

US, Britain intensify air strikes against Iraq

Hundreds of daily sorties in run-up to invasion

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Whatever the outcome of the Bush administration's bribery and arm-twisting of United Nations Security Council members, the war against Iraq is well underway. In the so-called "no-fly" zones, US and British jets are now conducting up to 1,000 sorties a day. This is approximately the same number of combat flights as in the opening days of the 1991 Gulf War.

In the latest attack Sunday, war planes bombed five underground communication sites near An Numinayah, approximately 100 kilometres southeast of Baghdad, according to the US Central Command. It was the fourth successive day of bombing in southern and western Iraq, the main directions from which ground troops will invade.

Without waiting for a new war resolution to be approved by the Security Council, the two allies are themselves flagrantly violating the UN Charter, launching an air war to pave the way for an all-out assault within days. There is barely any pretense that the stepped-up bombing is limited to enforcing the no-fly zones in the north and south of the country, which were, in any event, declared by the US, Britain and France in the aftermath of the 1991 war without the benefit of UN sanction.

Iraq has condemned the bombing as the opening of an illegal war of aggression, but its protests have fallen on deaf ears at the UN.

More than 400 US and British planes are now operating from about 30 locations in the Persian Gulf and elsewhere, systematically destroying Iraq's air defenses and, more recently, surface-to-surface missiles. In the past month, US pilots have struck from seven to fourteen targets a week. The commander of US air forces in the Gulf region, Lieutenant General Michael Moseley, boasted Sunday that several months of air strikes had eliminated all fixed air defense

positions in southern Iraq.

The number of civilian casualties is rising. The Iraqi news agency INA last week reported that six civilians were killed and 15 injured in attacks on military and civilian facilities in southern Basra province. On at least two other occasions, INA said allied forces had targeted civilian infrastructure.

Official spokesmen in both Washington and London have claimed, for the record, that the warplanes are firing on Iraqi positions only in "self-defense." British Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon told Parliament that the British aircraft were acting "in accordance with international law."

But US Air Force General Richard B. Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, last Friday confirmed that coalition planes had been authorised to attack any Iraqi facilities considered a threat to the tens of thousands of ground forces now amassed along Iraq's borders. Iraqi surface-to-surface missile batteries had been hit because they were within range of US troops. "They become a threat to our forces, absolutely, because they are new deployments," Myers said.

The sheer scale of the air blitz makes a mockery of the US and British claim that they are retaliating against increased Iraqi fire. The number of allied sorties has quadrupled in recent weeks, escalating an offensive that began as long ago as last September, when US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld disclosed that he had directed commanders to widen their targets.

Rumsfeld specified that in addition to Iraqi radar and missile systems, the attacks should focus on air defense communications centers, command posts and cable relay stations in order to eliminate the entire air defense network in the southern zone.

A wider range of strikes has also commenced in recent weeks across the northern zone, where US and

British planes fly out of Turkish bases. Recent targets have included military communications sites. For some months, a narrower range of targets was maintained in the north because of the Turkish government's political difficulties in the face of overwhelming popular opposition to its involvement in the military campaign.

Over recent days the air strikes have extended to western Iraq. Last week, US aircraft launched two raids on mobile Iraqi surface-to-air missile batteries defending the H-3 airbase in western Iraq. Pentagon spokesmen described the air strikes as "routine" enforcement of the southern zone, but the attacks were far from the Shiite population of southeastern Iraq, the supposed beneficiary of the zone.

Media commentators have noted that the western attacks are designed to clear a path for forces to invade from a string of covert bases in Jordan and Saudi Arabia, where troops have been assembled since Turkey's parliament last week blocked the movement of 65,000 US troops through Turkey to open a northern front.

News of the preparations along the western front have emerged despite efforts by the regimes in both Jordan and Saudi Arabia to cover-up the scale of the troop mobilization on their countries' soil because of the depth of popular opposition to their participation in the war.

In addition to the air war, it is an open secret that several thousand American, British and Australian special forces are roaming northern, southern and western Iraq, conducting operations which the British *Telegraph* newspaper Monday described as unprecedented in scale.

Quoting defence sources, the *Telegraph* said two British SAS Sabre squadrons—about 240 men—plus more than 100 support troops were engaged in various parts of Iraq. The joint special operations were said to involve more than 4,000 American and Australian special forces with headquarters in Qatar and bases in Jordan, Kuwait and Turkey.

These forces were reported to be forging alliances with local militias, repeating a tactic employed in Afghanistan. They are also monitoring Iraqi oilfields west of Baghdad and in the north, a further indication of one of the central aims of the war—the seizure of Iraq's oil wealth.

These ground operations were launched long before

the US and Britain began their efforts to secure a specific UN mandate for war. In its latest edition, *Time* magazine reports that US special forces have been operating inside Iraq for at least a month. "We're on the offensive," a senior Western diplomat in neighbouring Kuwait was quoted as saying. "We're in there. This war starts on our terms."

There are many signs that the full-scale military operation will commence within a week, irrespective of the maneuvers in the Security Council. According to various reports, some 300,000 troops are positioned around Iraq, considerably more than the 250,000 that the Pentagon originally set as necessary for the onslaught.

Key US units, the 101st Airborne and units from the 82nd Airborne, are said to be fully prepared for battle, following some delays. These units are the US Army's traditional first response. The British armed forces chief, General Sir Michael Jackson, said Saturday that his country's troops in Kuwait would be ready in four to five days.

UN observers have reported a growing number of violations committed by the US in the UN demilitarized zone along the Iraq-Kuwait border in recent weeks, four of them in the past week alone. "This is a pattern that has been increasing," said Daljeet Bagga, a spokesman for the UN border monitoring mission. "Almost every second day, we see a US vehicle inside the demilitarized zone. We pointed out to them that they aren't supposed to be there, since it's a DMZ."

Confronted by these violations, the UN is withdrawing more than 300 of its observers from the border. The withdrawal sums up the real relations behind the horse-trading at the UN. While the US and British governments would prefer to secure a victory in the Security Council to offset widespread domestic and global opposition to their planned invasion, they are hell-bent on war, regardless of any vote.



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