

Operation Iraqi Bloodbath: US prepares reprisals against uprising

James Conachy
6 April 2004

The invasion of Iraq last year was christened “Operation Iraqi Freedom” in an attempt to deflect from the utterly predatory and criminal character of US ambitions in the Middle East. Twelve months later, as American troops prepare to close in on the Shiite youth who have taken up arms against them in Baghdad and other cities, and marines prepare reprisals against the city of Fallujah, a more apt name would be “Operation Iraqi Bloodbath.”

As the situation stood on Monday night, an arrest warrant has been issued by the US Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) against the religious leader of the Shiite uprising, 31-year-old cleric Moqtada Sadr. Along with many of his most senior associates, he has been accused of responsibility for the killing of a Shiite cleric in April 2003. No evidence has been provided and the allegation has been repeatedly denied.

Sadr is barricaded inside the main mosque in the city of Kufa. He has issued a statement that he will not leave until the US occupation authority “guarantees” when foreign forces will leave Iraq and the lifting of the ban on his newspaper *Al Hawza*. Thousands of his young supporters, both armed and unarmed, are occupying the mosque’s courtyard and surrounding area to prevent any attempt by the American military to seize him.

In a direct threat against the cleric’s life, US General Mark Kimmitt told the press yesterday: “Whether Sadr decides to come peacefully, or whether he decides to come not peacefully—that choice is the choice of Mister Moqtada Sadr.” Kimmitt declared: “Individuals who create violence, who incite violence... will be hunted down and captured or killed. It’s that simple.”

A member of Sadr’s “Mehdi Army” militia told Agence France Presse (AFP) in Kufa: “We are ready to sacrifice our lives for our leader Moqtada if the coalition troops touch a single strand of his hair.”

The 500,000 citizens of Fallujah, the Sunni Muslim centre where four American mercenaries were killed and paraded through the streets last week, are waiting for the inevitable re-entry of US troops into the city. The American military has sealed off the roads with earth barricades and imposed a dawn to dusk curfew. *Al Jazeera* reported that its journalists have been blocked from entering the city. Helicopters and jet fighters are stalking the sky above.

A force of 1,200 marines and hundreds of Iraqi Civil Defence Corp (ICDC) troops are “poised” to go in, according to a marine spokesman Lieutenant James Vanzant. The US troops reportedly have lists of addresses they allege are the homes of resistance fighters, or of youth who were involved in parading the mercenaries’ corpses. Leaflets were distributed throughout the city yesterday warning people to stay inside their homes.

Air strikes were called in Sunday night against a residential area the American military claimed was being used as a mortar base. Five houses were damaged, five civilians killed and a number of others injured. One marine was reportedly killed and several wounded on the fringes of the city by mortar attacks.

A marine colonel told the *Los Angeles Times* on the weekend: “Fallujah is a barrier on the highway to progress. We’re going to eliminate the barrier without damaging the highway.”

The reprisal mentality guiding the American military forces calls to mind nothing less than the conduct of Nazi occupation forces in Europe during World War II. By the end of the war, the very term reprisal had become synonymous with the mass killing of civilian populations supporting popular and legitimate guerilla warfare against the Nazis. Hitler, in answer to the operations of Soviet partisans, for example, issued instructions in 1942 that “whatever succeeds is correct.” The German military command responded by ordering its occupation troops to use “any means, even against women and children, provided they are conducive to success.”

The prospect is looming in Iraq for an orgy of killing by US troops, in desperate and murderous efforts to carry out the orders of the Bush administration that they bring the situation under control. Bush declared from North Carolina that the US had to “stay the course, and we will stay the course [in Iraq].”

He was joined by Democrat presidential candidate John Kerry. While calling again for the involvement of the United Nations and other powers in Iraq, he declared his full support for “whatever’s necessary to protect our troops that are there and to provide for stability and success.” Other leading Democrats have followed suit.

The implications of restoring “stability” are enormous. Entire swathes of the country are now in a state of revolt over the crackdown against Sadr.

Militiamen have control of the streets of Najaf, where they have taken up positions around one of the holiest sites of the Shiite faith, the mausoleum of Ali. Spanish troops in the area came under what the Spanish Defence Ministry described as “sporadic attack from mortar launchers.” The Spanish statement declared: “The situation in Najaf has been one of high tension.” The Iraqi police have reportedly abandoned the city to Sadr’s supporters.

In Karbala, Kut, Amara and Basra armed militiamen are also on the streets. So far, British and other occupation forces have avoided a direct confrontation, but gunfire exchanges took place at various times during the day.

In Baghdad, senior members of Sadr’s organisation are barricaded inside their headquarters in the eastern “Sadr City” suburb, which was named after the radical cleric’s father. American tanks and troops are

in battle positions just hundreds of metres away. Militiamen are manning road and rooftop positions and at main intersections leading into the area. When US forces attempted to move toward the headquarters earlier in the day, crowds of unarmed Shiite civilians sat down in the middle of road to block their path, chanting “Long live Moqtada.”

Fighting flared early Monday in the northwest Baghdad suburb of Shuala. A convoy of US and ICDC troops attempting to enter the area was attacked and one truck set ablaze. According to an unconfirmed report, the ICDC troops joined the militia and turned their guns on the Americans. For the first time since last November, Apache attack helicopters were called in to provide covering fire while the US troops pulled out.

It is now clear that the events on Sunday have already inflicted large numbers of civilian casualties in Baghdad. At least 47 people were killed when US troops opened fire on a pro-Sadr demonstration in the city centre. During the fighting that raged Sunday night in Sadr City, a market and a number of buildings were levelled by American tanks. “They came in humvees and we kicked their asses,” a 20-year-old youth told United Press International, “but after we burned the two humvees, their tanks came late last night and shot everyone.”

UPI reporters saw at least 12 civilian bodies in one hospital, including two children. Doctors claimed at least 12 others had already been taken away by their families. According to militiamen, they did not take their dozens of dead and wounded to the hospitals out of fear they would be arrested.

Doctor Tariq Atham told UPI: “I never saw a more despicable and evil action by the Americans. Even Sharon or Saddam are better. They [the American troops] shot children and women in the face and neck every time.”

In the midst of such atrocities, and preparations for even greater ones, CPA head Paul Bremer denounced Sadr yesterday as an “outlaw”, who was “attempting to establish his authority in the place of the legitimate authority.”

The only “authority” Bremer is referring to is the repressive power of the American military. Despite the Islamic fundamentalist perspective of Sadr’s organisation, the movement that erupted on Sunday in his name is based among Iraq’s urban poor and is motivated by justified, anti-colonial resistance to the American conquest of their country.

No institution created by the US invasion, especially the one Bremer heads, has any political or moral legitimacy, let alone popular support. The war was illegal and conducted on the basis of threadbare lies—one of the most threadbare of which, apart from Iraq possessing “weapons of mass destruction,” was that the Iraqi people would welcome foreign invaders as “liberators.”

The majority of Iraqis have been reduced to unspeakable poverty and deprivation by 13 years of US-led wars and economic sanctions. While still enduring mass unemployment and deprivation, they are witnessing the US attempt to install a puppet government that they do not support and which will give the US control over the country’s energy resources and territory for military bases.

There is a clear element of provocation in the US actions against Sadr. Bremer and the military have sought to push the cleric—who has been one of the more vocal critics of the US plans for a puppet regime—into a corner from which he had no choice but to either completely capitulate or sanction an uprising.

Sadr’s newspaper was banned on March 28 for “inciting violence,” bringing thousands of his supporters into the streets throughout last

week in protest. Amidst the turbulence, one of his closest associates was arrested on Saturday on murder charges. The resulting mass protests on Sunday were fired on by coalition troops in both Najaf and Baghdad, leading to the uprising and pitched battles of Sunday night. It is doubtful whether Sadr had any particular control over the course of events.

In a column in today’s British *Guardian*, journalist Naomi Klein posed the obvious question: Why would the US provoke armed resistance in the Shiite population when it is already incapable of suppressing the guerilla war in the Sunni regions of the country?

Klein gave one possible answer: “Washington has given up on its plans to hand over power to an interim Iraqi government on June 30, and is creating the chaos it needs to declare the handover impossible. A continued occupation will be bad news for George Bush on the campaign trail, but not as bad as if the hand-over happens and the country erupts, an increasingly likely scenario given the widespread rejection of the legitimacy of the interim constitution and the US-appointed Governing Council.”

The speculation is entirely valid. The invasion of Iraq has become a political debacle for the Bush administration. The latest Pew Research opinion poll shows that only 32 percent of Americans believe the White House has a “clear plan” of what to do in Iraq. Only 50 percent support keeping troops in the country, down from 63 percent in January. Bush’s personal approval rating of 43 percent is the lowest the survey has ever registered.

The US political and media establishment, which completely backed the war and is totally committed to continuing the occupation, faces an increasingly skeptical and hostile American public that believes anything Bush says about Iraq is a lie. All that are left are hollow appeals that the US cannot risk the global political consequences of being seen to “cut and run” in the face of the growing quagmire. The Democrats have stepped forward as the main promoters of this position. The US, Kerry declared yesterday, “cannot allow this [Iraq] to end in failure.”

The American working class, however, has everything to gain from the failure of the criminal enterprise in Iraq. It is being carried out against their interests, at the expense of their democratic rights and at the cost of hundreds of American, and thousand of Iraqi, lives. The only progressive answer is the immediate and unconditional withdrawal from Iraq of all US and foreign forces.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact