

# Protests grow against US-led occupation of Iraq

**Mike Head****15 January 2004**

Amid a wave of protests against the US-led occupation of Iraq, the country's most senior Shiite cleric has reiterated his opposition to the Bush administration's plans to instal an unelected provisional government on July 1. Both these developments—mass demonstrations demanding jobs and food, and the objections of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani—point to deepening problems for Washington and its allies.

The latest protests reveal growing impatience with the abject poverty, widespread joblessness, lack of basic facilities and military violence that have resulted from the American invasion. Significantly, they erupted first in southern Iraq, which is predominantly Shiite and under British control. Previously, coalition leaders claimed that the people of the south had overwhelmingly welcomed the occupying forces, particularly the British. Resistance was supposedly confined to the so-called Sunni Triangle north of Baghdad.

The demonstrations began on January 6 in the southern port city of Basra, where British troops and Iraqi police opened fire on a protest by about 6,000 former Iraqi soldiers demanding unpaid wages, wounding at least four. British tanks were called in after the ex-soldiers threw stones at troops and attempted to enter a bank.

On January 10, Iraqi police, backed by British and US troops, opened fire on hundreds of demonstrators outside the town hall in Amarah, 365 kilometres south-east of Baghdad, killing at least six and wounding seven. The protesters denounced the breaking of an earlier promise to create 8,000 local jobs in a civil defence corps. They also demanded food and an end to corruption. The town hall serves as the British military's HQ.

British military officials claimed that the police officers had been under attack and that explosions had been heard from the crowd. They reported that one victim had been in the process of throwing a bomb and demonstrators had been armed with cans packed with explosive powder and nails. Yet, no British troops or Iraqi officers were injured.

Likewise, the US military insisted that occupation forces had shot dead an Iraqi "terrorist" after he tossed grenades during the demonstration. "At 10.45 a.m., one Iraqi terrorist was killed during violent demonstrations in Amarah," a US military spokesman said. Participants, however, condemned the response of the police and troops. "We came here to get a job, but instead of giving us a chance they opened fire on us," one told a reporter.

The following day, British troops baton-charged an angry crowd after people pelted them with stones in protest over the previous day's shootings. Demonstrators handed out a leaflet demanding a new governor, compensation for the deaths and the arrest of the soldiers who fired on the protesters.

On January 12, about 200 people gathered in Amarah for the third day in a row, despite the presence of British helicopter gunships

hovering over the centre of the town since dawn. British troops blocked the marchers from advancing on a local government headquarters. British commanders instituted foot patrols, road closures and random searches to cover the withdrawal of Iraqi police after they fired on the January 10 rally.

On the same day, the unrest spread to Kut, 120 kilometres south-east of Baghdad, where two Ukrainian soldiers and an unknown number of civilians were wounded after 1,000 demonstrators demanding jobs hurled bricks at government buildings. The deputy commander of the Ukrainian forces in Kut said his men had opened fire after two hand grenades were thrown at troops guarding the governor's building.

A Polish military spokesman for the US-led coalition gave a more frank explanation. "There was a demonstration of 1,000 people. They started to be offensive and moving forward and shouting, so the Ukrainians fired some warning shots in the air," Polish Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Strzelecki said. His account suggests that the sight of a large demonstration was enough to trigger shooting by soldiers, whether under orders to do so or because of fear.

Clashes continued for a second day in Kut, with angry demonstrators confronting Ukrainian army tanks and Iraqi police at the City Hall plaza, before dispersing at the urging of a local Shiite cleric. Among them were recently dismissed soldiers and labourers who have long been jobless. Their wrath was primarily directed at US-appointed officials, whether former exiles or ex-members of the former ruling Baath Party, who they said demanded bribes.

"People have gone without jobs for a year, and they are ready to tear down buildings," one participant, Mohammed Ali, 23, told a journalist. Abdul Karim Mustafa, 43, a doctor watching the protests said: "The Shiite people are peaceful and dignified, but when their rights are stolen, no foreign troops can stop them. These people are not terrorists, but they are desperate enough to die."

The clashes in southern Iraq signal the revival of protests over the lack of jobs since Saddam Hussein's capture last month. The US-British invasion of Iraq has led to a social catastrophe. A joint United Nations-World Bank report issued in October estimated the number of unemployed and underemployed working people in Iraq at 50 percent of the country's 26 million population. Of those, 400,000 were Iraqi soldiers who lost their jobs when US administrator Paul Bremer abolished the army.

Clashes with troops have also continued in the north. On January 12, US soldiers shot and wounded six Iraqi civilians in response to an attack on their convoy in Ramadi, 80 kilometres west of Baghdad. Witnesses said US soldiers fired randomly after a roadside bomb hit their vehicle. The soldiers then raided houses in the area. Reuters television footage showed cars and front doors pierced by bullets.

One man showed bullet holes in his kitchen pots and pans as well as a shattered television screen. "There were only innocent children here," he said. "What did they think, that Saddam Hussein was here?" Other residents said they rushed to extinguish a fire that had erupted in the nearby area, when they were caught in the firefight. "They (US soldiers) handcuffed us, beat and kicked us with their boots. We are policemen and firefighters," a policeman said.

Ramadi has become a centre of resistance in recent months. American convoys regularly come under attack and soldiers carry out constant raids looking for insurgents in the town. Three days before the latest incident, the US military said soldiers had uncovered a "large weapons cache" while searching a house.

One of the issues fuelling hostility across Iraq is the mounting civilian casualties at the hands of occupying forces. Occupation Watch, an international group of antiwar organisations, released a report last weekend estimating that between 7,900 and 9,800 civilians have died from war-related causes since the US invasion.

The group accused the US military of arbitrarily and cruelly rejecting many compensation claims. As of September, the US military had received 5,400 claims, for civilian deaths in non-combat circumstances, of which 4,148 had been adjudicated and 1,874 denied.

Against this background of rising social discontent, Ayatollah al-Sistani, 72, who is the official religious leader of Iraqi Shiites, restated his demand that the provisional assembly, which Washington plans to establish in July to draft a new constitution, be elected rather than chosen by the occupation regime.

In a statement issued by his office in the holy city of Najaf, south of Baghdad, al-Sistani said the US plan, unveiled last November, would give birth to an illegitimate government. The US intends to have carefully-vetted regional caucuses select members of a provisional national assembly. "This will, in turn, give rise to new problems and the political and security situation will deteriorate," he said.

A full-page advertisement in the newspaper *al-Zaman* quoted al-Sistani as telling a delegation of tribal leaders that power must rest with Iraqis and "not outsiders," an apparent reference to the US-led authorities. Sistani also warned that only a directly elected government could negotiate the continued presence of coalition troops in Iraq beyond July 1.

Coming from the country's highest-ranking Shiite cleric, his remarks are doubly problematic for Washington because Al-Sistani has until now taken a largely passive stance toward the US invasion. His comments were issued despite weeks of behind-the-scenes negotiations between his aides and members of the puppet Iraqi Governing Council to produce what an anonymous White House official cynically termed a "workable compromise".

Al-Sistani appears to be responding to the rising tide of opposition to the US occupation and attempting to maintain his own position. He risks being sidelined if he extends too close support for Washington's measures. That is also why the US authorities are attempting to accommodate him. They need to maintain the extremely limited bases of support that they have.

Al-Sistani is not opposed to the US occupation. And he is demanding that the constitution be consistent with Islamic law, with judges drawn from a religious council of scholars he helps preside over. Nevertheless, his objections underscore the utterly anti-democratic nature of the US plan.

It calls for a complicated series of town and provincial council meetings, all convened under the watchful eye of the US military to ensure that preferred Iraqi agents are selected as national assembly

members by the end of May. The national assembly would choose a national government by the end of June and supervise the drafting of a constitution. No elections would be held until the end of 2005 at the earliest.

Before last November, the Bush administration had proposed that a constitution be drafted and elections held before the creation of such a Washington-backed government. It rejected calls by the Pentagon's favoured stooge, Ahmed Chalabi, and his Iraqi National Congress for the early creation of a token provisional government.

A number of conflicting considerations determined the official about-face. Among them was the need to head off popular discontent by quickly installing an ostensibly Iraqi regime. Another was that it would be a blatant violation of international law for an occupying power to impose the sweeping economic looting operation that US corporations have in mind for Iraq, including wholesale privatisation of the oil industry and the removal of barriers to foreign investment.

Even more pressing, the Bush camp is anxious to have a "sovereign" regime in place for its own narrow electoral reasons. Confronted by continuing armed resistance and political discontent, it needs a public relations "success" in Iraq before the final stage of the US presidential election, regardless of the reality.

Al-Sistani's intervention seemed to cause confusion in official circles. US administrator Bremer, sticking to the White House line, immediately ruled out holding elections. He declared that it would be simply impossible to organise the necessary legislation, procedures and facilities before the July 1 deadline.

White House officials, however, later told US media outlets that the administration was working on "hybrid plan" under which direct elections would be held in Baghdad and surrounding towns dominated by Shiite Muslims, while caucuses would be held in other areas of the country.

These manoeuvres have nothing to do with the democratic rights and aspirations of the Iraqi population. Rather, they are about establishing arrangements with the competing business and religious elites in Iraq to set up a regime that can simultaneously suppress popular unrest and clear the way for unrestricted profit-making.



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