

US military launches bloody attacks on rebel strongholds in Iraq

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In little-publicised moves, the American military has launched a broad series of attacks in Iraq to try and forcibly subdue many of the major centres of armed resistance to the US-led occupation. Scores of people, many of them innocent men, women and children, have been killed in airstrikes, tank and artillery barrages and aggressive patrols aimed at intimidating and terrorising the population as a whole.

Fallujah, a symbol of anti-US opposition throughout the country, has been subjected to four successive days of aerial bombardment this week. US military spokesmen insisted that the air raids used “precision” munitions to target militia bases associated with alleged Al Qaeda terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. However, as in the case of all such US attacks, no evidence was provided, either before or after the bombing, to verify the claims.

The immediate reason for the sustained assault on Fallujah was retribution for an ambush on a US convoy to the north of the city which killed seven US Marines on Monday. The following day the US military responded with airstrikes on the southern and eastern parts of the town of 300,000 people. The 1st Marine Expeditionary Force, which remains entrenched on the outskirts of Fallujah, unleashed an intense tank and artillery barrage on the southern Shuhada district.

The US military claimed that 100 “insurgents” had been killed in the attack, adding that there were “no noncombatant casualties”. Dr Muhammad Aboud declared, however, that of the four bodies at his hospital one was an eight-year-old child and another a 65-year-old man. The same tragic pattern has been repeated on each successive day: airstrikes purportedly targetting “militants” and “terrorists” have been followed by a stream of dead and wounded into the town’s hospitals.

On Wednesday, US warplanes killed at least two people and wounded another 23. On Thursday, a “precision strike” killed eight people of whom four were children and two were women, according to local doctor Rafi Hayad. Reuters TV showed footage of several bloodied and heavily bandaged children in a Fallujah hospital. The US military later acknowledged that an “unknown number of Iraqi civilians were unfortunately among those killed and wounded”. Yesterday another man was killed in a US airstrike which supposedly destroyed a rocket launcher.

The US military was compelled to call off an offensive to

seize Fallujah in May in the face of fierce resistance and mounting outrage over the destruction being wrought on the town. Nominally, control was handed to the “Fallujah Protection Brigade”, cobbled together by a former Baathist officer, but this force has all but disappeared. Members of the Iraqi National Guard who were meant to support the Brigade fled the town after one of their commanders was executed for spying for the Americans. The local police act under the tacit control of various anti-US resistance groups, whose fighters patrol the streets and monitor most roads into the town.

Efforts by US-installed Prime Minister Ayad Allawi to cajole local leaders into allowing the US military into the city have failed. Local cleric Khaled Hamoud, who was part of a delegation to Baghdad last week, told Associated Press: “If there is occupation, there must be resistance. We want to live in peace, but it seems that Fallujah is punished for every attack on the Americans, no matter where it takes place.”

Tal Afar, near the northern city of Mosul, has been under siege for more than two weeks. US and Iraqi government forces have completely sealed off the town, which American spokesmen describe as “a hotbed of militant activity”. Some of the fiercest fighting took place on Thursday when, according to local health officials, at least 27 people were killed and more than 70 injured. On the previous day, 17 people had died and another 51 were wounded in a savage, seven-hour bombardment.

The American military claimed to have killed 57 “enemy” on Thursday, using a combination of tanks, warplanes and attack helicopters against lightly armed resistance fighters. Again, many of the dead were civilians. Bashir Abboush, a sheep farmer, told the *New York Times*: “There was bombing everywhere and my cousin was killed by a rocket when he was trying to get his family out of the city. The city is weeping. It is empty of people.”

In comments to the Qatar-based *Al Jazeera* website, provincial health director Dr Rabya Khalil angrily denounced the authorities’ refusal to allow medical assistance into the town. “We sent ambulances, medical teams and medical supplies but unfortunately the Iraqi national guardsmen prevented them from entering the town. This is a shameful action and an unacceptable act, as how could wounded be

evacuated to hospitals?”

The doctor appealed to the Allawi government “to intervene to prevent such violation of human rights. It was a slaughter that should not have taken place. All the casualties were Iraqis. Residents of Tal Afar resisted occupation forces which carried out this attack to punish them.”

The only response came from Abdel Aziz al-Hakim, leader of the pro-occupation Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), who declared on Friday that such “catastrophes” could be avoided if the Iraqi government were in charge of security. There is no doubt, however, that Allawi, a longstanding CIA asset, gave the go-ahead for the US assault on Tal Afar, and would have no compunction in ordering Iraqi forces to use the same brutal methods.

The savagery of the attack on Tal Afar even prompted a muted protest from neighbouring Turkey. Foreign ministry spokesman Namik Tan appealed to Washington to quickly end the military operation, “not to harm the civilian population and [to] avoid using excessive and non-selective force.” The town has a large number of minority Turkomens.

Sadr City, the impoverished Baghdad suburb that is home to some two million people, has also been subject to repeated attack this week, after negotiations with rebel Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr’s Mahdi Army broke down. At least 30 Iraqis were killed in clashes on Tuesday, along with one US soldier killed, and another 193 wounded.

The ill-equipped Mahdi army fighters planted explosives and blocked roads with stones and tyres in a desperate attempt to halt the US military entering the area in tanks and armoured vehicles. “Our fighters had no choice but to return fire and to face the US forces and helicopters pounding our houses,” Sadr spokesman Sheikh Raed al-Khadami told the *Independent*.

In comments to the *Military Times*, Brigadier General Michael Jones bluntly spelled out the US strategy in Sadr City. “The Madhi militia guys, they want to negotiate... I don’t know how it makes you feel, but our negotiating position is, ‘You turn in all your weapons, you disband and we won’t kill you.’ That’s our negotiating position. We are going to finish these guys off, so we don’t have to keep screwing with them forever.”

Clashes continued on Wednesday after US warplanes repeatedly shot into a house early in the morning. Another four Iraqis were killed in the attack. Local residents told the *Christian Science Monitor* that attempts to move the wounded by car were met with more US gunfire.

Bushra Hamood, a black-robed woman, angrily exclaimed: “The Americans are killing our fathers and brothers just as Saddam did, so of course the boys will join the resistance! I thought the Americans could do a lot of good in Iraq, but it has come to this!” Pointing to the blasted house and putrid water in the street, she exclaimed: “We have been pushed back to the age of boiling water.”

Anger over the deaths is certain to strengthen support for

armed resistance to the occupation. Sadr aide Sheikh Mohammed Ali Khadeem told the *Monitor*: “This war inside Sadr City and indeed all of Iraq will never end until the last American soldier leaves.” He branded Allawi “a tool of the Americans” and “a CIA thug”. Between 3,000 and 4,000 Sadr supporters held a demonstration in the suburb on Friday, denouncing Allawi and interim president Ghazi al-Yawar as infidels and chanting “Long live Sadr”.

Samarra, a no-go area to American troops for months, provided a graphic illustration of the US methods being employed to suppress opposition to the occupation. Major General John Batiste, head of the Army’s 1st Infantry Division, told a gathering of tribal leaders in Tikrit earlier in the week they would not receive “a dime of American taxpayers money” unless they helped the US military drive insurgents out of Samarra.

Ensnared in one of Hussein’s palaces, Batiste boasted to the media that a combination of diplomacy, US aid and army intimidation would persuade the city’s 500 militants to give up. If not, he said, his forces would attack. “It’ll be a quick fight and the enemy is going to die fast. The message for the people of Samarra is, peacefully or not, this is going to be solved.”

On Thursday, US soldiers backed by tanks, armoured personnel carriers and attack helicopters rolled into Samarra unopposed, set up checkpoints and installed a mayor, a police chief and a local council. “This is a significant step forward where the good people of Samarra are taking control of their destiny,” Batiste pompously announced. The army lifted its blockade of the main route into the city as “a sign of good faith”. Lacking a secure base for the night, Batiste then withdrew, along with his troops.

Whether or not the newly inserted mayor manages to cling to office, the episode underscores the absurdity of the Bush administration’s claims to be bringing democracy to Iraq. Confronting determined and growing armed resistance, which enjoys the support and sympathy of an overwhelming majority of the population, US generals think nothing of resorting to the same criminal methods as Hussein: bribery, threats and, if those fail, mass slaughter. And there is the Orwellian language to match: the installation of a mayor and a local council at the point of a US tank barrel is declared a step towards the Iraqi people “taking control of their destiny”.



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