

Mounting casualties, Iraqi resistance take toll on US troops

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The steady toll of casualties and the growing hostility of the population of Iraq to the US occupation have begun to have a marked impact on the morale of American troops. US soldiers have been increasingly willing to express their frustration and opposition to continued action in Iraq, in comments to their families, to the media and to congressional visitors.

The Pentagon announced Wednesday that the casualty toll among American soldiers in Iraq has risen to 1,256 since the war began March 20. This includes 212 dead and 1,044 injured. Since Bush declared major combat over on May 1, 382 soldiers have been wounded or injured and 74 killed—an average of one death and six injuries each day. At the present rate, by the end of August more US soldiers will have died in Iraq since the end of the war than were killed during the six-week invasion and occupation of the country.

So frequent have the attacks become that the US occupation authority announced this week it would pay a \$2,500 reward for information leading to the arrest of anyone shooting at or killing a foreign soldier or an Iraqi policeman. Former New York City police commissioner Bernard Kerik, who now heads the Baghdad police force, announced the reward after seven Iraqi police cadets were killed by a bomb during their graduation ceremony.

Two more US soldiers were killed Wednesday night, and a third wounded, as the result of a series of guerrilla attacks involving rocket-propelled grenades and small arms. One death came near Mahmudiyah, 15 miles south of Baghdad, while the other was near Tikrit, 120 miles north of the capital. Three separate mortar attacks hit US troops in the city of Ramdi, 60 miles west of Baghdad. These attacks indicate a higher level of organized opposition, since at least ten fighters are required to move, assemble, aim and disassemble the mortar.

Another US soldier died Wednesday in what military officials called a “non-hostile gunshot incident,” a Pentagon euphemism for suicide. It was the second suicide in three days, following the death of a soldier in the 101st Airborne division who killed himself at the US air base near Balad, about 50 miles north of Baghdad. The suicides are a clear sign of the growing stress on American troops.

Accounts recently published in the American press give a glimpse of the nightmarish conditions facing the soldiers, who are beset by the fear of becoming casualties, a desire to go home to their families, and mounting questions over the rationale for what they are being ordered to do to the Iraqi people.

According to one of the few serious efforts to tabulate the Iraqi death toll from the US invasion, Iraq Body Count www.iraqbodycount.net, between 6,000 and 7,700 Iraqi civilians have been killed by US forces since the March 20 invasion. In a number of recent incidents, American soldiers have killed Iraqi children—the latest a 13-year-old boy shot to death this week when US troops opened fire after a grenade attack on a police station in the Baghdad suburbs.

The *New York Times* reported July 5 on the conditions in Abu Ghraib, the town that was the site of one of Saddam Hussein’s most infamous prisons, where American troops were initially well-received by the local population. The US commander in the town now reports that his company is being shot at daily, while the US-appointed Iraqi administrator said he was receiving a dozen complaints a day about US soldiers seizing weapons, vehicles or people.

The *Times* reporter described the scene in the town’s traffic-congested center: “American soldiers were deployed to keep order, but in the heat and chaos their tempers frayed. They broke windshields and cursed at Iraqis, further shrinking the reservoir of good will.”

The *Washington Post* reported Wednesday that non-fatal, but potentially deadly attacks on American troops are no longer even reported by the US military’s public information office in Baghdad, because they are so commonplace. “It’s becoming routine,” a military official told the *Post*. “It’s no longer a few isolated incidents.”

The newspaper wrote that officials are “worried that a barrage of non-fatal attacks—estimated by officials at more than a dozen a day in Baghdad—will sap troop morale and cause people to reevaluate official pronouncements that armed resistance to the U.S. occupation is small and militarily insignificant.”

Time magazine’s current cover story carries the headline, “Peace Is Hell,” with a photograph of several American soldiers looking like they would rather be anywhere in the world but Iraq. The magazine, which enthusiastically backed the war, reports, “The enthusiasm Iraqis initially showed the occupiers has largely expired, replaced by disappointment and a growing belief that everyday life was better under Saddam Hussein.”

The report blames “shoddy planning, undue optimism and lackluster leadership” on the part of the Bush administration and the Pentagon as a major cause of the debacle, and notes “the growing intensity of fighting,” especially the series of mortar

attacks on US bases.

The magazine also criticizes Bush's notorious "bring 'em on" comment, a remark which apparently welcomed Iraqi guerrilla attacks on the troops he nominally commands, warning, "Despite the President's bluster, Bush Administration officials are privately worried that U.S. forces are caught in a dangerous loop. The persistence of attacks has forced the U.S. to remain on a combat footing, which has diverted attention and resources away from the reconstruction effort. The heavy military footprint, in turn, has soured Iraqi opinion and created a more hospitable climate for anti-American agitators."

Time also reported that the chief US civilian administrator in Iraq, L. Paul Bremer, has asked the Bush administration to send an additional 400 civilians for his staff, but there have been few volunteers willing to relocate to Baghdad. Evidently even in official Washington there are few who believe the triumphalist propaganda of the Pentagon and White House claiming that Iraq is basically secure.

The most explicit condemnations of the occupation by US soldiers were reported by the *Christian Science Monitor*, which cited a series of letters from soldiers in Iraq to their congressmen, asking for quick action to return their units to the United States.

One letter declared, "Most soldiers would empty their bank accounts just for a plane ticket home." An officer in the Third Infantry Division wrote, "Make no mistake, the level of morale for most soldiers that I've seen has hit rock bottom."

Another letter-writer said, referring to false Pentagon promises of an early end to the occupation, "The way we have been treated and the continuous lies told to our families back home has devastated us all." Another officer described his troops as follows: "They vent to anyone who will listen. They write letters, they cry, they yell. Many of them walk around looking visibly tired and depressed....We feel like pawns in a game that we have no voice [in]."

The newspaper added that there was an increase in letters from the Red Cross urging individual soldiers be sent home because of family problems, as well as in women soldiers becoming pregnant, which results in immediate repatriation.

The growing difficulties in Iraq have compelled top military officials to sharply increase their estimates of the troop strength required to hold down the occupied country. At a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing July 9, General Tommy Franks, the overall commander of the invasion force, testified that he expected the number of US troops in Iraq to remain at 150,000 for the "foreseeable future." As recently as May, the Pentagon had forecast a rapid drawdown of troop strength in Iraq to no more than 30,000 or 40,000 by the fall.

At the same hearing, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld revealed that the monthly cost of maintaining US forces in Iraq was nearly \$4 billion, double the cost estimates offered by the Pentagon in the immediate aftermath of the war. Although this figure works out to nearly \$50 billion a year, the Bush administration's \$369 billion military budget for FY 2004 includes no funds at all for Iraq.

The deteriorating morale among US soldiers in Iraq is a major problem for the Bush administration, both in its foreign and its

domestic operations. Top military leaders are reportedly warning that the current deployment of 370,000 troops overseas, 230,000 in Iraq and the Persian Gulf, is causing excessive strain on the Pentagon's personnel resources. An additional major military action—attacking Iran or North Korea, for instance—would likely require reinstitution of the draft.

The domestic impact of the unrest among the soldiers was revealed at Fort Stewart, home base for the Third Infantry Division, much of which has been deployed in the Persian Gulf for nearly a year. "Frustrations became so bad," there, the *New York Times* reported July 5, "that a colonel, meeting with 800 seething spouses, most of them wives, had to be escorted from the session."

Lucia Braxton, director of community services at Fort Stewart, told the *Times*, "They were crying, cussing, yelling and screaming for their men to come back."

At the congressional hearing July 9, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld said that one of the Third Division's three brigades had already been pulled back to Kuwait, and he promised that the entire division would be back in the United States by September, three months later than originally promised.

The growing resistance in Iraq is also impacting opinion in the broader US public. A Gallup poll published July 8 said that the proportion of the public who think the war in Iraq is going badly has risen from 13 percent in May to 42 percent. A Pew Research Center poll published the same day said that just 23 percent thought the US military effort was going "very well," down from over 60 percent during the actual combat phase.

Despite the efforts of the Bush administration and the media to portray the American public as overwhelmingly supportive of the war against Iraq, these figures, and the accounts of discontent among the troops, make clear that there is an enormous underlying hostility to the war and the occupation.

In the interests of both the Iraqi people, who are being killed and brutalized each day by the occupation, and of the American rank-and-file soldiers, the vast majority of whom want neither to kill or be killed in a far-off country, working people in the United States must demand the immediate withdrawal of all US troops from the Middle East.



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