

Britain: Blair government announces near doubling of budget for war vs. Iraq

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Iraqi resistance to the US/UK invasion of their country has forced Britain's Chancellor of the Exchequer to almost double the amount he had set aside to pay for the war.

With his budget due on April 7, Chancellor Gordon Brown had originally set aside £1.75 billion to finance the UK's 45,000-strong military commitment in Iraq. Just days into the invasion, however, he announced last week that he was allocating an additional £1.25 billion—taking the Blair government's war budget to a total of £3 billion so far.

With the prospect of the final bill being even greater, the chancellor made clear that the government is prepared to pay as much as necessary to ensure a US/UK victory.

Several economists have pointed out that recent developments, which have seen far greater Iraqi resistance to US/UK forces than predicted, makes such a pledge look like a willingness to throw money into a bottomless pit.

They have suggested that the war will actually cost Britain £5 billion but this is based on the assumption that it will be over within four to six weeks. With some political and military figures suggesting it could go on well into the summer, others are now saying British costs could run as high as £10 billion.

Given that total public spending this year is £420 billion, this is still a relatively small amount. And it pales alongside the \$US76 billion (£50 billion) allocated by the US to the war. Just \$500 million of President George W. Bush's budget is for humanitarian aid. Military operations and munitions account for more than \$50 billion—not surprising given that more than 6,000 bombs have been dropped on Iraq. The price tag for one daisy cutter, for example, is estimated at £19,000 each and the GBU-28 Bunker Buster bombs

£66,000 each. A B-2 Stealth Bomber costs \$2.2 billion.

Neither the US nor the UK budgets include the costs involved after the war, and it is here that Brown's open-ended pledge is causing most concern.

Already it has been made clear that Britain will have to make a long-term commitment to “enforcing” the peace. The US intends a colonial-style takeover of the country. Hostility to imperialist occupation, coupled with mounting anger at the brutal bombardment and massacre of Iraqi civilians, will ensure continuing popular opposition.

Estimates of the price of maintaining enough troops to control the country are being worked out—keeping 10,000 “peacekeepers” in Bosnia and Kosovo costs £1.6 billion annually, for example.

Moreover, the £3 billion set aside so far is based on the costs to Britain of its participation in the 1991 Gulf War, when it intervened with similar numbers of soldiers and armour. But then much of the final bill of the war was picked up by the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Germany and Japan.

True to form, only a tiny portion of the Chancellor's budget for Iraq is given over to humanitarian aid. So far Brown has allocated an extra £120 million for the Department for International Development to use for emergency humanitarian aid work, a paltry sum considering the huge tasks facing the Iraqi people given that the infrastructure of their cities has been destroyed.

In an article titled “War bill could feed the world” the *Observer* opined: “The White House puts the cost of a single cruise missile at \$800,000. The opening blitz of 320 of them launched at Baghdad cost \$256 million. The price of just two of these missiles would build an entire new village for the charity SOS Children's Villages or feed 270,000 hungry people in Angola for a month.”

The real price of the war goes far beyond immediate military spending. In the first instance, Prime Minister Tony Blair has made clear that UK involvement in the war against Iraq is just part of an aggressive attempt to reassert the interests of British imperialism more widely.

That means, that after 15 years of almost continuous cuts, military spending will have to rise dramatically from its current level of 2.2 percent.

In addition, the British economy is extremely fragile. Last November, the International Monetary Fund had criticised the government's economic forecasts as over-optimistic, and called for some £8 billion to be saved, either through tax hikes or spending cuts.

Rupert Murdoch's right-wing *Sun* tabloid, one of the most belligerent supporters of the war on Iraq, has already spelt out for Blair that his government should not attempt to recoup the money by raising taxes. It wants the government to follow the Bush administration's example and cut them instead.

Even before the war begun, Brown had introduced a string of tax rises carefully targeted against working families, rather than big business and the rich. As the *Scotland on Sunday* newspaper put it, "millions of households will soon be facing an Operation Shock and Awe of their own next month: increases in National Insurance contributions, higher council tax bills and the non-indexation of personal allowances."

Up to now, popular opposition to the war has naturally taken the form of moral indignation against the ruthless destruction of the country and the slaughter of innocent civilians. But connections have also been made between the military onslaught and the attacks on the living conditions of the population "at home". The money used to wage war would be better placed investing in Britain's crumbling infrastructure like the railway or the health service, people have said.

Such demands will intensify as the government attempts to place the financial burden of its neo-colonial policy onto the backs of working people, by making increased inroads against living standards and essential services such as health and education.



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