

Iraq: No letup in anti-US riots and guerrilla attacks

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Iraqi and US casualties have continued to rise over the last week, as US and British forces mounted campaigns to locate former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein and put down riots in Baghdad and Basra, the two largest Iraqi cities. Anger is growing in Iraq over killings of innocent civilians by US and British forces, and over the deplorable state of public services. Armed confrontations continue in north-central Iraq, the major southern city of Basra, and the capital city Baghdad.

US forces have mounted concerted military campaigns with tanks and helicopter gunships to put down armed resistance in central Iraq and search out Saddam Hussein around his hometown of Tikrit. Major General Ray Odierno, commanding the US Army's 4th Infantry Division, which is carrying out the campaign, told the *Washington Post* on August 12, "I don't know if we're getting close or not [to capturing Hussein]."

While the Pentagon has not released figures on Iraqi casualties resulting from the campaign, US operations in the area have resulted in several US casualties. Between August 10 and August 13, five US soldiers were killed and 11 wounded by roadside bombs and rocket-propelled grenade attacks in north-central Iraq. These casualties give the lie to claims enthusiastically pushed by the US media that the July 22 killing of Saddam Hussein's two sons, trapped in a house, would end armed resistance to the US occupation.

Two further US deaths were not listed with regular wartime casualties: a young soldier found "dead in his bunk" in Ramadi, who allegedly died of heat exhaustion, and a soldier who died in a collision with an Iraqi taxi in the northern city of Mosul.

These two deaths are part of a larger pattern of under-reporting US casualties in Iraq. As the British newspaper *Guardian* noted, between May 1 and August 4 there were 52 US combat deaths but 60 further non-combat deaths. It noted, "Military observers say it is unusual, even in a 'low-intensity' guerrilla war such as the situation seen in Iraq, for non-combat deaths to outnumber combat casualties."

One possible explanation, advanced by Paul Krugman in an August 12 *New York Times* column, is that heat-related casualties and supply problems are rampant in US units. He quoted soldiers' letters home that blamed "heat casualties" on the fact that "each soldier is limited to two 1.5-liter bottles of water per day." Krugman also quoted a Newhouse News Service dispatch that said, "US troops in Iraq suffered through months of unnecessarily poor living conditions because some civilian contractors hired by the Army for logistics support failed to show up." These contractors prominently include Kellogg Brown & Root, the subsidiary of the construction firm Halliburton, which formerly employed Vice President Dick Cheney as its CEO.

Another possible explanation is that political pressure is forcing combat deaths to be listed as non-combat deaths, to minimize the combat death numbers that are usually quoted in the press.

Reports on the number of US wounded in Iraq are, if anything, more peculiar. The official Pentagon figure as of August 4 was 827, but the US Army Central Command in Qatar estimated it at nearly 100 higher—926. However, National Public Radio's (NPR's) interview with US Lieutenant Colonel Allen DeLane, who commands the airlift of US wounded to Andrews Air Force Base near Washington DC, revealed that even the Central Command figure is probably massively understated.

DeLane said: "Since the war has started, I can't give you an exact number because that's classified information, but I can say to you over 4,000 have stayed here at Andrews, and that number doubles when you count the people that come here to Andrews and then we send them to other places." He said 90 percent of the injuries were war-related. NPR pointed out that the figure might involve double-counting wounded soldiers who stopped several times at Andrews, but even then it seems impossible to reconcile DeLane's lower figure with the higher official figure: that alone would require the implausible scenario that every wounded US soldier moved in or out of Andrews at least six times.

Resistance to the US-led occupation of Iraq has increasingly taken the form of acts of economic sabotage, aiming to disrupt US attempts to export Iraqi oil and restore some power and water to Iraqi cities. At least two oil pipelines were sabotaged: one attack early last week blew out a pipeline near Taji in central Iraq. An August 16 bomb blast also cut off the main oil pipeline carrying Iraqi oil exports to Turkey, 20 km north of the large northern pumping station at Baiji. The pipeline, which carries oil from the large oilfields of Kirkuk—which contain 40 percent of Iraqi oil—will not be operating for the next several weeks, according to US officials.

These attacks, together with the fragile state of the Iraqi electrical power grid that leads to frequent power outages, have highlighted the major energy crisis in Iraq. The kerosene and diesel shortages that plague this oil-rich country are another indictment of coalition mismanagement of the occupied Iraqi economy. Iraqi oil refineries are largely out of date, and therefore produce much more heavy fuel oil and less of the lighter kerosene, diesel and gasoline that Iraq requires—they can only meet half of the 38-40 million-liter demands for these fuels. UN officials are concerned that the US will leave responsibility for importing lighter fuels to the cash-strapped Iraqi Oil Ministry. There are no reports of a large-scale effort to upgrade Iraqi refineries and boost local consumption.

US and British spokespersons have tried to blame the electricity

shortages on the legacy of Hussein's misrule. This is a cynical evasion. It is well known that the US-led coalition extensively bombed the Iraqi power grid in the first Gulf war—the *Guardian* estimates the bombing destroyed roughly 85 percent of the national grid. The Hussein regime's attempts to restore the grid were limited to stopgap measures by UN sanctions denying Iraq the right to import electrical equipment. Occupying US and British forces failed to protect the power grid, sections of which have been targeted for its copper wire, which looters can resell.

