

Mounting attacks on US-led troops in Iraq

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A series of missile, rocket and mortar attacks on US and Allied forces in Iraq in recent days points to the continuing resistance to the US-led occupation since the capture of ousted Iraqi president Saddam Hussein. The attacks are becoming more sophisticated and support for them more widespread, reflecting intense anger over the increasingly repressive operations being conducted by the US military.

The latest wave began on January 7, with a large-scale mortar attack on the US Logistical Base Seitz about 20 kilometres west of Baghdad, killing one soldier and wounding 34. Six mortars struck the soldiers' barracks. It was the second major mortar strike since the start of 2004. In a shift in tactics, insurgents have employed remote-control mortar launchers. One soldier was killed and two wounded in a mortar attack on January 3 south of Balda, 75 kilometres north of Baghdad.

Then on January 8, a Black Hawk medivac helicopter was shot down in Fallujah, killing all nine US troops aboard, just after a C-5 transport plane with 63 passengers and crew was struck by a surface-to-air missile at Baghdad airport. Both incidents point to the acute difficulties facing the US military.

Pentagon officials initially denied that the helicopter had been struck by hostile fire, but an eyewitness reported seeing a rocket hitting its tail. Mohammed Ahmed, 27, a farmer who lives nearby, said he heard the distinctive whoosh of a rocket and saw the helicopter struck in the tail. He rushed to the scene but found everyone dead.

It was also the second reported attack of its kind in the new year. On January 2, an OH-58D Kiowa helicopter was downed near Fallujah, killing a pilot. According to official reports, at least 14 US helicopters have crashed in Iraq since President George Bush declared "mission accomplished" last May, claiming some 58 lives and underscoring the vulnerability of an essential cog in the US military operations.

The US occupation of Iraq is heavily dependent on hundreds of helicopters for carrying troops, officials and supplies throughout the country, yet the fleet has no protection against shoulder-held grenade launchers and other surface-to-air missiles. Since November 1, two-thirds of all American battle deaths have come in hostile assaults on helicopters. Three attacks alone—on November 2, November 15 and January 8—accounted for 41 combat fatalities.

At least 350 US soldiers have now been killed in action since the invasion began in March, 225 of them since Bush's May 1

claim of victory. The total US death toll, including so-called non-hostile fatalities, now stands at 495.

If anything, the suspected surface-to-air missile attack at Baghdad airport on a giant Air Force transport plane exposes an even greater weakness in the US position. The US Air Force first attributed the C-5's emergency landing to engine failure, but later admitted the engine had been hit. "It looks like its number four engine was hit by a surface-to-air missile, but it was able to turn around, come back and land," a senior official said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Although the plane managed to land safely, it was the third airliner struck in recent weeks. On November 22, a shoulder-fired SA-14 missile hit a DHL cargo plane as it took off from Baghdad airport. On December 10, a surface-to-air missile hit an Air Force C-17 troop transport plane.

Apart from the distant British-held southern port city of Basra, the airport provides the primary means of transporting soldiers, military equipment and logistical supplies into Iraq. This week's incident confirms that routine airport operations cannot be guaranteed against potentially fatal attacks.

The helicopter downing near Fallujah, an area of intense opposition to the US-led occupation, came 24 hours after the most recent US atrocity in the city, about 50 kilometres west of Baghdad. Several witnesses said US soldiers fired a tank missile at a residential building, killing a civilian couple, on January 7.

Footage shot by Associated Press Television News showed a shattered brick wall and another two stained with blood where, according to witnesses, 37-year-old Ahmed Hassan Farhoud and his wife, 28-year-old Suham Omar, were seated during the attack. They added that the couple's five children were sleeping in an adjoining room and survived unharmed.

"This is democracy, these corpses?" neighbour Raad Majeed asked. The US High Command made no comment despite repeated telephone calls and emails by Associated Press to the military personnel stationed in the town. Commanders of the 82nd Airborne Division later claimed that paratroopers had returned fire after receiving "two rounds of indirect fire". No weapons were found in the destroyed home.

Fallujah and other towns and villages in central Iraq, provocatively dubbed by the US authorities and media as the "Sunni triangle," have been the targets of heavy US raids, shootings and detentions for months. These methods seem to be

only fuelling the popular resentment and resistance.

The latest bloodshed in Fallujah is not an isolated event. On the day before, January 6, British troops and Iraqi police opened fire on a protest by about 6,000 former Iraqi soldiers, wounding at least four. The clash occurred just two days after British Prime Minister Tony Blair's lightning visit to Basra to address British soldiers.

The unemployed demonstrators, mostly ex-conscripts, gathered in front of three banks after failing to receive their salaries. They said they had not been paid since September, when they got a one-off payment of \$150 for three months' wages. They demanded their unpaid wages and pensions, threw stones at British troops and attempted to enter a bank, only to be confronted by British tanks.

A former Iraqi army officer, Ahmed Abdul Aziz, told reporters: "We are bread-winners and have families and want to feed our families." He condemned the British response. "Which is better, armed conflict or getting our rights peacefully?"

On January 4, the US military, accompanied by Iraqi police, provoked an outcry when they raided a Sunni mosque in western Baghdad, allegedly seizing arms and explosives. More than 1,000 worshippers at the al-Tabool mosque demonstrated against the five-hour raid, accusing the troops of violating their religion. "American soldiers entered the mosque with their shoes on and with machine guns in their hands," imam Abdulsatar al-Janabi said, "They trampled on the holy Koran, beat up some of the worshippers and stole computers and a donations box."

US generals and officials claim that Saddam Hussein's capture and interrogation have struck blows against the insurgency, or at least confined it to "hardcore" elements in predominantly Sunni Muslim areas. But the latest attacks, and a string of less-reported incidents, suggest otherwise.

Despite the erection of razor wire and checkpoints in strategic areas of Baghdad, 2004 began with two car bombings in the Iraqi capital. One hit a US convoy, wounding five US soldiers and five Iraqi civil defence personnel, as well as killing an eight-year-old boy and 11 others. Another tore through an upmarket restaurant frequented by occupation officials and US journalists, killing five people and injuring more than two dozen.

In the oil-rich northern city of Kirkuk, numerous people were killed in the first week of the year during demonstrations by ethnic Arab and Turkomen residents against proposals by Patriotic Union of Kurdistan leaders to form a Kurdish-controlled autonomous zone.

Throughout the week, there were scores of reports across the country of ambushes, gun battles and acts of sabotage directed against occupation troops, foreign contractors and oil installations. In one typical incident on January 7, an oil pipeline near the Syrian border, 135 kilometres west of Kirkuk, was damaged using explosives. On the same day, members of

the Iraqi resistance attacked a police checkpoint 80 kilometres from Kirkuk, killing one police officer and one civilian and wounding three oil company patrol guards.

While insisting that they are succeeding in subduing the resistance in Iraq, the US-led administration and the puppet Iraqi Governing Council on January 8 announced two initiatives aimed at obtaining badly-needed intelligence on the insurgency: a \$US200,000 reward program for the capture of wanted individuals, and a prisoner release program.

US administrator Paul Bremer said 506 of the 12,800 US detainees—held for months without trial in camps throughout the country—would be released, but only if they renounced support for the resistance and secured a guarantor among prominent backers of the US occupation. The first 100 were to be released from Baghdad's Abu Ghraib prison, where the US authorities have availed themselves of the notorious torture chambers once used by the Baath Party regime.

Efforts by the US authorities to portray the detainee releases as a goodwill gesture quickly backfired, however. About 80 men were freed from Abu Ghraib, but most Iraqi families waiting for the return of their loved ones were left disappointed and angry. Women carrying photographs of missing husbands, fathers or sons broke down in tears. "Liars! Liars! They won't let them out!" one woman shouted in dismay.

Reporters were given numerous accounts of innocent men who had been seized by American troops for no reason at all, or simply for possessing a rifle or voicing dissent or because their names had been given to US officials to settle old scores. Now the US administrators and their Iraqi collaborators expect these prisoners to become police agents for the new regime.

These injustices, symptomatic of the arbitrary and lawless character of the US occupation, combined with atrocious social conditions—mass joblessness, electricity blackouts, petrol rationing—will continue to provoke hatred for the colonial-style takeover of Iraq.



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