US military chief admits American troops already in Iraq

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Even as the Bush administration embarks on the final act in the diplomatic charade within the United Nations Security Council, it has already launched military action on Iraqi territory.

The Pentagon admitted last week that American ground troops are now operating in the north of the country, while US and British warplanes have dramatically intensified their bombing campaign against both military and civilian targets, principally in the south.

Air Force General Richard Meyers, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, confirmed press reports that US soldiers have been deployed inside Iraq, while refusing to provide any details on how many are in the country or where they are operating. Other top Pentagon officials said that the deployment involves Special Operations troops who are working in conjunction with CIA contingents in Kurdish regions in the north of Iraq.

US forces are reportedly crossing the border into Iraq from both Turkey and Jordan, whose armies are covertly collaborating with Washington. Meanwhile, representatives of the US-sponsored Iraqi opposition have reported that US military cargo planes are using an 8,500-foot-long runway near the town of Irbil in northeastern Iraq.

The preliminary buildup in this region is in large measure driven by a key strategic aim of the coming war—the seizure of Iraq's oil resources. The oil wells around the Kurdish city of Kirkuk are presently pumping a million barrels a day, and proven reserves in the area amount to more than 10 billion barrels. US military action would likely begin with a drive by Special Forces troops to ensure that Washington winds up in possession of this rich prize and preventing the Iraqi regime from blowing up the fields.

The CIA and Pentagon are also concerned about potential attempts by Kurdish separatists or even Turkey to seize the oil wells for themselves. The Turkish military has repeatedly deployed troops inside Iraq as part of its protracted war of repression against its own Kurdish population.

The Pentagon has also changed the rules of engagement for pilots flying in the so-called "no-fly" zones that Washington and London unilaterally enforce over southern and northern Iraq. Last month alone, US and British warplanes bombed at least three dozen targets, most of them in the southeast of the country.

Ostensibly imposed as a "humanitarian" operation aimed to defend the Shi'ite population in the south and the Kurdish minority in the north, the no-fly zones are sanctioned by no UN mandate and have been used to wage a low-level air war against Iraq, while training US and British pilots for a full-scale invasion. Notwithstanding the humanitarian pretext for the bombings in the "no-fly" zones, US and British warplanes have ceased their flights in the north whenever the Turkish military decided to carry out its own bombing raids against Kurdish villages.

The Pentagon has claimed that its attacks in the no-fly zones are in response to anti-aircraft fire or Iraqi radar having locked onto US warplanes. But the US military is now using each such incident as the pretext for bombing as many as eight separate targets, most of which are in no way connected to the alleged threats to US and British aircraft. Pilots are supplied with the coordinates of pre-determined targets for each sortie.

The clear intent of these bombing raids is to wipe out all Iraqi air defenses within the main corridor that US troops will use in a push across the Kuwaiti border towards Baghdad. This would clear the way not only for unfettered US bombing, but also the use of

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helicopters and transport planes to bring in troops and supplies.

In a number of cases, bombs supposedly aimed at radar installations or anti-aircraft positions have fallen on heavily populated areas, resulting in the killing and wounding of Iraqi civilians. The Western media barely bothers to report these deaths, which now occur almost every other day.

In one such incident last December 1, missiles slammed into a building housing the state-owned Southern Oil Company in the densely populated city of Basra, killing four office workers and passersby and wounding 27 others. On December 26, bombs again struck civilian targets—including a mosque—in southern Iraq, killing three people and wounding 16.

Iraq has reported over 1,400 civilians killed by US and British attacks over the past 10 years. While Washington has dismissed virtually every report of civilian casualties, the UN's own statistics indicate that close to 400 have died in bombings carried out over the past four years alone.

These attacks, which kill and maim men, women and children and destroy the basic infrastructure of an already war-ravaged country, are only a foretaste of the "overwhelming firepower" that the Pentagon promises to unleash against Iraq. Plans leaked by the Pentagon promise that a firestorm of some 800 cruise missiles will rain down on Baghdad, a city of nearly 5 million people, in the first 48 hours of the US war. In all, the US plans to unleash some 3,000 precision-guided bombs and missiles against the country in the first two days of the military assault.

As unprovoked acts of aggression against an essentially defenseless population, the deployment of troops in northern Iraq and the no-fly zone bombings—not to mention the slaughter yet to come—constitute war crimes according to the provisions of the United Nations Charter and long-standing tenets of international law.

In both legal and moral terms, these actions are comparable to Italy's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 or Japanese imperialism's rape of China during the same period. Behind all of the lies about "weapons of mass destruction" and Baghdad sponsorship of terrorism, the motivation is likewise similar—the attempt to overcome systemic economic and social crises at home by means of aggressive war against a weak and oppressed nation.

Yet it is the governments of Bush and Blair, those responsible for this aggression, that will be going to the UN Security Council this week as Iraq's accusers, posing as the defenders of "peace." The claims by both governments to be driven by concern for the inviolability of UN resolutions and international law reek with hypocrisy.

The buildup to war has exposed the UN itself as a pliant tool of imperialism. It is institutionally incapable of indicting Washington and London for war crimes; such treatment is reserved only for small, impoverished countries. At the most, it will provide a public charade behind which the five permanent members of the Security Council thrash out the terms of a sordid bargain: a second resolution authorizing full-scale war in return for a share in the carve-up of Iraq's oil wealth.

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