

Bush seeks UN bailout of Iraqi occupation

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Having written off the United Nations as irrelevant in the days leading up to the US invasion of Iraq and declared as little as two weeks ago that it had no intention of making its occupation of the country an “international operation” backed by a new UN resolution, the Bush administration has been compelled by events to do just that.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell and Washington’s ambassador to the United Nations John Negroponte began sounding out members of the UN Security Council, Germany and other governments Wednesday on a new resolution designed to win the world body’s backing for more troops and money to prop up the failing US military occupation.

The shift in the US position follows a string of four deadly car bombings that claimed the lives of at least 120 people, murdered Washington’s key political ally among the volatile Shiite population and sent UN and other aid officials fleeing the country in recognition that the 140,000 American troops there are incapable of providing any modicum of security.

At the same time, attacks on US forces have risen dramatically. According to a report published in Tuesday’s *Washington Post*, an average of 10 troops a day are listed as “wounded in action,” many of them with explosives that tear off limbs. The Pentagon, the paper noted, only reports the number of wounded in connection with the daily incidents in which one, two or more soldiers lose their lives. Since May 1, when President Bush proclaimed major combat operations at an end, 574 soldiers have been wounded, 24 more than in the combat operations that preceded that date. The “postwar” death toll has likewise topped the number killed during the invasion that preceded May 1.

Meanwhile, a report issued in Washington made clear the Pentagon will be forced to cut its deployment in Iraq by half or more if current troop rotations are continued. Reversing this trend would be possible only by increasing tours of duty in Iraq to more than a year and calling up even more National Guard and reserve units. Given a continuation of present trends, it estimates that available troops would fall to between 38,000 and 64,000 within barely a year.

The report was issued by the Congressional Budget Office in response to a request from Senator Robert Byrd, Democrat of West Virginia, who commented that it “quantified evidence that the long-term occupation is straining our forces close to the breaking point.”

The administration has estimated the cost of the occupation at \$3.9 billion a month. This does not include the “many tens of billions of dollars” that Washington’s Baghdad consul, L. Paul Bremer, recently said would be necessary to begin reconstruction of the war-ravaged country.

With available troops dwindling and money fast running out, the Bush administration finds itself forced to seek an international bailout for what has become a political and human catastrophe.

The purpose of the UN resolution is to lend pseudo-legitimacy to the

colonial-style US occupation. It is designed to give particularly the governments of Turkey, India and Pakistan cover for deploying troops in the country. Whether such a resolution will have the desired effect remains to be seen. All three governments face overwhelming domestic opposition to joining the US occupation and have used the absence of a UN mandate as a convenient excuse for rebuffing Washington’s invitation to send troops.

It is also hoped that the UN imprimatur would convince other governments to contribute substantial amounts of money for reconstruction and other costs associated with occupying Iraq.

While it is reported that the administration is prepared to ask Congress to appropriate tens of billions of dollars more to finance the occupation, it has refused thus far to provide any estimate as to the costs the US will incur, allowing only that it will be “substantial.” With the US federal government confronting a projected record deficit of \$488 billion next year, the White House is trying to postpone any public discussion on the spiraling cost of intervention in Iraq.

It is hoping that it can carry out a shakedown operation at an international conference set for next month in Madrid to discuss contributions for the occupation. Potential donor nations have indicated in advance of the conference that they are reluctant to contribute to an operation that is run unilaterally by the US and that has provoked violent opposition from the Iraqi people.

“Ask any donor. Security is now the main issue,” a senior international aid agency official told the *Financial Times*. “Reconstruction will be hampered as long as the occupation continues. You can build walls, wire fences and have armed guards. It will not bring security. The violence will continue as long as the occupation will continue.”

While the diplomatic initiative at the UN is aimed at winning international support, it is by no means clear what Washington is willing to offer in concessions to those powers it previously vilified for opposing the invasion and that have stood to lose the most from unrestricted US hegemony over Iraq and the region.

The administration appeared adamant about maintaining military and political control. “This is and continues to be something that is under the command of the United States military,” said White House spokesman Scott McClellan. Bremer and the US-controlled Coalition Provisional Authority are “overseeing our efforts in Iraq and they will continue to oversee our efforts in Iraq,” he said, adding, “We want to encourage more countries to participate.”

The Pentagon’s leadership, which expressed the greatest contempt for the UN in the run-up to the invasion, has intransigently opposed granting it any greater role in Iraq, much less any control over the operations of US troops.

United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan signaled recently that the UN is willing to accept much of Washington’s demands, at least in regard to military operations. According to US officials, he told

Negroponte that “there would have to be a unified command of any international participation, and that command would be the United States.”

