

Bush administration accelerates US military buildup against Iraq

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Having declared that he is undeterred by the size of the global protests against his planned assault on Iraq, US President George W. Bush is proceeding with frenzied military preparations. While Bush cynically continues to insist that no decision has been taken to invade Iraq, and that military attack is a “last resort,” US and British troops are massing in Kuwait at breakneck speed.

Behind the diplomatic maneuvers and bullying at the UN, the massive buildup indicates that the White House’s timing is driven primarily by military considerations. From all indications, the invasion strike force will be ready within two weeks, the same deadline that the White House has given the UN Security Council for the passage of a resolution legitimizing the assault.

According to Pentagon officials, an accelerating deployment has put some 150,000 American forces in the Persian Gulf region, with the number expected to exceed 200,000 by early March. Military officials have previously stated that up to 250,000 personnel will be involved in the attack.

This week, 60 wide-body aircraft have landed in Kuwait every 24 hours carrying personnel and equipment to the war theater. Other troops arrived on commercial passenger planes leased by the military to handle the mass ferrying. Lieutenant General David D. McKiernan, who commands the US and British land forces in Kuwait, told CNN Tuesday that 100,000 US troops had landed in Kuwait and were ready to launch the attack whenever ordered.

A seven-ship Navy fleet was due to arrive in the Gulf this week carrying about 7,000 Marines from the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. A similar size group of California-based Marines is en route aboard seven other ships.

Since last December 24, the Pentagon has ordered at least 125,000 US forces to the region, joining approximately 60,000 servicemen previously stationed there. More than 150,000 National Guard and Reserve members have also been called to active duty, up from 58,000 just a month ago. Under an order signed by Bush three days after the 2001

terror attacks in New York and Washington, up to one million guard and reserve troops can be called to serve for up to two years.

Two key components of the US ground force, the 101st Airborne and 4th Infantry Division, will arrive in Kuwait by early March, although defense officials in Washington have hinted that military operations could begin with a “rolling start” before the force is fully assembled.

Some 31,000 British military personnel—one-quarter of the country’s entire armed forces—have also begun to pour into Kuwait. Together with about 2,000 Australians, they are the only other troops to join the US invasion force.

Offshore, three aircraft carriers bristling with missiles and jets are now within range of Iraq—the USS Harry S. Truman in the Mediterranean Sea and the USS Abraham Lincoln and the USS Constellation in the Persian Gulf or Arabian Sea. A fourth, the USS Theodore Roosevelt, will soon arrive and the Pentagon has dispatched the USS Kitty Hawk from its station in Japan and the USS Nimitz from San Diego. A seventh carrier, the USS George Washington, is likely to sail from Norfolk, Virginia.

Overhead, a network of spy satellites has been assembled at 400 miles in space, to back up Global Hawk reconnaissance drones that will loiter at 65,000 feet, manned JSTARS aircraft with moving-target radar at 40,000 feet and Predator drones with video, infrared and radar sensors at 20,000 feet.

With the northern half of Kuwait now occupied by US and British troops, the Kuwaiti regime last week ruled the entire region off limits to civilians and shut down two northern oilfields in readiness for hostilities. This week the government of Crown Prince Saad al-Abdallah al-Salim Al Sabah raised its military alert level from Level 2 to Level 4, one step below maximum.

Troops from the other Western-backed semi-feudal dictatorships in the Gulf began to arrive this week to bolster the Kuwaiti regime internally during the war. Contingents from the United Arab Emirates landed at Ali Al Salem air base as part of the “Peninsula Shield Force” formed by the

six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council, which also includes Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman.

In reality, for all the diplomatic role-playing at the UN, the war has been under way for months. US warplanes are bombing Iraqi installations almost every day, and Special Forces commandos and CIA officers are operating inside Iraq. Administration officials have confirmed that in the past several days additional US troops have crossed the border into northern Iraq. They joined a group already there that was acknowledged several weeks ago by General Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

US forces have set up bases in Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq in order to secure control over the region's crucial oilfields as soon as the main assault is launched. Proven oil reserves in the area total more than 10 billion barrels—a rich prize that Washington is determined to seize. These operations are a direct violation of the UN resolution passed last November, which prohibits infringements on Iraq's national sovereignty. This is the same Resolution 1441 the US is invoking to justify its war drive.

Bush Tuesday revealed his determination to overcome one final obstacle—the Turkish government's refusal to give the final go-ahead for Turkish bases to be used for a ground assault on Iraq from the north. Turkey's Prime Minister Abdullah Gul Monday delayed a parliamentary vote on the use of the bases, declaring that no approval would be granted without a second UN resolution.

Facing overwhelming popular opposition to its decision to allow the country to become a staging ground for the war, the Turkish government is holding out for a larger aid package than the \$6 billion in grants and \$15-20 billion in loan guarantees offered by Bush. The postponement came after the weekend's worldwide antiwar protests, followed by demonstrations at the US Embassy in Ankara and outside the headquarters of Gul's Justice and Development party.

In true gangster style, Bush administration officials told the *New York Times* that “Turkey cannot afford to turn them down, and that Turkey's leaders will ultimately understand that.” Bush himself declared that Turkey had “no better friend than the American government.”

Other factors are propelling the timing of the assault. Pentagon officials have acknowledged that any delay beyond mid-March could begin to expose US personnel and equipment to sweltering heat. By summer, troops will face temperatures exceeding 40 degrees Centigrade and blinding sandstorms. The extreme conditions could affect the high-tech weaponry that the White House is counting on for a swift victory.

US forces will have vast superiority in firepower and resources. Iraq's military equipment—its tanks, artillery and air force—has declined by more than half since the 1991 Gulf

War and has become worn out or obsolete after a decade of UN sanctions on spare parts. American and British jets patrolling the so-called no-fly zones over northern and southern Iraq have knocked out many of Iraq's air defenses.

But some media outlets have reported that US officials are concerned that any prolonged wait or protracted war could severely undermine military morale and further turn public opinion against the war, particularly if casualties are suffered. There is also the question of performance of the troops in a more drawn-out conflict. In some front-line units as many as three quarters of the rank-and-file soldiers are only 18 or 19 years old, and have no experience of actual combat.

According to Associated Press: “With 250,000 service members overseas even before the massive buildup began in the Persian Gulf region for a possible war with Iraq, the strains of a soaring ‘operations tempo’ are starting to show across their military—on the men and women who fill out its ranks, on their families, and on the machines they operate...”

“The Pentagon has relied on tens of thousands of reservists to prosecute the war on terrorism, conduct new homeland security missions in the United States and, now, prepare for war with Iraq... A surge of patriotism has kept morale, recruiting and retention high since the attacks on New York and Washington. But defense officials fear that the open-ended nature of the war on terrorism and a possible lengthy occupation of Iraq could deplete the ranks of the all-volunteer active-duty force and break the reserve system.”

These concerns are among the reasons that the invasion will begin with a brutal show of force—48 hours of massive air bombardment during which 3,000 precision bombs and missiles will be unleashed by air force and navy jets, each carrying 16 one-ton, satellite-guided bombs, as well as B-1 stealth bombers. The Bush administration is quite prepared to kill tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians, as well as poorly-armed soldiers, in the hope of achieving a rapid victory. The stated aim of this “shock and awe” strategy is to terrorize the Iraqi people with the same horror as the atom bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.



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