

US troops begin slaughter in Fallujah

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The US assault on Fallujah should be regarded in the same way as opponents of Hitler's Nazi regime viewed the fascist bombing of the Spanish town of Guernica on April 27, 1937: a warning of what is in store for the international working class as a whole if imperialist militarism is not defeated and overthrown.

Over 10,000 US troops pushed into Fallujah yesterday from multiple directions, following raids on Sunday in the west to secure bridge crossings over the Euphrates River and to seize control of the city's major hospital. The ground assault has been preceded by weeks of intense air strikes and artillery fire to weaken the city defences. US jets have launched multiple attacks each day, pounding Fallujah with 1,000-pound and 500-pound bombs. The outer districts of the city have been devastated by barrages from 155mm cannon and tanks.

An Iraqi in Fallujah told the London *Times* before yesterday's attack began: "The damage is so heavy the suburbs look like they were hit by an earthquake."

An Agence France Presse correspondent covering the battle from the outskirts reported: "The skies above Fallujah burned red as artillery, war planes and tanks pounded the Iraqi rebel bastion... Missiles rained down indiscriminately on the city, with the action most intense in the Askari district in the northeast and Jolan in the northwest. 'They are in the process of incinerating the section', a Jolan local said."

An Iraqi journalist still in the city told Al Jazeera that the fighting in Jolan was fierce: "The city's defenders are responding to the US attacks with everything at their disposal."

There is no reliable estimate of how many Iraqi fighters and civilians, or US soldiers, are already dead and wounded. Apart from scattered and limited reports, there will be virtually no independent media coverage of the offensive or the conduct of the American forces. Few journalists are inside or near the city. The bulk of what is being published in the printed media is based on US military press releases and statements, or the censored reports of journalists embedded with American units. The bulk of what is being broadcast consists of what the US military has permitted to be filmed.

Censorship was the primary motive for seizing the Fallujah hospital before the major operation began. The American military wants to be able to prevent Iraqi doctors from speaking to the media about how many civilian casualties they are treating.

The Bush administration, along with its puppet Iraqi interim government headed by Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, claim that Fallujah is being stormed in order to "liberate" the city from "terrorists" and "foreign fighters" commanded by Al Qaeda-aligned extremist Abu Musaab al-Zarqawi.

These claims are crude slanders and deserve contempt. After months of US officials declaring they had firm information, US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld replied to a direct question yesterday as to whether he knew Zarqawi was in Fallujah with the answer: "I have no idea if he is there." Iraqis have consistently denied Zarqawi is in the city. To the extent men from neighbouring Arab countries have come to Fallujah to fight, it is overwhelmingly to assist the Iraqis defend themselves against the real foreign invaders—the US military.

In the areas of Europe that the Nazis occupied during World War II, the type of homicidal policy guiding the US assault on Fallujah was called "exemplary punishment". The Bush administration, with the support of the Democrats and the American media establishment, intends to reduce the city to rubble, and to kill or imprison its defenders, in order to make Fallujah an example to other rebellious areas of the consequences of opposing the occupation.

Fallujah is a symbol of the popular and legitimate Iraqi defiance of the US attempt to turn Iraq into a puppet-state. The city's citizenry have been at the forefront of the armed resistance to the repressive US occupation of country.

In April 2003, just days after the fall of Baghdad to the invasion force, American paratroopers massacred dozens of unarmed youth in Fallujah who were demonstrating against the presence of US troops in a city school. Fallujans, many of whom have training in the former Iraqi military, retaliated with a guerilla campaign that ultimately forced the US military to withdraw its troops from the city by the end of 2003.

In April this year, the killing of four American mercenaries

in the city was used as the pretext for a massive US offensive aimed at reestablishing occupation control. The city's fighters and civilians suffered horrific casualties, but were able to withstand the assault as the US military was confronted with an uprising across southern Iraq by Iraqi Shiites led by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. In order to concentrate forces on crushing the Shiite rebellion, a ceasefire was struck in Fallujah that left the city under the governance of a council of resistance and tribal leaders who have insisted that no occupation troops—US or allied—will be permitted inside.

For the six months since, the US military has been plotting revenge for the setback in April and, since June, softening up the city with air strikes. A ground assault was held off until after the Shiite uprising was suppressed in the south and until after the US elections, due to fears that the likely high American casualties would be detrimental to the Bush administration's reelection strategy.

With the election out of the way, Fallujah is now being attacked as the spearhead of an offensive to bring 22 Iraqi cities and towns—including the Shiite Sadr City suburb of Baghdad—under US control before elections are held in late January. The assault was preceded by the declaration of 60-days martial law in every province of Iraq except the three northern Kurdish-populated provinces. Allawi now has the power to declare curfews, street sweeps and the indiscriminate detention of "suspected" supporters of the resistance.

The aim of the US offensive and martial law is to ensure that the elections take place in a climate of repression, with the opposition to the occupation having been shattered or terrorised into submission, and the only candidates being the despised pro-US elements that agreed to join the interim government.

The main purpose of the propaganda about terrorism is to disorientate the American people about the real motives for the assault. It was also used to whip American troops, many of whom only recently arrived in Iraq and have never seen combat, into a frenzy of bloodlust and fear before being sent into battle.

Marine commander Lieutenant General John Sattler dehumanised Fallujah's defenders as "mugs, thugs, murderers and intimidators". Colonel Michael Shupp ordered his troops to shoot Iraqis attempting to surrender, "because of the threat of suicide bombers". Army Colonel Pete Newell declared: "We're going to start at one end of the city and we're not going to stop until we get to the other. If there's anybody left when that happens, we're going to turn around and we're going to go back and finish it."

Marine Colonel Gary Bradl made the most chilling call for mass murder, couching it as Christian fundamentalist duty.

He lectured his troops: "The enemy has got a face. He's called Satan. He's in Fallujah and we're going to destroy him."

The battle now underway is being directly compared by marine officers with the 1968 battle for Hue city in Vietnam. The comparison may prove to be accurate. In the course of 26 days of combat, over 600 US and allied troops were killed and 3,164 wounded, killing an estimated 5,000 Vietnamese fighters in the city. More than 10,000 houses were destroyed and 40 percent of the city reduced to rubble.

As one analyst on GlobalSecurity.org noted: "It was savage work—house-to-house fighting through city streets—of a type largely unseen by Americans since World War II. Ground gained in the fighting was to be measured in inches and each city block cost dearly: every alley, street corner, window and garden had to be paid for in blood" ("The Battle for Hue", 1968, James H. Willbanks, PhD).

The impact on young American soldiers being flung into a nightmare of death and destruction is reflected in the statements of Joseph Bowman, a 20-year-old marine from Texas: "We're ready to go. I'm just ready to get this done. I want to go and kill people, so we can go home. Kill them, and go home, that's all we can do now."

The rules of engagement that US troops like Bowman have been given will facilitate mass killings over the coming days and weeks. A 24-hour "curfew" has been imposed, meaning American troops have orders to fire on any male between 15 and 50, and any vehicle, they see on streets.

Fallujah, in military parlance, is a free fire zone. Every government and organisation around the world that has given support or legitimacy to the US occupation of Iraq carries political responsibility for the war crime now taking place.



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