

US, British air strikes kill Iraqi oil workers

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US and British warplanes Sunday fired missiles into facilities of the Southern Oil Corporation in the southern Iraqi city of Basra, killing several employees and seriously wounding approximately 20 others. Passersby in the street outside the facilities were showered with broken glass, suffering lighter injuries.

The fatal air strike came shortly after Iraq's Foreign Minister Naji Sabri issued an angry letter to the United Nations denouncing the stepped-up bombing campaign. "The raids by American and British planes on Iraq cities and villages and the infrastructure of the Republic of Iraq ... is state terrorism, wanton aggression and rude interference in Iraq's internal affairs," Sabri wrote.

While the Iraqi military gave the number killed as four, residents of Basra put the death toll at eight. A military spokesman said that the warplanes also struck two other civilian targets in southern Iraq.

Basra's civilian airport has already faced heavy damage in the bombings, and fear of air raids has become a fact of daily life for residents of the port city.

US and British fighter jets have flown nearly 65,000 combat sorties over the so-called no-fly zones in southern and northern Iraq since 1998. These missions have been stepped up in recent months in a calculated campaign to knock out Iraq's air defense system and prepare pilots for a full-scale air war against Iraqi cities.

Iraq has refused to recognize the no-fly zones, which were imposed unilaterally by Washington and London, without any approval from the United Nations. Nonetheless, the Bush administration has claimed that Iraqi anti-aircraft fire in response to the violations of its airspace constitute a "material breach" of the latest UN weapons inspection resolution. Washington clearly hopes to use the escalating conflict as a pretext for launching an invasion.

The attack on the state-owned oil corporation heavily damaged administrative offices that run the UN-sanctioned oil-for-food program that provides Iraq with

limited resources to deal with poverty and hunger. It was 11 in the morning when the two missiles struck the building and 600 to 700 workers were there.

In the aftermath of the bombings, the Bush administration issued new threats of war. On Monday, signing a \$355.5 billion military budget approved by Congress, Bush described the week-old operations of the UN inspectors in Iraq as "not encouraging." So far, the inspections have uncovered no evidence of the "weapons of mass destruction" that Washington has repeatedly claimed exist in the Arab country.

Bush reiterated that a December 8 deadline for Iraq to submit a full accounting of all its chemical, biological and nuclear weapons programs—military and civilian alike—would be considered decisive in US war plans.

"That declaration must be credible and complete—or the Iraqi dictator will have demonstrated to the world once again that he has chosen not to change his behavior," Bush said. He went on to spell out that if Washington deemed the declaration not "credible and complete" it would go to war. "The temporary peace of denial and looking away from danger would only be a prelude to broader war and greater horror. America will confront gathering dangers early before our options become limited and desperate," he declared.

Whatever the Iraqis say in the report will be seized upon as a pretext for war. Should they deny the existence of any weapons programs, they will be charged with lying and in violation of the UN resolution. Any admission that the programs exist will likewise be seized upon as a "material breach."

Vice President Richard Cheney spoke the same day in Denver to Air National Guard commanders, repeating the unsubstantiated claims that the US is threatened by a potential alliance between Islamic fundamentalist terrorism and the regime in Baghdad. "That's why confronting the threat imposed by Iraq is not a distraction from the war on terror, it is absolutely

crucial to winning the war on terror,” Cheney said “The war on terror will not be won until Iraq is completely and verifiably deprived of weapons of mass destruction.”

Meanwhile, Washington launched a renewed diplomatic offensive aimed at bribing and coercing its erstwhile allies into backing an unprovoked war against Iraq. Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz departed for Brussels, London and Turkey to sell US war plans, while other senior US officials—including Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage and Stephen Hadley, the deputy national security adviser—will be touring Europe and the Arab countries in coming weeks.

In preparation for war, the Pentagon has assembled 60,000 troops in the countries surrounding Iraq together with arms and equipment for a force twice that size. Some 12,000 soldiers and Marines are occupying a sealed-off territory that constitutes fully one-quarter of Kuwait, conducting permanent war games near the Iraqi border.

By the end of this month, the Navy will have brought together a massive armada consisting of five aircraft carrier battle groups within striking distance of Iraq from the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean.

Finally, by next week, the chief of the US Central Command, General Tommy Franks, together with more than 750 headquarters staff will have deployed to the al-Udeid air base in Qatar, 700 miles from Baghdad, in what is being billed as another military exercise, dubbed “Internal Look.”

The aim of this “exercise” is to test out the entire command-and-control system that would be used to coordinate an invasion of Iraq. It has been organized to coincide with the December 8 deadline set for Iraq’s report to the UN, which the Bush administration has strongly suggested may serve as the trigger for military action. While General Franks and his staff are officially set to return to their permanent headquarters in Florida by the middle of this month, there is every reason to believe that they will be kept in place as the Bush administration ratchets up military tensions.



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