

Faced with growing resistance

US prepares military repression in Iraq

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Backing off from earlier promises to quickly scale back the US military force presently occupying Iraq, the Pentagon has announced that it will instead increase the number of troops deployed in the country and indefinitely postpone the scheduled departure of key combat units.

The decision was taken in the face of mounting Iraqi guerrilla attacks on US forces that have claimed the lives of as many as a dozen American soldiers over the past week and left dozens more wounded. In response, the Pentagon is preparing a military campaign aimed at suppressing resistance to the US occupation.

US military commanders have blamed the mounting wave of attacks on what it claims are “holdouts” from the Saddam Hussein regime, thereby setting the stage for a ruthless crackdown. Independent observers inside the country, however, have reported broad popular support for the resistance and link it to intensifying anger over the disintegration of Iraqi society in the wake of the illegal US invasion.

“The war has not ended,” Lt. Gen. David McKiernan, the commander of US-British forces, said at a press conference in Baghdad Thursday. “Decisive combat operations against military formations have ended, but these contacts we’re having right now are in a combat zone, and it is war, and they are members of (Hussein’s) regime that must be removed.”

On the day that the US commander spoke, another US soldier was killed, this time by a rocket-propelled grenade fired at a convoy traversing one of the main US supply routes.

McKiernan announced that the Army’s Third Infantry Division, which had been scheduled to return to the United States in June, would remain in Iraq indefinitely. “If we need to apply some of the combat power of the Third Infantry Division elsewhere in Iraq, we will certainly not hesitate to do that,” the US commander said.

He indicated that the combat unit, which played the lead role in the murderous race to Baghdad, will likely be sent to Fallujah, 45 miles west of the Iraqi capital, where US occupation forces have faced growing resistance. Two US soldiers were killed and nine others wounded there early Tuesday, when Iraqis opened fire on a US checkpoint. The city of more than a quarter million people has been seething since American troops gunned down demonstrators protesting the commandeering of a local school for a military headquarters. At least 18 unarmed civilians were killed in a pair of back-to-back protests last month.

During the attack on Tuesday, a helicopter brought in to evacuate the wounded was badly damaged. The army claimed that this was the result of an accident, but the Al Jazeera television network interviewed witnesses who said that the aircraft was shot down by the attackers.

In two incidents the day before, two US soldiers were killed and four wounded in attacks in Baghdad and north of the city. And on Sunday a soldier died when the Humvee in which he was traveling was hit by an explosive placed along the highway. Two US military policemen were badly wounded on Tuesday when the Iraqi police station they were manning was struck by a rocket-propelled grenade.

Al Jazeera, meanwhile, reported that four American soldiers were killed

when gunmen shot down a helicopter in Al Anbar province. The Pentagon has denied the report.

A full month after President Bush strutted onto the deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln in a navy flight suit to announce that “major combat operations in Iraq have ended,” and proclaim the US military’s “mission accomplished,” there are growing indications that the US is on the brink of a ferocious colonial-style war in Iraq.

Last month, the Pentagon outlined a plan for a rapid scaling back of the US military presence, reducing it to 70,000 troops by September. It now appears that at least three times that many US soldiers will be kept in the region for the foreseeable future. At least 160,000 US and British troops are now deployed in Iraq, with another 90,000 support troops operating out of Kuwait and Qatar.

Reports from Iraq indicate broad popular support for the acts of resistance against US occupation forces. The *Washington Post* quoted the leader of the local mosque in Fajullah praising the attack there and predicting more such acts. “We’re all with the resistance against the occupation,” said the religious leader. “The Americans are occupiers. Occupiers cannot come and provide people with happiness and freedom.”

Similarly, a report by the *Post*’s Scott Wilson cited the case of Eman Mutlag Salih, a young woman shot dead by US troops Sunday after she attempted to throw a grenade into a US military command post in Baquba, a city of half a million people 30 miles northeast of Baghdad.

Wilson writes that “rising frustration among millions of Iraqis over the US occupation is beginning to produce the desperate foot soldiers of resistance like Salih, who left her father a brief letter the day she died that bluntly stated her intention: ‘I will be martyred for the sake of Islam.’” The report states that Salih has been hailed as a heroine by the city’s inhabitants, who are chaffing under an occupation that has left them without jobs, incomes, food, electrical power or clean water.

These desperate conditions characterize the entire country in the wake of the US war. Rory McCarthy of the British *Guardian* cites the desperate plight the 40,000 inhabitants of Khalis, a provincial capital some 50 miles north of Baghdad. At the local hospital, he writes, “doctors are now seeing 200 new patients daily, all suffering from severe diarrhea.... In addition, each day they see at least seven new typhoid patients.” The hospital, he reports, has run out of essential supplies, including oxygen and antibiotics. Other medicine stocks are expected to run out next week, and supplies of diesel fuel needed to run the hospital’s generators are dwindling. Doctors have not seen a paycheck in over three months.

The city’s sewage treatment plant was bombed during the US invasion and looted afterwards, McCarthy reports. While patched together since, it cannot operate because there is only an hour of electric power each day. The result is sewage contaminating the local water supply and a hospital filled with sick infants and children.

“If Khalis is anything like the hundreds of other small towns and villages across the country, then postwar Iraq is already in a far deeper crisis than its military occupiers will ever admit,” writes McCarthy.

In a report published on Tuesday, the *Guardian* quoted Nations top humanitarian official in Iraq accusing the US occupation authority of attempting to “force through an ideological process” in Iraq. Ramiro Lopes da Silva, who was named the UN’s humanitarian coordinator in Iraq last year, characterized the first several weeks of the occupation as consisting of “talk about grandiose plans and a lot of promises, but there were no decisions.”

Since the shakeup in the authority earlier this month and the installation of former counterterrorism official L. Paul Bremer as the US proconsul in Baghdad, decisions have been taken, but Lopes da Silva said the UN “disagreed” with many of them.

In particular, he cited the decree disbanding the Iraqi army, with no provisions made for reintegrating hundreds of former soldiers into civil society. “The way the decision was taken leaves them in a vacuum,” the UN official said. “Our concern is that if there is nothing for them out there soon this will be a potential source of additional destabilization.”

Sitting in Saddam Hussein’s former Republican Palace in Baghdad, Bremer has issued other decrees, including the banning of former members of the ruling Ba’ath party from serving in any new government, effectively barring some 30,000 senior and mid-level managers from returning to their jobs. He has also ordered the disarming of Iraqi citizens, a move that has evoked intense popular opposition. US soldiers conducted a house-to-house sweep of western Baghdad in a search for weapons earlier this week.

The “ideological” bent perceived by the UN official is that of the right-wing Republican administration in Washington. It consists essentially of the conviction that America’s military might must be used to seize control of vital resources and achieve geopolitical advantage over American capitalism’s principal rivals in order to defend the interests of a corrupt and predatory ruling elite. All of the neo-liberal nostrums about the benefits of the “free market” are being applied to Iraq to this end.

Thus, the declaration founding the Office of the Coalition Provisional Authority, the colonial regime now ruling the country, states in its preamble that it “will help alleviate dependence on humanitarian assistance” and “assist in the rejuvenation of a broad-based Iraqi economy.” In plain words, this translates into “liberating” Iraqis from the state food rations upon which 60 percent of them have depended for survival. It also means privatizing the extensive Iraqi state sector to the benefit of US-based corporations and speculators and at the expense of hundreds of thousands of state employees who will lose their jobs.

In an opinion column written for the *Wall Street Journal* earlier this week, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, the ultimate authority over the Iraqi colonial venture, further spelled out this agenda. Decisions taken by the US officials ruling Iraq, he said, “will favor market systems, not Stalinist command systems.... The Coalition will encourage moves to privatize state-owned enterprises.”

Rumsfeld further declared that the occupation authority would “promote Iraqis” who share US goals. “In staffing ministries and positioning Iraqis in ways that will increase their influence, the Coalition will work to have supportive Iraqis involved as early as possible—so that Iraqi voices can explain the goals and direction to the Iraqi people.”

This then is the real face of the US intervention in Iraq. Its aim is the looting of the economy—above all through the privatization of its vast oil resources, already being run by US officials—and the installation of an Iraqi puppet regime to “explain the goals” worked out in Washington and in the boardrooms of major US-based energy giants to the Iraqi people.

The fatal flaw in this ideology, however, is the illusion that there exists some popular constituency for this program of reshaping Iraq to serve American interests—outside of the corporate ruling elite in the US that hopes to profit from it.

The US occupation authority has been forced to indefinitely postpone its plan to create some kind of “interim government” composed of Iraqi

collaborators. The elements upon which it sought to base such a puppet entity are entirely unstable. On the one hand, there are pro-US exiles grouped in the Iraqi National Congress headed by the Ahmed Chalabi, a man convicted in Jordan for the biggest bank embezzlement in the country’s history. Earlier this week, US authorities announced that they had disbanded and disarmed the “Free Iraq Forces” militia connected with Chalabi’s outfit, whose 700 members were initially trained and deployed by the US military. Apparently these armed thugs had criminal predilections similar to those of their leader.

The other groups that the US authorities sought to draw into its “interim government” scheme included Kurdish organizations bent on establishing an independent Republic of Kurdistan in the north of the country, and the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, an Iranian-based Shiite group committed to the creation of an Islamic state and the implementation of Sharia law. The latter group, which enjoys the allegiance of a substantial share of Iraq’s Shiite majority, appears to be on a collision course with the US occupation. Rumsfeld warned this week that the US would “aggressively put down” any attempt to “remake Iraq in Iran’s image.”

The American military, which has been called upon to realize this criminal looting of a nation, has appeared less sanguine about the prospects of the occupation realizing the aims of the right-wing clique in control of the US government.

Fully a year before the invasion was launched, it issued a study initiated by the US Army War College’s Strategic Study Institute in conjunction with the senior Pentagon military leadership entitled “Reconstructing Iraq: Insights, challenges and missions for military forces in a post-conflict scenario.”

The report warns, “Rebuilding Iraq will require a considerable commitment of American resources, but the longer US presence is maintained, the more likely violent resistance will develop.”

Drawing upon experiences ranging from the US occupation of the Philippines at the end of the nineteenth century to the Israeli occupation of Lebanon in the early 1980s, the report states that “a mass uprising against occupation forces is unlikely in the early stages of any US occupation of Iraq, probably up to at least the first year.” Hopes that American control will bring improvements in living conditions along with “uncertainty over the degree to which US troops can be pushed,” the document argues, would initially dampen any revolt.

It goes on to warn, however: “After the first year, the possibility of a serious uprising may increase should severe disillusionment set in and Iraqis begin to draw parallels between US actions and historical examples of Western imperialism.”

The report concludes: “Without an overwhelming effort to prepare for occupation, the United States may find itself in a radically different world over the next few years, a world in which the threat of Saddam Hussein seems like a pale shadow of new problems of America’s own making.”



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