted a senior intelligence official as saying. The administration has decided, the official said, that "there has to be a defining moment of some form, a defining event."

There is a growing danger that the Bush administration, enveloped in crisis, will provoke or stage such a "defining event." The Bush White House increasingly sees war as a political necessity for its own survival—the best means of diverting public attention from the meltdown of the financial markets and the mounting corruption scandals that are engulfing Bush, Cheney and much of the cabinet in charges of criminal corporate activity.



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