

Poland sends troops to Iraq

Stefan Steinberg
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On August 1, the Polish government sent more than 2,000 soldiers to help relieve beleaguered US troops in Iraq. The Polish contingent is part of a planned 9,200 Polish-led multinational division, which will take over responsibility for one of the four districts of Iraq currently under the control of American and British soldiers. The Polish government was one of the first to offer practical assistance to the US and British operation sending a small unit of 200 elite soldiers to fight in the Iraq war.

The latest Polish-led contingent will be supplemented by soldiers from a number of eastern European countries and comprise 1,640 Ukrainian troops, 500 from Bulgaria, several hundred from Hungary, 150 from Romania and Latvia, and 85 respectively from Slovakia and Lithuania.

The Polish reinforcements come at a time when US military commanders on the ground and politicians in Washington are increasingly concerned at the growing number of US troop casualties in Iraq. In a comment headed "US struggles to cobble together troop force," the British *Financial Times* commented last Friday: "An administration forced to go it nearly alone during the war in Iraq is now being forced, hat in hand and chequebook at the ready, to cobble together international troops to help secure a country where guerrilla attacks are a daily occurrence."

Already on July 3 the *Washington Post* had pointed out that the presence of troops with a nationality other than American or British could not only help divert fire from US troops, but also have positive propaganda benefits: "Many hope a larger international presence could reassure Iraqis that they are not being colonised and help get Americans out of the line of fire."

Last week, the acting US army chief of staff General John Keane told a congressional hearing that American soldiers could not start returning home until international reinforcements were in place, but hectic US diplomatic activity over the past weeks has had very limited success in the attempts to persuade other countries to contribute to the Iraq war campaign.

Following his recent trip to the region, Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz admitted last week that it was unclear when, or if, Pakistan or Turkey would send a division of troops to Iraq. Turkey has already sent troops to the north of Iraq, but US plans to strengthen Turkish military participation have been bedevilled by conflicts between the two countries against a

background of broad popular hostility to Turkish army involvement. Wolfowitz also conceded that it was unclear how quickly it would be possible to train Iraqis to take over security duties in the country.

Meanwhile, US general Richard Myers travelled to New Delhi to intensify American pressure on India to send troops. India recently declined to send 17,000 troops to the region, stating that a new UN resolution was necessary before it could intervene in the war.

The Washington administration still hopes to persuade India to send a contingent some time next year. Even with aid from India and eastern Europe, however, the US will be confronted with the necessity of posting at least 100,000 troops for the foreseeable future with all of the costs that entails. The cost of the current US operation is running at \$3.9 billion a month. Desperate to insure participation from eastern Europe, the US has agreed to foot the preliminary expenses (\$230 million for transport, food and medical expenses) for the Polish contingent.

Together with Italy, Poland will be the largest continental European contributor to the US-led occupation. Although the leaders of both Italy and Spain fully supported the Bush war in Iraq, under conditions of massive domestic public opposition and daily troop casualties both nations have been reluctant to send large numbers of troops to the region. Italy has just 2,800 soldiers in the region operating in the British-controlled sector. Britain currently has 11,000 troops posted in Iraq. Spain has announced plans to send 1,300 soldiers to take part in the Polish-led mission.

The commitment by the Polish government to the Iraq war is highly controversial inside Poland itself. Currently, more than half of the Polish population oppose participation by its troops in Iraq, and the original decision in March to send a unit of elite Polish troops to fight in the war was made by government leaders in the face of huge domestic opposition.

In the period immediately preceding the war, 70 percent of the Polish population opposed any sort of participation. Then on March 17, three days before the war started, Polish president Aleksander Kwasniewski and Prime Minister Leszek Miller demonstrated their contempt for public opinion and stated bluntly at a press conference that they had agreed to send troops. Under conditions where the country was already involved in the war, Kwasniewski and Miller were later able to acquire agreement by a large minority of the acquiescent Polish

parliament for their actions.

