

US military adopts “no-holds barred” tactics against Iraqi resistance

James Conachy
1 December 2003

After heavy casualties in October, the US and allied forces in Iraq suffered more combat deaths in November than any other month of the invasion, including March and April when the “major combat” was taking place. Guerilla attacks and suicide bombings killed 94 American and coalition troops, two Japanese diplomats and at least five foreign civilian contractors servicing the occupation forces. More than 300 American and coalition troops were wounded.

Other attacks have killed or wounded dozens of American-trained Iraqi police. Resistance fighters have demonstrated an increasingly sophisticated ability to attack targets in various parts of the country, ranging from troop-laden helicopters, aircraft landing at Baghdad airport, city hotels, police stations and oil pipelines to individual Iraqis working for the US occupation authority. The growing boldness of the insurgents was underscored over the weekend with the ambush of two unmarked vehicles carrying Spanish intelligence agents. Seven were killed.

The Bush administration’s response to the escalating struggle against the occupation has been to direct the US military to use whatever means it has at its disposal to root out and crush the Iraqi resistance.

Major General Charles Swannack, commander of the 82nd Airborne Division, which is policing cities such as Fallujah in Iraq’s Al Anbar province, told journalists on November 18 that commanders had, up until last month, been “a little bit reluctant” to use helicopter gunships, anti-tank aircraft and precision-guided bombs against suspected resistance in civilian areas. “Now,” he declared, “there’s no-holds barred on what we used. We use what necessary capabilities and combat power we need to use to go ahead and take the fight to the enemy and also minimise collateral damage”.

Brigadier General Martin Dempsey, commander of the US 1st Armored Division, which is responsible for policing much of Baghdad, told a press conference on November 20: “The one thing I am blessed with is a chain of command that runs right up through the president of the United States, who has essentially told me ‘You do whatever you need to do, in a way that’ll make your country proud, to finish that fight’. Now that’s paraphrased, but that’s fundamentally the kind of freedom I have to manage the fight in Baghdad, Iraq, as I see

fit.”

What commanders such as Swannack and Dempsey have seen fit to carry out for the past several weeks is a brutal campaign of terror against the Iraqi civilian population. Code-named “Iron Hammer,” the ongoing operation has particularly targeted the so-called “Sunni Triangle”—the largely Sunni Muslim-populated region stretching from Baghdad to Tikrit in the north and encompassing cities such as Fallujah, Samarra, Baqubah, Thuluya and Balad.

The scale of the operation has been massive. At one point in mid-November, it involved five US army combat brigades—over 25,000 troops.

Three Baghdad neighbourhoods assessed by the US as centres of resistance activity were among the first targets of the operation. With helicopters hovering overhead to prevent anyone fleeing the area, US tanks and armoured vehicles cordoned off entire residential blocks for the first time. US troops and Iraqi police subjected the homes of hundreds of terrorised Iraqi civilians to searches. More than 500 men were dragged from their homes on suspicion of being opponents of the occupation.

Suspected guerilla hide-outs on the outskirts of the Iraqi capital, including houses and abandoned factories, were bombed or strafed by Apache helicopter gunships and F-16 fighters. *Washington Post* correspondents reported on November 21: “The bone-jarring explosions and drumbeat of cannon fire that echoed across Baghdad this week evoked memories of the intense campaign that preceded the fall of Saddam Hussein’s government.”

In answer to a question as to whether the military was concerned such acts would affect efforts to win the “heart and minds” of the Iraqi people, General Dempsey told the press: “Now, you know, I’m not running for mayor, so I’m not trying to convince you that I have the popular support of the people of Baghdad every time I shoot an Apache helicopter.”

Sections of the US political establishment have repeatedly called for a mass round-up of Iraqis since mid-year. As early as July, the *Wall Street Journal* was editorialising for a policy of “larger-scale detentions in the Sunni Triangle”. It has now achieved its wish. According to US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, US and coalition forces conducted 12,000 patrols

and 230 raids and detained more than 1,200 “suspects” in the week from November 16 to 23 alone.