UN agencies expressed concerns of a winter kerosene shortage—500 million liters of kerosene must be stocked for heating, but this is far behind schedule—that could cause a humanitarian crisis. The *New York Times* reported that a US official “said the kerosene supply depended on whether the refineries had adequate electricity,” which now appears highly unlikely.

Baghdad has also seen several armed confrontations in which US forces killed civilians. Six Iraqis were killed at checkpoints set up on the night of August 9, when an electricity outage plunged the Baghdad suburb of Slaykh into darkness, setting US troops on edge. Anwaar Kawaz lost her husband and three of her four children, whom US troops shot with no warning and left to die in their car, according to Kamaz's interview with the Associated Press. Neighbors trying to get dying family members out of the car were chased away with automatic rifle fire. Two other civilians were killed at roadblocks nearby.

US troops provoked a massive demonstration in Sadr City, a poor Shiite area of Baghdad, when a helicopter flew low over a transmission tower and tried to remove—or blow down with its rotor blades—a flag bearing an inscription holy for the Shiite faith. Several Iraqis were wounded and one killed when protesters clashed with US troops on August 13. US officials maintained that the victim was a man who had fired a rocket-propelled grenade at US troops, although witnesses and press sources said it was a 10- or 13-year-old boy. Iraqi doctors told the *Washington Post* that a 12-year-old boy was admitted to a hospital with a gunshot wound to his face.

After the clash, the Shiite religious group al-Sadr issued a statement calling for US troops to stay out of Sadr City. Al-Sadr is named after the increasingly popular Muqtada al-Sadr, an anti-occupation cleric in the Shiite holy city of Najaf and relative to two prominent Shiite clerics killed by Hussein in 1999. The organization claimed it had “difficulty controlling the people” and that residents were preparing mines, rocket-prepared grenades and suicide explosive belts. The US military command claimed it issued a formal apology, and US troops reportedly stayed out of Sadr City on August 14.

The *Globe and Mail* reported that at 6 p.m. residents of Sadr city regularly form lines to sign up for the Mahdi army, which was created after an appeal by al-Sadr and named after an imam whose coming is supposed to herald a new age. According to Sheik Qais al-Khazraji, an al-Sadr member recruiting for the Mahdi army, over 10,000 have signed up in Sadr City alone. The *Globe and Mail* reported that while the Mahdi army was for the time being only accepting male volunteers, it had spoken to several women who were ready to volunteer.

In the central Iraqi town of Baquba, former Iraqi secret policemen were turned away by US soldiers after requesting pay. The secret police was excluded from deals whereby former Iraqi military men received small pensions in exchange for not attacking US troops. Muder Khalaf, one of the former secret policemen, said, “We haven't had a penny in five months, we have families to feed.... We are trained

in all types of weapons and we're ready to use them if this goes on.”

US civil affairs officer Captain Dennis Van Wey acknowledged that the protest had “potential for significant violence,” but said that the secret police “was dissolved...they no longer exist, so we are not going to give them salaries.”

Ruling circles in the United States and Europe increasingly view the situation in Iraq as unstable, threatening the control of US and British forces. *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, who has maintained a consistently pro-war stance, expressed his concern in an August 13 piece titled, “Power and Peril.” While praising the Bush administration for having the “audacity to undertake this revolutionary project in Iraq,” he worried that “we're not going to have the time, money, or people to finish this job right.”

In a sign of the fragility of the US's grip on Iraqi internal security, the well-connected journalist's five-car convoy on the Iraq-Jordan highway was held up and robbed by highwaymen armed with AK-47 assault rifles. Upon notifying US army forces, Friedman was told that they could not investigate for lack of personnel. He noted that “All of America's friends in Baghdad say the same thing: I love your ideas, but my daily life—salary, electricity, security—is worse since you came, not better.”

Ghassan Salameh, the number-two UN official in Iraq, also laid out warnings in the August 14 issue of the French news magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur*. He commented: “Many influential Iraqis who at first felt liberated from a hated regime assured me that they were going to take up arms if coalition troops do not get results.” He warned that attempts to massively privatize the Iraqi economy and transfer Iraqi oil wealth to US corporations would be highly unpopular.

Paul Bremer, US proconsul in Iraq, went on ABC's “Good Morning America” August 13 to defend the course of US policy in Iraq. He tried to downplay threats to US soldiers, telling his interviewers that “US soldiers here are not sitting ducks.” He then immediately added: “It doesn't mean you can eliminate casualties, you can't. I don't know what more people think we can do.”

Bremer also foretold that the US occupation of Iraq would be long and costly. “I guess we will be here [in Iraq] a while,” he said. “There is not any deep, dark secret there. It's a question of how this develops.” He gave an estimate of the overall cost of the occupation, which is currently running at roughly \$4 billion per month, at \$100 billion. Although the Bush administration has not released any information on how much the war is likely to cost, US lawmakers are reportedly anticipating requests for a further \$40-\$50 billion for 2004.



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