The new Polish-led division will operate in a territory a quarter the size of Poland (31,000 square miles) and includes four predominantly Shiite Muslim provinces south of Baghdad now occupied by the US Marine Expeditionary Force. The risks involved in such an operation were underlined last Friday when Polish troops already stationed in Iraq were attacked in their base by mortars.

Doubts about the Polish engagement extend to the Polish military itself. In the conservative daily *Rzeczpospolita*, Polish general and strategy expert Stanislaw Kosiey warned of the increasing number of attacks taking place on occupying troops. "The attacks could last many years and they are more and more better organised," he said, and they could give rise to a "new Vietnam."

Before the collapse of the Stalinist bloc countries at the beginning of the 1990s, Poland enjoyed close relations with Iraq, and more than 16,000 Polish workers—mainly engineers—worked in infrastructure projects and the Iraqi oil industry.

One consideration in Poland's recent alliance with the US are hopes by the Polish elite, whose roots all lie largely in the pre-1990 Stalinist apparatus, to be able to restore their influence in the region—this time under the protective umbrella of American imperialism. Poland has already re-opened the Baghdad office of the Polish Oil Company Nafta Polska. In an attempt to conceal the colonial character of the operation, Marek Siewik, head of the Office for National Security, stated: "What brought us to Iraq is not greed, but a certain responsibility...which we had from the very beginning of the operation."

The chief of the international committee of coordination in Iraq is the former Polish finance minister Marek Belka, once a Fulbright scholar in the US. His role is to coordinate the cooperation of the colonial administration with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the United Nations, as well as foreign governments and organisations involved in the reconstruction of the infrastructure. Belka also works in the leading committees of USAID, which awards major contracts for Iraq.

During the past year, Poland has been accepted as a full member of the European Union, but the Iraq war demonstrated that the country's leadership was also anxious to deepen its relations with the US and was prepared to operate as a sort of Trojan horse for American interests in Europe. Confronted with French and German opposition to the war, US defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld provocatively drew a distinction between "old Europe"—by which he meant France and Germany—and "new Europe," a number of eastern European countries, with Poland to the fore, that have established close links with Washington since the collapse of the Stalinist bloc.

On a number of occasions Rumsfeld and the administration in Washington have sought to play the "old Europe" card in order

to isolate and put pressure on France and Germany. Earlier this year and against expectations, Warsaw decided against re-equipping its air force with the new Euro-fighter and instead wrapped up a deal for F-16 fighter jets with US company Lockheed Martin. The value of the contract is \$3.53 billion and is the biggest struck in eastern Europe. The deal led some media outlets to comment that, although Poland has its heart in Europe, it keeps its wallet in the United States. Then in May of this year, amidst premature jubilation over an American victory in Iraq, Bush travelled to Europe, pointedly ignoring France and Germany and stopping off in Poland for talks with Kwasniewski, where the US president called for a "strong transatlantic alliance."

There is a further reason for the close alliance struck between the Polish and US leaderships. Both President Aleksander Kwasniewski and Prime Minister Leszek Miller began their careers inside the Polish Stalinist governing party, the PZRP. Following the collapse of the Polish and Soviet Stalinist bureaucracies, both men were instrumental in transforming the PZRP into the Democratic Party of the Left (SLD), which was elected in 2001 following the electoral disaster of the incumbent AWS (Solidarity Bloc). In 1995, Kwasniewski quit the SLD after his election to the post of state president.

Elected on the basis of cleaning up Polish politics and restoring economic health, the balance sheet of the SLD after two years in office is disastrous, with catastrophic repercussions for broad layers of the Polish population. According to official figures, Poland has one of the highest levels of unemployment in eastern Europe—20 percent.

Isolated and under pressure at home, against the background of a growing economic crisis, the Polish government has sought to deepen its relationship with the one government with which it has most in common—the criminal administration in Washington.



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