

Thousands dead and wounded

US military seeks to crush Iraqi uprising

James Conachy
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A week of bloody repression by the US military and allied forces has killed at least 1,300 Iraqis and left thousands more wounded. Jet fighters, helicopters, tanks and artillery have been used indiscriminately to try and crush the popular uprising that began against the US-led occupation on April 3. Large numbers of the dead and injured are women, children and other noncombatants.

The city of Fallujah, which marines have surrounded and began assaulting on April 5 in reprisal for the killing of four American security guards on March 31, has become a symbol of both Iraqi defiance and US brutality. By Friday, US forces had only advanced several kilometres into the industrial suburbs. Marines have described fighting “block by block” and assessed the resistance as far greater than during the invasion of Iraq last March. Over 75 percent of the city is still being held by Iraqi fighters.

Hundreds of homes and other buildings in Fallujah, including two mosques, have been damaged by US air strikes, strafing runs by Apache helicopter gunships and artillery and mortar shells. The city has no electricity, water supplies have been disrupted and food is running out. The vicious operation has been denounced as “heavy-handed” and “collective punishment” even by British officers and Iraqi supporters of the US occupation.

A temporary ceasefire was called on Friday. A further ceasefire was declared on Sunday and was still largely holding on Tuesday morning, despite periodic outbreaks of gunfire. The main motive of the US military is to rest their exhausted and overstretched troops, bring in reinforcements and prepare for another bloody offensive. The head of American Central Command, General John Abizaid, told the press: “I think you’ll see a series of very clear military moves over the next couple of weeks that will get ourselves into a position to do what needs to be done.”

Associated Press described the tragic scenes in the city after the first ceasefire took effect: “Many families, emerging from their homes for the first time in days, buried slain relatives in the city football stadium. A stream of hundreds of cars carrying women, children and the elderly

headed out of the city after marines announced they would be allowed to leave. Families pleaded to be able to take out men, but the marines refused. Some entire families turned back.”

Doctor Rafa Hayd al-Issawim, the director of Fallujah’s hospital, told *Al Jazeera*: “I can say more than 600 have been killed, but the number may not be correct as many families have already buried their dead in their gardens.” Five international non-government organisations (NGOs) estimated a minimum of 470 dead and 1,200 wounded, including 243 women and 200 children.

As many as 60,000 refugees have now fled Fallujah. Those entering Baghdad have recounted numerous atrocities by US troops. Abbas Ibrahim, a 30-year-old man who escaped on Friday, told the Lebanese *Daily Star*: “As soon as the Americans see a group of people in the streets, they shoot at them. People venture out only if their homes risk being bombarded or if they must carry the dead or wounded to the city’s clinics.” A Red Crescent official who arrived in the city on Thursday said: “Fallujah is a ghost town, a battlefield. The streets were deserted, no cars, all the shops were closed, homes and stores bombarded.”

The indiscriminate bombardment of Fallujah by the US military has fueled the nation-wide opposition to the occupation. It has strengthened the Iraqi people’s sense that they are fighting a common struggle, against the attempts by the US authority to promote sectarian differences between Shiite and Sunni communities.

Across the country, Sunni and Shiite Iraqis have rallied to appeals for food and blood donations to assist the people of Fallujah and other cities under attack by coalition forces. A Shiite cleric collecting supplies at the Kadhimiya mosque in Baghdad told the *Washington Post*: “This is strong proof that the people of Iraq will end wars between Sunni and Shiite before they begin. And we welcome Iraqis of all religions—Jews, Christians, everyone—to come and help the people of Fallujah and Karbala and Mosul and Nasiriyah and Basra.”

The first convoy of humanitarian relief arrived on the

outskirts of the besieged city last Thursday. Thousands of unarmed Iraqis—both Sunni and Shiites—pelted American troops blocking their path with rocks. A former United Nations aid worker told the *Washington Post* that the US military eventually allowed food supplies to enter, but refused blood and other medical necessities.

There have been a number of reports of Shiite militiamen infiltrating past American lines to join the Sunni fighters in Fallujah who are defying the US. A teacher in the “Mehdi Army” militia of Moqtada al-Sadr told the *New York Times*: “We have orders from our leader to fight as one and to help the Sunnis. We want to increase the fighting, increase the killing and drive the Americans out. To do this, we must combine forces.”

Moqtada al-Sadr, who has fortified himself and thousands of his supporters in the holy Shiite city of Najaf, issued a statement on Friday: “I direct my speech to my enemy Bush and I tell him that if your excuse was that you are fighting Saddam, then this is past and now you are fighting the entire Iraqi people.”

After days of operations to win back the suburbs of Baghdad and the southern Iraqi cities taken over by Shiite militiamen loyal to al-Sadr, the US military claimed yesterday that the coalition had killed at least 700 Iraqi fighters. US casualties in April so far stand at 76 dead and over 250 wounded.

Fighting is continuing in Sadr City, in the Sunni Baghdad suburb of Adhimiya, and on the western and southern fringes of the capital, where Iraqi fighters are launching determined attacks to disrupt the attempts of the US military to resupply the marines besieging the city of Fallujah. At least three American convoys have been ambushed and an Apache helicopter was shot down on Sunday.

A US commander in Baghdad told the press that “full security has not yet been established” in the capital. Over 200,000 people took part in a joint Sunni-Shiite prayer vigil against the US occupation on Friday. Most of the US-recruited police in “Sadr City”—the working class districts of eastern Baghdad—are wearing photos of Moqtada Sadr over their badges. Most of the city shut down over the weekend, as shopkeepers and workers responded to an appeal by Sunni and Shiite religious leaders for a strike.

The *Wall Street Journal* commented on April 12: “Despite US officials’ claims that the uprisings have no grass-roots support, the public adherence to a cleric’s call for a general strike demonstrates just how much the relationship between Americans and Iraqis has deteriorated over the past few weeks. The streets of Baghdad were largely empty over the weekend, with the majority of businesses closed. Schools, universities and government buildings also shut down.”

The uprising has utterly shattered the claims of the Bush

administration that the US presence in Iraq is aimed at “liberation”. The occupation does not have the support of any significant section of the population. Every institution the US has attempted to create as part of its agenda to plunder Iraq and turn it into a client state has broken apart under the pressure of a popular uprising of the Iraqi people.

The US military reported on the weekend that at least 25 percent of the Iraqi police and Civil Defence Corp (ICDC) was either refusing to fight the uprising or had joined it. One of the US-trained battalions of the new Iraqi Army mutinied on the weekend and refused to obey orders to join the attack on Fallujah.

By the end of the last week, members of the handpicked Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) were openly denouncing the conduct of the US military. Adnan Pachachi, who sat beside Laura Bush during the State of the Union address in January and was named by Bush as one of the closest US allies in Iraq, appeared on *Al Arabiya* on Friday to denounce the siege of Fallujah as “unacceptable and illegal.” Adbul Karim Mahoud al-Mohammedawi, a leader of the Shiite Marsh Arabs, announced he was resigning from the IGC until “the bleeding stops in Iraq.” At least two other members of the council also resigned.

Preparations are being made, however, for further repression. Despite news of a negotiated settlement between representatives of the IGC and Sadr for his militia to hand back control of official buildings to the Iraqi police, the US is building up its forces on the outskirts of Najaf.

In the murderous language one has come to expect from American political and military leaders, General Ricardo Sanchez told journalists yesterday: “The mission of US forces is to kill or capture Moqtada al-Sadr.”



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