

US, UK step up air war on Iraq

Bill Vann
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US and British warplanes have repeatedly pounded targets in Iraq with precision-guided weapons in recent weeks, ostensibly in response to Iraqi anti-aircraft fire in the so-called no-fly zones created in the north and south of the country.

The latest bombs fell September 5 on an air defense command and control center located at an airfield approximately 240 miles southwest of Baghdad, the Pentagon's Central Command reported.

With the Bush administration noisily pressing its case for a "preemptive" invasion of Iraq, the US military has quietly escalated its low-intensity air war against the ravaged Arab nation. Of the 35 bombing raids conducted so far this year, 10 of them took place in August, eight of these in southern Iraq.

According to Iraqi estimates, US and British warplanes have flown a total of 42,000 sorties over Iraqi territory since 1998, flying out of bases in Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Several hundred civilians have been killed in bombing raids that Washington and London describe as acts of "self defense." Over 1,000 have been wounded.

US officials have repeatedly dismissed Iraqi reports of civilian casualties, claiming that its "smart bombs" are directed at military targets. UN investigations and other independent probes have shown otherwise, however. In one infamous incident, warplanes dropped high explosives on a shepherds' encampment, killing a large number of people and slaughtering herds of sheep. The Pentagon subsequently claimed that its pilots mistook a water trough for a missile launcher.

The timing of the latest stepped-up bombing campaign strongly suggests that the air patrols are being used as a means of provoking greater tensions between the US and Iraq and, potentially, an incident that could be used as a pretext for a US invasion of the country.

The increased number of sorties and intensified

bombing activity elevate the risks of a US warplane being shot down over Iraqi territory. In the context of the Bush administration's frenzied attempts to fabricate a pretext for an unprovoked invasion of Iraq, there can be little doubt that such an incident would be seized upon as a justification for all-out war.

According to a recent *Washington Post* article, high-ranking US Air Force officers recommended ending the combat patrols last year, but were overruled by the Defense Department's civilian leadership. The cost of the program is well over \$1 billion a year.

According to the *Post*, the rationale for continuing the no-fly zones was that they provide the US with substantial intelligence that can be utilized in preparing an invasion. Moreover, they serve as a means of roping in Saudi Arabia and Turkey, which have publicly expressed opposition to a US war against Iraq.

The operation, one Pentagon official told the newspaper, "keeps our skills high on knowledge of the area and keeps our competency high in flying over the area. The benefits you get from that—should you decide to do something militarily—are great."

The no-fly zones were decreed in the aftermath of the 1991 Persian Gulf War under the pretext that they would protect the Kurdish minority in northern Iraq and the Shi'a in the south, both of which revolted against the regime of Saddam Hussein at the close of the war. US forces stood back and allowed Iraqi government units to suppress the revolts, and then imposed the no-fly zones.

In practice, the zones have had nothing to do with protecting either people. Exempted from the no-fly restrictions, for example, are Turkish military aircraft, which have regularly carried out cross-border raids in Ankara's continuing counterinsurgency campaign against Kurdish separatist rebels.

Initially, the missions were flown by US, British and French warplanes. France pulled out of the program

entirely by 1998 and has since publicly opposed it. Russia, China and other countries have also denounced it as an unwarranted and illegal infringement on Iraqi sovereignty. The no-fly zones have never been authorized by any United Nations resolution and represent a unilateral military intervention against Iraq by the US and Britain.

The regular bombings carried out against Iraqi targets, military and civilian, are ignored by the media as it trumpets the Bush administration's warnings about Iraqi "weapons of mass destruction." Similarly, the effects of US-backed sanctions that have left the country in ruins and—according to United Nations agencies—cost the lives of over 1 million Iraqis, most of them children, go virtually unreported.



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