After being sent to “liberate” Iraq, the US military is now admitting to destroying the homes of alleged resistance fighters, paralleling the criminal reprisals against Palestinian civilians carried out by the Israeli military in the Occupied Territories. The destruction of civilian dwellings is a war crime under Articles 33 and 53 of Geneva Convention.

In the town of Mahmudiya, south of the capital, the 82nd Airborne destroyed the home of six alleged resistance fighters. General Swannack told the press on November 18: “We apprehended them and detained them, removed all family members out of the house, and we destroyed the house.”

Amnesty International has alleged the family was given only 30 minutes to leave the farm, after which F-16 fighters bombed it into rubble. “It seems that the destruction of the Najim family house was carried out as collective punishment and not for ‘absolute military necessity’,” it charged.

Amnesty has also accused the 4th Infantry Division of destroying 15 homes in the Tikrit area between November 16 and 18. It claims that in one case in the village of Al Haweda, a family was given five minutes to get out before their house was destroyed by tanks and helicopter gunships.

Despite the military actions, there are clear indications that the resistance has not only survived, but is spreading. According to figures released in late November, there had been 2,227 guerilla attacks within the Sunni Triangle since May, and 1,416 attacks in other parts of the country. According to the reports, the number of attacks in the southern Shiite area of Iraq has doubled since August. Anti-occupation activity has also escalated in the northern cities of Mosul and Kirkuk. A US intelligence officer who asked not to be named told the *Boston Globe*: “What I worry about is broader support for the insurgent guerilla activity.”

The American troops in Iraq are confronting a catastrophe of the Bush administration’s making. The very measures of repression and intimidation it is ordering the military to carry out to secure control over the country are fueling the hostility to the occupation among broader and broader layers of the Iraqi population.

Around the country, tens of thousands of Iraqis have had family members killed or maimed, or their property destroyed, in what the US military calls “collateral damage.” Human Rights Watch (HRW) had tallied at least 94 cases of civilians gunned down by American troops as of September 30. Among them are a number of cases of people shot dead in their cars as they approached US military road-blocks. Others were killed on crowded streets when US troops unleashed indiscriminate bursts of gunfire in the general direction of a suspected sniper.

HRW commented: “The lack of timely and thorough investigations into many questionable incidents has created an atmosphere of impunity, in which many soldiers feel they can pull the trigger without coming under review.”

Statistics obtained ~~Guardian~~week by ~~the~~ HRW’s accusation. Iraqi civilians have filed a total of 10,412 claims against the US occupation authority for the wrongful death or injury of family members or for damage to their property. No criminal charges can be brought against a US soldier, as the puppet Iraqi Governing Council installed by the Bush administration has given the American military a blanket amnesty from prosecution.

The US military admits to having spent \$1.54 million in cash payments to aggrieved Iraqis. However, compensation has only fueled the perception of the Americans as indifferent and unapologetic for the suffering they have inflicted. In one case reported by the *Guardian*, a woman lost her husband, son and two daughters when their car was riddled with bullets by American troops. The family was driving down their own street; there was no checkpoint and no resistance activity taking place. The compensation of \$11,000 barely paid for the four funerals.

The connection between military repression and growing hostility to US forces has been particularly evident over recent weeks in Mosul. The 101st Airborne Division responded to the November 16 crash of two Blackhawk helicopters, which claimed the lives of 17 US soldiers, by launching raids on and violating 10 city mosques. Alleging that Sunni clerics were behind the growing resistance in the city, the US troops hauled away 100 people, including one cleric. The bewildered senior local cleric, Sheik Salih Khalil Hamoody, told the *Guardian* that the conduct of US soldiers had inflamed the population. “It could drive the youth into the arms of Saddam’s loyalists and religious extremists,” he warned. Several days later, two paratroopers were killed in a working class suburb of the city and their bodies allegedly mutilated by Iraqi teenagers.

The US and international media gave considerable coverage to the alleged mutilations, largely to demonise the Iraqi resistance as inhuman terrorists who deserve whatever treatment they get. A conspiracy of silence, however, exists over the repression, intimidation and humiliation inflicted each day on the Iraqi people. With the odd exception, the American television and print media has carried next to no coverage of the impact on Iraqi civilians of operations such as “Iron Hammer”.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact