

British troops lay siege to Basra

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Amid a welter of media reports, rumour and speculation about a possible anti-Hussein “uprising” in the southern Iraq city of Basra, simple facts have been conveniently buried. A large force of mainly British troops has surrounded and laid siege to the city of 1.3 million people, most of whom now have no electricity and clean water, and is responsible for creating a humanitarian crisis, potentially of huge proportions.

The Wafa al-Qaed water treatment plant, which supplies over 60 percent of the city’s water, was put out of action last Friday during the attacks by British and US warplanes. Bombing knocked out high-tension cables, cutting the city’s power supplies and shutting down pumping and treatment facilities at the plant.

On Tuesday, engineers from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and local city technicians managed to start up three of the plant’s six back-up generators but clean water is only available to about half the population. Moreover, the generators are a stopgap measure.

ICRC spokeswoman Antonella Notari stated: “There are reports of people drinking river water that has sewage flowing in it. That is an alarming sign. For the children, the elderly and the more vulnerable, it could be serious.” She pointed out that the water available from the city’s other treatment plants was of poor quality.

The World Health Organisation warned that the lack of clean water could rapidly lead to outbreak of respiratory infections, diarrheal diseases and measles, which are already major killers of young children in Iraq. The UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) estimated that up to 100,000 children under the age of five were at immediate risk of severe disease from unsafe water.

As the military blockade continues, other essential supplies, including food, will begin to run out. Like the rest of the Iraqi population, Basra residents were heavily dependent on supplies provided under the

UN’s limited oil-for-food program, which was suspended on March 18. US and British officials, of course, deny any intention of starving Basra into submission but the logic of the siege is obvious: allied propaganda blared out through loudspeakers and dropped in leaflets promising abundant food and assistance—once the city falls.

Within that context, reports of an uprising in Basra on Tuesday have to be treated with considerable scepticism. The efforts of US and British officials to portray the city as being on the brink of revolt, held in check only by fear and terror inspired by pro-Hussein militia, are a cynical attempt to justify their own actions. Lurid stories about pro-Hussein militia using mortars and artillery against the rebels are being used as the pretext for artillery barrages on civilian areas and the bombing of buildings, including the Ba’ath Party headquarters, in the crowded city centre.

That is not to say that widespread opposition among the predominantly Shiite population of Basra does not exist. But as many media pundits have now been compelled to admit, hostility to Hussein does not necessarily translate into support for a US occupation of Iraq. Among the Shiites there are bitter memories of Washington’s duplicity in 1991, when the US encouraged a rebellion against the Hussein regime with promises of support and then abandoned the rebels to their fate. Thousands were killed in reprisal as the Iraqi army regained controlled.

Moreover, there is no reason why the citizens of Basra should welcome as “liberators” those who have imposed a debilitating economic embargo for over a decade and, under the guise of enforcing the southern “no-fly zone,” have repeatedly bombed targets in or near the city. Even the Shiite organisation with the closest links to Washington—the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)—has warned that US forces will be welcome in Iraq only to get rid of

Hussein. “Iraqis will resist if they seek to occupy or colonise our country,” SCIRI leader Mohammed Baqir al-Halim told the press.

After nearly a week, the population of Basra has not welcomed the British troops with cheering and flowers. The US and British have now declared the city “a military objective” indicating that they no longer believe it will fall of its own accord.

Claims that the population is simply being suppressed by pro-Hussein militia appear to be highly exaggerated. The exact number of defenders varies from report to report, but a figure of around 1,000 Fedayeen militia backed by other regular soldiers and irregular fighters is commonly referred to. It is implausible that a force of this size could maintain control of the city and hold British troops at bay without considerable local support.

The British military have been actively encouraging a rebellion. According to several media reports, US and British intelligence agents have been inside the city for several weeks working to provoke a revolt. Propaganda to the same effect has reached residents via radio, loudspeakers and leaflets. Attempts have been made to “decapitate” Hussein’s apparatus in Basra: British troops seized a senior Ba’ath official and killed 20 bodyguards in a “snatch operation” in the Basra suburb of Az-Zubayr on Tuesday.

So it is not surprising that British spokesmen latched onto any news of anti-Hussein resistance in the city. The reports, however, have all been sketchy, conditional and heavily laced with propaganda. Major General Peter Wall told reporters the apparent uprising “could be the beginning of something important” but provided no details. Other accounts claimed that the “uprising” was provoked by an announcement that a prominent Shiite leader was to be executed.

No British troops were sent into the city. Underscoring the uncertainty, a senior officer told the *Telegraph* newspaper: “It’s no way a situation we can control and anything can happen. It’s highly dangerous in there. We would have to be damn sure things were safe before sending the British military into what could be a nightmare scenario.” The lack of information did not stop Blair, senior US officials and the share markets from seizing on the news as a positive sign in an otherwise bleak picture.

But the uprising, if it ever occurred, appears to have

rapidly evaporated. Senior Iraqi officials denied any revolt had taken place. A SCIRI spokesman in Tehran, Abu Islam, told the media on Wednesday: “No, there is no uprising. Some disturbances took place last night in different parts of Basra, but it is not widespread and it was not an intifada. The people chanted slogans against Saddam.”

The Qatar-based Al-Jazeera television station showed pictures of Basra residents quietly queuing up for gas bottles. According to the station’s reporter, one of the few journalists inside Basra: “There are no indications in the city that people rose up against the regime, and a state of calm prevails in the city.”

Reports of the uprising were greeted with ambivalence in the White House. US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld declared: “I am very careful about encouraging people to rise up. We know there are people in those cities ready to shoot them.” Rumsfeld’s concern, however, is not for the wellbeing of Iraqis but with the political implications of such a revolt.

It may be expedient for the US military in the short-term to encourage a rebellion in Basra and other cities so as to avoid the high risks of street-to-street fighting. But an insurgent population, and moreover one that is potentially extremely hostile to the US military presence, would threaten the Bush administration’s aims in Iraq—the establishment of a neo-colonial regime in Baghdad.



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