Yet the governments that opposed the war, particularly France and Germany, appear to be insisting that Washington loosen its grip on the reconstruction operation, particularly in relation to the creation of a new Iraqi regime and the reorganization of the Iraqi oil industry.

Having voiced their opposition to the war in uncompromising language before the US invasion, these governments have since sought to mend their relations with Washington. In May, they voted in the UN to lift economic sanctions against Iraq, recognize the US and Britain as occupying powers and thereby lend a veneer of legality to Washington’s seizing of Iraqi oil revenues and other assets to finance its occupation.

From the outset, the opposition of these powers to Washington’s unilateral military action was rooted not in any principled differences over the “right” of a major imperialist nation to invade and plunder a small, poor and defenseless one, but in their own national strategic interests. France and Russia, in particular, stood to lose any claim to collecting on considerable debts incurred by the Iraqi regime, as well as lucrative oil contracts signed at the expense of their American competitors. Moreover, all of them understood the threat of the US gaining a stranglehold over the oil pipelines upon which its economic rivals in Europe and Asia depend.

There can be little doubt that they will seek to utilize the present crisis confronting the US occupation in Iraq to advance their own interests.

French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin, who voiced the strongest opposition to the US drive to war on the Security Council, insisted in relation to a new resolution: “The measures to be taken cannot simply be an increase or an adjustment of the current occupation forces. It involves putting in place a real international force under a mandate from the UN Security Council.”

The one restraining element upon the European powers in pressing their case, however, is the concern that the present crisis over the Iraqi occupation could lead to the collapse of the Bush administration and an uncontrollable political crisis in the United States. Such a crisis in the center of world imperialism would place the stability of their own regimes at risk.

If one takes the US administration at its own word, the inescapable conclusion is that the Iraq invasion constitutes a catastrophic failure and a glaring expression of incompetence. Bush claimed on the eve of the war that the US had to intervene because Iraq had become a “safe haven” for terrorists, and was prepared to turn over its extensive stockpile of “weapons of mass destruction” to elements who would carry out attacks far worse than those of September 11, 2001. US troops had to intervene to eliminate the terrorist haven and secure these weapons stockpiles.

Now, five months after the invasion, the stockpiles that the invasion were supposed to secure have yet to be located. By Washington’s own account, the number of “terrorists” has multiplied and they are carrying out daily attacks on US troops and their Iraqi collaborators. Taking US claims as good coin, one could only assume that these terrorists and Saddam Hussein’s well-hidden chemical, biological and nuclear weapons will soon be united and a devastating attack is just around the corner.

Of course, the claims of WMD and terrorist havens were lies from the beginning, advanced solely for the purpose of terrifying the American public into accepting an illegal and predatory war. No

weapons have been found because they never existed, as both US and British officials well knew. As for the “terrorists,” there is no doubt that thousands of young Arabs are pouring into Iraq from throughout the Middle East to join the struggle against the US occupation, but the main impetus for the dozens of attacks carried out daily against US forces is the growing anger of the Iraqi people over the foreign occupation of their country.

The real source of the Iraqi catastrophe is the ideologically driven lies that those in the administration told themselves: that Iraqis would welcome US troops; that the US could speedily lay hold of Iraq’s vast oil wealth to finance occupation, reconstruction and super-profits for US corporations; and that the unilateral use of overwhelming military force would transform the face of the Middle East—and indeed the world—in favor of US strategic interests.

None of these predictions proved true. The result is a humanitarian disaster for the Iraqi people, who still lack reliable supplies of water and electricity, a condition that threatens to claim many more lives, particularly among the country’s infants and children. For American soldiers, told that they would be hailed as liberators, it has meant a nightmare of daily attacks and daily deaths. Meanwhile, the rest of the Arab world looks on with contempt at a puppet regime lacking any democratic legitimacy and an occupation that is incapable of imposing any semblance of order.

No UN resolution will alter these fundamental facts. A war begun based on lies and a criminal aim to seize by force strategic positions and vast supplies of oil cannot be turned into some sort of humanitarian project with a vote in the Security Council. Any troops sent into the country will be seen by Iraqis as mere hirelings of the American occupiers.

The US determination to maintain unfettered control over military operations in Iraq is a warning of what is to come. The Pentagon is preparing to carry out a brutal campaign of repression in an attempt to stamp out Iraqi resistance and does not want UN personnel in any position to limit its actions.

In the end, as countless counterinsurgency campaigns have demonstrated, such an escalation in repressive violence will only provoke more widespread resistance to foreign occupation. The inevitable result can only be a horrific increase in the loss of life, both Iraqi and American.

The solution to the deepening US debacle is Iraq is to be found not in the diplomatic horse-trading at the United Nations, but in the independent political mobilization of American working people demanding an immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US military forces from the region.



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