

Blair in Basra: Iraq a “test case” for other countries

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As a public relations stunt it was a singular failure.

Britain’s Prime Minister Tony Blair ended his 10-day Christmas vacation in Egypt’s Sharm el-Sheikh resort with a surprise January 4 visit to Iraq’s second city of Basra.

Blair was there for the sole purpose of mounting a political counteroffensive prior to the publication of the report by Lord Hutton in the next few weeks into the death of Ministry of Defence weapons expert and former UN arms inspector, Dr David Kelly.

Kelly was the source of a story on Radio 4’s *Today* programme arguing that the government “sexed up” an intelligence dossier on Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction. Kelly was found dead on July 18 last year, two days after he was questioned by the Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee over his contacts with BBC reporter Andrew Gilligan. His death focused attention on the government’s lies over Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction—the possession of which was the rationale given by Blair for his support for the Bush administration’s illegal war of aggression against Iraq.

The Hutton report is expected to avoid making any judgement on the use of false intelligence on WMD in the run-up to war, but this will not shield Blair from political criticism given the subsequent failure of the US and British occupation forces to find any evidence of such weapons. It is expected that Blair will face calls for a full-scale judicial inquiry into the entire handling of the Iraq conflict from Liberal Democrat leader Charles Kennedy and others.

It was to pre-empt such attacks that Blair took his six-hour trip to Basra. He calculated that this would provide him with a valuable photo-opportunity, an evocative platform and a disciplined and receptive audience culled from Britain’s 10,000 troop presence—from which to attempt to justify his decision

to go to war.

The essential feature of his adjective-laden ten-minute speech was its failure to cite Iraqi WMDs as the reason for going to war. Blair only claimed in passing that Saddam Hussein had plans for such weapons. Instead he hailed the supposed benefits of regime change in Iraq as proof that going to war had been correct, coupled with warnings that a firm example had been necessary in order to combat the general danger of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction.

He described Iraq as a “test case”, arguing, “If we backed away from that, we would never be able to confront this threat in the other countries where it exists.”

This not only begs the key question that the existence of such a threat from Iraq has not been proven and that Blair clearly lied to the British people. It also confirms that he was intent on establishing a precedent whereby future wars of aggression could be launched by Britain, either alone or in alliance with US imperialism on the basis of unfounded allegations of WMD programmes or involvement with terrorism. Blair even described the British occupation forces as “the new pioneers of soldiers in the 21st century”.

Blair used all manner of hyperbole to describe how “passionately” he believed in “this cause and in the wisdom of the conflict” as the means of “tackling the twin threats of repressive states and terrorism”. He told the 1,000 or so troops at the British-led multinational division’s logistical base at Shaibah that the work they had been doing was “a noble and good cause”.

But he still made the most telling of Freudian slips when he referred to “weapons of mass distraction”—speaking of “repressive states developing weapons that could cause distraction”.

The problem for Blair is that his latest attempt to

divert attention from the exposure of his previous efforts at political distraction—by switching his justification for the war onto what he considers to be the safer ground of the humanitarian impact of ending Saddam Hussein’s brutal regime—will not wash. He went to war citing as his legal basis Iraq’s possession of chemical, biological and possibly nuclear weapons that were an imminent threat to world peace. Such a capability never existed. And millions of people in Britain and throughout the world have not forgotten, and not forgiven Blair’s lies.

Neither do they accept his claim that the war inaugurated a new era of democracy and peace in Iraq or anywhere else. To reinforce his argument that the benefits for Iraq alone justified the decision to go to war, Blair and other government spokesman have tried to downplay the scale of resistance to the occupation forces and have insisted they would meet the July 1 deadline for transferring sovereignty to a puppet Iraqi government. But attacks on coalition troops continue to take place every day. Two British soldiers were killed in a car accident in Iraq on New Years Day, bringing the number of British deaths since the beginning of hostilities to 55. Nearly 500 US soldiers have been killed and an unknown but far larger number of Iraqis. Blair has made clear that British troop numbers will stay at around 10,000 for at least one or two years and Britain’s military commitment to Iraq will last even longer, so there is no possibility of his shielding his government from intensified political criticism in the weeks ahead.



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