

Japanese parliament ratifies troop deployment for Iraq

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7 February 2004

Despite widespread public opposition, the Japanese government last weekend rammed legislation through the lower house of the Diet (parliament) approving the deployment of troops to Iraq. While endorsement and a supplementary budget bill to pay for the operation are not expected to pass in the upper house until next week, the dispatch of Japanese soldiers has already begun.

An advance team of 30 troops is stationed in the southern Iraqi city of Samawa and another 80 Japanese soldiers have arrived in Kuwait for deployment to Iraq. In all, more than 1,000 troops are expected to be in Samawa by March. It is the first time since World War II that Japanese troops have been sent overseas to what is an active combat zone.

Throughout the debate Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi has maintained the fiction that the Japanese contingent is simply engaged in humanitarian work. But the troops will be fully armed and authorised to use their weapons to defend themselves. Continuing armed resistance to the US-led occupation of Iraq could mean that Japanese soldiers will be involved in combat sooner rather than later.

The deployment marks a sharp political shift. For more than five decades, the Japanese political establishment has abided by the so-called pacifist clause of the constitution effectively banning the use of military force except in self-defence. In the 1990s, however, sections of the ruling class have pressed for an end to such restrictions so as to permit the more aggressive pursuit of their economic and strategic interests.

The extent of the change underway was underscored by the New Komeito Party's support for the Iraq deployment. While New Komeito is in coalition with Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), it has in the past adhered to a strict interpretation of the post-war pacifist

constitution. The party is connected to Japan's largest Buddhist body, Soka Gakkai, and portrays itself as a pacifist organisation.

The main opposition parties—the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), the Social Democratic Party and the Communist Party—boycotted the parliamentary session on January 31 in protest over the bill and the manner it had been pushed through the committee stages.

The opposition criticism has been very limited however. While condemning the current deployment unconstitutional, these parties do not oppose the decision in principle. DPJ President Naoto Kan offered to “explore the possibility” of establishing a separate “UN Standby Force” to allow Japanese troops to be sent overseas.

The parliamentary protest by the opposition parties was aimed at containing the broad popular hostility to the deployment. According to newspaper opinion polls, more than 50 percent of respondents oppose the sending of troops to Iraq despite the sustained efforts of the government and the media to drum up support.

More than 8,000 protesters gathered in Tokyo last weekend to express their opposition to the deployment. A small protest was again held in the city of Asahikawa which houses the military base from where the latest group of soldiers were sent to Iraq. About 50 protesters marched around the perimeter to protest Koizumi's visit to send off the troops.

One of the protestors, Asahikawa University president Ryochi Yamauchi, told the *Asia Times*: “By sending troops to Iraq, Japan is losing something extremely precious. Since the end of World War II, no Japanese soldier has shot or killed any human being. That is something for Japan to be truly proud of and it's worth fighting to preserve.”

In his speech to the departing troops, Koizumi

declared: “You are not going to war. You are not going to use military force or engage in combat. Your actions will help the Iraqi people, giving them the hope they need to rebuild their country.”

Despite the rhetoric, however, the government is acutely aware of the dangers confronting Japanese troops and the impact that casualties in Iraq would have on the political situation in Japan. According to the *Christian Science Monitor*, a virtual blackout has been imposed on any reporting of the troop deployment. Reporters are being prevented from entering the base in Samawa and there are no media briefings.

While the stated reason is “security”, an LDP source told the *Weekly Post*: “If Japanese TV stations air scenes showing SDF [Self Defence Force] camps or soldiers being attacked by terrorists, the Koizumi cabinet will collapse. That is why Prime Minister Koizumi and Cabinet Secretary Fukuda are asking news organisations to refrain from reporting.”

In a bid to minimise the dangers, the government is also attempting to buy protection for the troops. An article in the *Weekly Post* reported that the government was planning to give 24 local tribal leaders near Samawa 10 billion yen (\$US94 million) as a lump sum to protect Japanese soldiers from terrorist attacks. Abdul Amir Rikaabi, leader of the Rikaabi tribe, visited Tokyo last December to meet with Koizumi.

The tribal leaders have already begun to organise a virtual private army, with armbands that read “volunteer soldiers guarding Japan’s SDF in Samawa”. They have also obtained backing from an Iraqi Shiite cleric, Maad al Waili, who has issued a fatwa or a religious edict calling on residents of the Samawa region to protect Japanese troops from attacks.

A spokesman for the prime minister told the newspaper: “It is more important for the Japanese government to make one-time payments to the leaders than to pay a salary. If the Japanese government pays them, it will nourish their local economy and benefit Japan’s foreign policy toward new Iraq... It is rather cheap if we can buy security for our soldiers with that amount of money.”

An article published by the US-based Stratfor thinktank indicated that other considerations were involved. Entitled “Japan in Iraq: Deploying Troops, Greasing Hands and Seeking Oil,” it made the point that the 10 billion yen bribe was not just to buy

protection but rather was seen “as the first step toward resurrecting Japanese claims for Iraqi oil.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* has previously explained that one of the main reasons behind Japan’s decision to deploy troops to Iraq was to secure access to the country’s oil supplies. Japanese corporations are seeking rights to develop the one-billion-barrel Al Gharaf oilfield in southern Iraq. Interest in the oil field dates back to the late 1980s, when Iraq was one of Japan’s main suppliers of oil and Japan was one of Iraq’s largest trading partners.

As the Stratfor article noted, the oil field, which is estimated to produce 130,000 barrels a day, is located just 40 miles due east of Samawa. The military base is thus very conveniently located to look after Japanese corporate interests. And the 10 billion yen has been placed “in just the right hands” to ensure that local tribes will look after Japan’s oil investment in the long term, as well as Japanese troops in the short term.

While Koizumi claims that the troop deployment will be reconsidered in the event of fighting in the Samawa area, exactly the opposite is the case. The soldiers have been sent to Iraq to defend the interests of Japanese imperialism both immediately in the Al Gharaf oilfield and more broadly by establishing a precedent for dispatching troops elsewhere.



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