

Rising popular anger behind attack on British troops in southern Iraq

Chris Marsden
28 June 2003

The killing on June 24 of six British soldiers at a police station in a village near Amara, 100 miles north of Basra, is a wake-up call to the political realities of the imperialist occupation of Iraq.

The British press denounced the deaths as murder, possibly carried out by troublemakers still loyal to Saddam Hussein or alternatively by Iranian-backed forces who have infiltrated the country. Lieutenant Colonel Ronnie McCourt claimed, “This attack was unprovoked,” while Prime Minister Tony Blair told parliament the soldiers had been doing “an extraordinary and heroic job trying to provide a normal and decent life for people in Iraq.”

But it has become clear that the deaths resulted from an outpouring of popular anger at the repressive and brutal actions of the British Army. The six royal military policemen (RMPs) belonging to 156 Provost Company, part of the Colchester-based 16th Air Assault Brigade, all died as a direct result of this policy.

The killings occurred after a day of mounting tension between the local population of nearby Majar al-Kabir and the occupation forces. The past weeks had seen a series of military raids on local houses to confiscate arms.

The British actions were opposed for a number of reasons. Firstly, Iraqis routinely keep weapons at home—and the belief was widespread that they were being disarmed so that Britain and the US could maintain their occupation indefinitely without fear of resistance.

Secondly, the way the raids were carried out was deeply insensitive. Women’s bedrooms were searched and sniffer dogs used, actions that are offensive to Muslims.

In the face of growing anger, the army has acknowledged that they agreed to a contract with local leaders outlining how troops could search homes only once they had given prior notice. On the day of the killings, however, locals protested because they believed that the agreement was being broken.

Tensions were already running high. Earlier that morning Iraqi gunmen had attacked two vehicles from the 1st Battalion Paratroop regiment on patrol, injuring one soldier. A Chinook helicopter sent to support the trapped men was also attacked, and a further seven paratroopers were injured.

Some hours later, British troops were out on manoeuvres in

Majar al-Kabir and locals surmised that house searches would take place—though the army denies that this was their intent. Accounts are somewhat unclear—and naturally, the army’s account is completely at variance to that of local residents—but what took place appears roughly to have been the following:

Hundreds of locals gathered in front of the local mayor’s office at around 10 a.m. for a second day of protests. British soldiers are said to have treated locals badly, including threatening a child with a gun.

The protests became angrier. Some accounts claim a local man fired on the British with a handgun, others that the army fired first using rubber bullets. But whatever the sequence of events, 14 or so British troops in two vehicles opened fire using live ammunition in a volley that lasted fully five minutes.

At least 17 people were hit, including a 13-year-old girl and a 9-year-old boy. Several were left with spinal injuries and multiple fractures. Five local men died from their wounds. According to an interview in the *Guardian*, Dr. Hassan Jabar, the assistant director of Majar al-Kabir’s hospital who treated the casualties, the high proportion of head and chest wounds showed the shooting had been carefully targeted.

The British then drove away to an outlying village and the angry crowd went home and armed themselves. They went to the police station in Amara, where they knew the RMPs were stationed, and killed them.

The deaths have blown apart a number of carefully cultivated myths surrounding Britain’s role in Iraq.

More than 20 American soldiers have been killed in attacks in the areas of northern Iraq they control, including Baghdad, due to opposition to their continued occupation of the country. This has routinely been attributed to the same elements blamed for the six RMP deaths, particularly to still active remnants of the Baathist regime. But the US Army has also been criticised in the British media for its “heavy-handed approach” and being too quick to react with force to protests and disturbances.

This criticism of US troops is undoubtedly true, but not true is the claim that Britain’s occupation troops did not face opposition and were in every way more sensitive than their American counterparts.

The British did have the advantage of being stationed in the South, a Shia-Muslim area known for its history of opposing

Saddam's minority Sunni-dominated Baathist rulers. Indeed, the 200,000 population of nearby Majar al-Kabir was the scene of a brief fight by 200 resistance fighters against Baathist forces in the last days of the war.

