

# One-quarter of British army sent for war vs. Iraq

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One-quarter of Britain's armed forces are being moved to the Gulf in preparation for war against Iraq, the Blair government announced Monday, January 20.

Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon told parliament that up to 31,000 military personnel, including 29,000 ground troops, are to be deployed to the region in the next weeks.

Although the government had previously made clear its intention to join a US-led war against Iraq, the scale of its military commitment far exceeds expectations, and is larger than that mobilised by the UK during the 1991 Gulf War. Some 8,000 UK personnel, part of a naval task force led by HMS Ark Royal, are already on their way to the region to join US forces.

The "deployment of forces on this scale is no ordinary measure," Hoon told MPs, but they would provide "the right group of forces for the sort of tasks that may be necessary."

The additional forces include the 7th Armoured Brigade (the Desert Rats), the 4th Armoured Brigade and the 1st (UK) Armoured Division headquarters, and paratroopers from the 16 Air Assault Brigade. These are to be stationed at bases in Turkey, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia, with the Royal Navy in the Gulf of Bahrain, and possibly Qatar. Some 120 Challenger tanks, made ready for desert conditions to the cost of £100 million, as well as 150 armoured personnel carriers, are also being readied for transportation.

The scale of the commitment is in line with demands from Britain's military leaders, many of whom had previously expressed misgivings over US war plans, fearing they would destabilise the entire Middle East. According to reports, Britain's military chiefs had insisted with the government that if they were to participate in such a venture alongside the US, a larger force was required, so as to ensure some degree of

independence and control over events.

Hoon cynically claimed that the deployment did not mean war was inevitable. It was simply aimed at "building up pressure" on Iraq, he declared. "A decision to employ force has not been taken, nor is such a decision imminent or inevitable," he said.

In reality the military buildup is a clear indication that Britain and the US are determined to go to war.

Plans for the military occupation of the country—which would be the largest since the takeover of Japan and Germany in 1945—are well advanced. The *Daily Mirror* reported that British military strategists have been told a full-scale invasion force must be in place by February 15. Military sources told the newspaper that the plan is to conduct 14 days of intensive air bombardment against the country, followed by a two-pronged attack by land and sea. From Kuwait a massive invasion force would "'ring fence' oil installations in the southern tip of Iraq and in the south west and north east. Once Basra is isolated and the oilfields secured, the US would push towards Baghdad," the *Mirror* said.

Such a scenario was given additional weight by the US announcement—just hours after Hoon's statement to parliament—that it was sending a further 37,000 personnel to the Gulf, in addition to the 150,000 it had previously committed. Already hundreds of warplanes and five nuclear-powered "super dreadnoughts," each more than 1,100 feet long and capable of carrying 70-plus aircraft and more than 10,000 marines, are in the region.

There is a flagrantly provocative character to the US/UK announcements, which came just days before United Nations weapons inspectors are due to make their first report on Iraq's alleged "weapons of mass destruction" on January 27. Chief UN weapons

inspector Hans Blix has said previously that the team requires more time to complete its investigations and has admitted that it has found no evidence that Iraq is stockpiling weapons.

But the US has made it clear that no extra time will be forthcoming, and that a “smoking gun” is not required to justify attacking Iraq. Such statements, coupled with the scale and speed of the military buildup now underway in the Gulf, have raised fears in European capitals that America intends to use the January 27 deadline to trigger war, and present other countries with a *fait accompli*.

Certainly the announcement of extra troops came just hours after a meeting of the United Nations Security Council had exposed sharp differences amongst its members over the future course of action, with Germany and France making clear their opposition to any military assault on Iraq not explicitly sanctioned by the UN.

Germany’s Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer told the meeting that his government could not support military action taken without UN approval because, “in addition to disastrous consequences for long-term regional stability, we also fear possible negative repercussions for the joint fight against... murderous terrorism.”

French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin indicated that France would use its veto on the Security Council to block any military action whilst UN weapons inspectors continued their investigation of Iraq’s military capabilities. “We believe that, today, nothing justifies military action,” de Villepin stated.

Their concerns were dismissed by Colin Powell, US Secretary of State, who told the meeting that the UN must not be scared into “impotence” and abdicate its responsibility “to disarm” Iraq. He was backed by British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, who argued that the US/UK had all the authorisation required for a military attack—pointing to paragraph 13 of the Security Council’s Resolution 1441, passed in November 2002, which stipulates that Iraq faces “serious consequences” if it is considered to have breached UN resolutions.

For the past months Prime Minister Tony Blair has sought to portray himself as a mediator between Europe and America over preparations for war against Iraq—keeping the former on line, and the latter in check. With the Bush administration making clear it will not be subject to any form of international control,

however, and that it will go to war in the near future regardless of the consequences, he has decided to jump aboard the US juggernaut.

It is a high-risk gamble. Whilst the prime minister has the support of the Conservative opposition and much of the media, his war mongering is at odds with the vast majority of the British population—81 percent of whom are opposed to a unilateral attack on Iraq. War, especially one taken in defiance of UN protocol, will immediately expose just how isolated Blair really is.

At the same time, the government is involved in a confrontation with the country’s 50,000 plus firefighters, who embarked on their third strike on Monday. The 24-hour strike is to be followed by two further 48-hour stoppages on January 28 and February 1 in pursuit of the firefighters demand for a pay rise to bring their salaries up to £30,000 per annum.

Blair has dismissed the pay claim and insisted that any wage rise is dependent on thousands of job cuts and the closure of stations. But with 19,000 soldiers being used to provide emergency fire cover during the strike, the Conservatives, the media and sections of the military are demanding that Blair outlaw the dispute and utilize police to break picket lines.

Whatever the exact course of events, the Blair government has committed itself to fighting a war on two fronts—against the Iraqi people overseas and the working class at home.



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