

30,000 British troops on standby for war vs. Iraq

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The Labour government of Prime Minister Tony Blair has put 30,000 troops on standby in preparation for a land war against Iraq as early as late January or early February.

Earlier reports indicated that the military top brass was demanding a decision from Blair on a war within 10 days so that a British armoured division could be sent to the frontline and deployed within six to eight weeks. Government spokesman insisted that no decision to go to war had been taken, but their actions gave the lie to such declarations.

Troops are being put on short notice to move and the government is looking into what reservists may be required. Notice to move for several key Army units has been cut to hours and letters have been sent to reservists and their employers, warning of a possible compulsory call-up. Tenders are being put out for civilian shipping that may be needed for a military campaign. The Ministry of Defence (MOD) is reported to be issuing Urgent Operational Requirement notices to defence equipment manufacturers instructing them to speed up work in some areas, such as conversion of Challenger battle tanks for use in desert situations.

Defence sources told the *Daily Mirror* that the deployment of troops close to Iraq's borders—in Kuwait first—is now highly likely within the next month.

The government has said that it will not respond officially to Iraq's weapons declaration until after Christmas, but it has repeatedly insisted that Saddam Hussein is lying. Blair's own "dossier" issued last month insists that Baghdad has continued its chemical and biological weapons programmes and sought to acquire a nuclear capability.

Press reports, led off by the fanatically pro-war *Sun* newspaper of Rupert Murdoch, published accounts of the size of the planned force on the day of the MOD

announcement, which were then dismissed by official sources as speculation. A defence ministry spokeswoman told the BBC that "military action is neither imminent nor inevitable and the diplomatic route is still being pursued."

But the estimates ring true. The *Sun* stated that the "enhanced" British military presence would be part of a 300,000-strong US armada to the Gulf.

The troop movements are officially part of a military "exercise" due to begin in February. The vessel deployment—called Naval Task Group 2003—will be led by the carrier HMS Ark Royal, accompanied by a destroyer, a frigate and two T-Class submarines armed with Tomahawk cruise missiles.

Troops from the elite Special Air Service will be sent, along with thousands of Royal Marine Commandos.

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MOD officials said the ships were on their way to "long-planned" exercises in the Indian Ocean called *Operation Flying Fish*, which will culminate in Singapore and Malaysia in June and would only "pass through" the Gulf. But they told the BBC that contingency plans were in place to divert the vessels for war with Iraq if necessary. "At this point it is not heading for the Gulf. It could head for the Gulf," one said.

Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon attempted to head off criticism from several Labour MPs opposed to war against Iraq with his insistence that nothing had been decided, but when he was asked if the UK required the agreement of the United Nations Security Council to launch a military strike he replied: "We do not require the specific agreement of the Security Council.... It is always the prerogative of individual members of the Security Council to take such decisions."

According to military sources, a war is likely to be fought on two fronts—in the north and the south of Iraq. US and British special forces are already believed to be operating inside Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq across the Turkish border, where one invasion force is likely to assemble. In Turkey itself, a senior military official said this week that Ankara had deployed troops and engineers near its border with northern Iraq to prepare for any US-led attack on Baghdad. Local sources put the numbers involved at 10,000 to 15,000 troops.

US and British marines are also expected to land on Iraq's coastline from aircraft carriers in the Northern Arabian Gulf.

Up to 60,000 American soldiers have already assembled in Kuwait close to Iraq's border. Though described as being engaged in military training manoeuvres, US planes have hit Iraqi targets almost daily. US and British bombing of Iraq has now increased by 300 percent, prompting Iraqi Foreign Minister Najib Sabri to send a protest letter to the UN Security Council stating, "The barbaric bombing of Iraq's cities and villages has reached the level of an undeclared war." In the December 9 letter, he said fighter-bombers have violated Iraqi airspace 1,400 times in the past month.



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