Not only was the British Army supposed to have been universally welcomed as liberators by the local population, but the press also boasted that their experience of policing Northern Ireland had made them far more adept in building friendly relations in potential areas of conflict. They were meant to have projected a less threatening public face to the Iraqis—no helmets, just berets, football matches with the local kids, and limited forms of self-rule under British supervision.

The fact that the Shia south has now exploded into opposition to the British Army has therefore undermined the claims that only the remnants of the old regime and a few imported troublemakers from Iran are opposed to the occupation of Iraq. And it has also destroyed the flimsy assertion that Britain is a more humane and acceptable policeman for the Iraqis than the United States. Events have demonstrated that there was ample provocation given for the bloody attack on the RMPs by an army whose real history in Northern Ireland and around the world is one of brutality—an army that is already dogged by accusations of having tortured and humiliated captive Iraqis.

The incident will prove to be a turning point in the occupation of Iraq. It represents the heaviest loss of British life in a single hostile incident since the war began. It will inevitably be followed by stepped-up repression on the part of both Britain and the US as opposition to their presence in the country intensifies.

Britain's Labour government raised the possibility that the deaths may lead to the deployment of thousands of extra troops, with Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon telling BBC Radio 4's "Today" programme that 19,000 troops used as cover for the firefighters' strikes were no longer needed for that role. However, he preferred to rely on the dispatch of troops from other countries, if possible. "I would point out there are some 14,000 British troops in theatre—10,000 in Iraq. We are also now bringing in forces from other countries as well. Indeed, over the next few weeks, 19 or 20 different countries will be participating and the total force from those countries will be several thousand men."

An ultimatum was issued to local civilian leaders in Majar al-Kabir, who were given 48 hours to hand over the killers of the RMPs.

On the part of the US, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said the violence was a result of "the global war on terror," and bizarrely claimed that it served as a reminder of the Bush administration's pre-war assertions that Saddam's regime was tied to Al Qaeda. The Bush administration will employ the attack as propaganda to justify suppressing dissent in Iraq and possibly as justification for its plans to target Iran.

The US and Britain will both meet growing resistance. In the past few days alone, two American soldiers were abducted

north of Baghdad on June 25, the day after the killings at Amara. And on June 26 a patrol of US marines came under attack on the outskirts of Baghdad, with three injured. One marine died and two others were hurt when they also went to the scene of the ambush.

Blair is already facing questions as to whether the government has an "exit strategy" for Iraq, from those who fear it will prove to be Britain's equivalent of Vietnam or a repetition of the long-term policing operation in Northern Ireland.

On June 25, Labour and Conservative MPs demanded a timetable for withdrawal of British troops and their replacement by United Nations forces.

Former Labour defence minister Doug Henderson warned, "If more troops are brought in to protect troops, that will send a signal that we are in for the long haul and will be seen as invaders rather than as liberators. It may be better for the government to win a further United Nations Security Council resolution for UN peacekeepers. Britain should persuade the US to do that."

He warned, "It is not Vietnam yet. But if we do not bring about law and order quickly, it will be impossible to effect reconstruction of Iraq."

Jon Owen Jones, the Labour MP for Cardiff Central, also cautioned Blair that Britain could end up remaining in Iraq for decades. "I am reminded that Northern Ireland...is still directly ruled from this place over 30 years after direct rule was put in place. We desperately require an exit strategy from Iraq," he said.

John Major, Conservative prime minister during the 1991 Gulf War, said an exit strategy would counteract those "spreading the propaganda that we are there for the long term."

Blair responded by dismissing any comparison with Northern Ireland and stating that Britain would not embark on a unilateral withdrawal—in other words, without the approval of the Bush administration. Hoon added that it was "not beyond the bounds of possibility" that 5,000 extra British troops could be sent.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact