

US military begins retaliation for Mosul bombing

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US Army and Marine forces, backed up by armored vehicles, helicopter gun-ships and jet-fighters, sealed off the northern Iraqi city of Mosul Wednesday, following the deadly attack at the US military camp outside of the city, which killed 18 Americans and 4 Iraqis Tuesday afternoon.

Hundreds of US troops and Iraqi national guardsmen blocked the five bridges that span the Tigris River in the city and conducted house-to-house raids across the western and southeastern districts. The city's governor, Duraid Kashmula, announced a ban on the use of the bridges and said anyone breaking the order would be shot.

US military spokesmen in the area said a 9 p.m. to 5 a.m. curfew—imposed several weeks ago—remained in place, and confirmed they were stepping up military operations in the city. Lt. Col. Paul Hastings, spokesman for Task Force Olympia, the major US military force in northern Iraq, claimed the offensive was planned before Tuesday bombing, but added, “We are targeting certain objectives, geographical as well as intelligence information about the terrorists. We are going to take the fight to the enemy.”

This amounts to a public warning of impending slaughter in Mosul on a scale that will undoubtedly dwarf the casualty toll at the US base. As in Fallujah, the killing of hundreds or even thousands of Iraqis will be portrayed by the American military and its media mouthpieces as an act of “liberation.”

Residents described the city of 1.8 million—Iraq's third largest—as a virtual ghost town, with no one on the streets, not even traffic policemen at intersections. City residents who spoke to reporters from *Al Jazeera* and other news agencies expressed fear that the US military would use the attack as a pretext for a major crackdown on the city. “Students went to school but were told to

go home,” Ahmed, a 25-year-old car dealer, said. “People went to the shops, saw the American troops in the streets, and went home.”

Sadiq Mohammed, a grocer, said, “Yesterday's attack on the American base will for sure lead to an escalation in US military activities in Mosul.”

Residents also expressed sympathy with the attack on the US base. “When occupiers come to any country (they) find resistance. And this is within Iraqi resistance,” Sattar Jabbar said of the attack. “I prefer that American troops leave the country and get out of the cities so that Iraq will be safer and we run its affairs,” Jamal Mahmoud, a trade union official, told an Associated Press reporter. He added, “I wish that 2,000 US soldiers were killed, not 20.”

Tuesday's blast occurred as hundreds of soldiers and contractors gathered to eat lunch in a massive dining hall at the camp. It killed 13 US soldiers, five American civilians employed by military contractor Halliburton, three Iraqi security personnel and an “unidentified non-American.” Sixty-nine people were wounded, including 44 soldiers, many of whom remain in critical condition. Many of the dead and wounded were National Guard reservists from small towns in Virginia, Maine and other states.

While military officials first speculated the deadly explosion had been caused by a mortar or rocket fired from outside the base, evidence uncovered Wednesday—including remnants of a suicide vest and human remains—points to the likelihood that a suicide bomber carried out the attack after infiltrating the high-security base. General Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said at an afternoon press conference Wednesday, “At this point, it looks like an improvised explosive device worn by an attacker.”

This would confirm statements on Islamist web sites,

which said the attack was the work of the Iraqi militant group Jaish Ansar Al-Sunna. An online message issued in the name of the group said the bomber was a 24-year-old man from Mosul who worked at the base for two months and had provided information about the base to the group.

The attack—the deadliest on a US installation in the 21 months since the war in Iraq began—demonstrates the growing effectiveness of the Iraqi resistance and further shatters the claims by the Bush administration that US-trained Iraqi military forces will be able to pacify the country. It underscores the fact that the resistance to the American occupation enjoys widespread support and that its proponents have thoroughly infiltrated the Iraqi military.

Security at US bases is ordinarily extremely tight. Local Iraqi workers are typically searched before entering and monitored on base. The only Iraqi nationals usually allowed in dining mess halls are Iraqi soldiers. “I think that this tells us that our base facilities are totally infiltrated by insiders who are passing the word on when and where we are most vulnerable to attack,” said retired Marine Col. Edward Badolato.

Over the past 20 months resistance fighters have learned a lot about how the US military operates and where its vulnerabilities lie. Kalev Sepp, a former Special Forces counterinsurgency expert who recently returned from Iraq, told the *Washington Post* that the attack “was carried out in daylight against the largest facility on the base, at exactly the time when the largest number of soldiers would be present. This combination of evidence indicates a good probability that the attack was well planned and professionally executed.”

It is widely anticipated that the pace of anti-US attacks will be stepped up in the month leading up to the January 30 elections.

Jeffrey White, a former Defense Intelligence Agency analyst of Middle Eastern military affairs, told the *Washington Post* that he is especially worried that the insurgents’ next move will be an actual penetration by fighters into a base. “The real danger here is that they will mount a sophisticated effort to penetrate or assault one of our camps or bases with a ground element,” he said.

At a press conference, White House spokesman Scott McClellan responded to a question as to how Iraqis will be able to go to some 9,000 polling places if US troops

can’t secure their own bases from attacks, saying there was “security and peace” in 15 of 18 provinces in Iraq.

Nobody believes such claims. Tuesday’s attack brought to light a reality of the military situation, which is rarely, if ever, mentioned by the US media, let alone the Bush administration. While American forces are capable of mass destruction as seen in Fallujah, in large measure they are hunkered down in over 100 heavily fortified military bases dispersed around the country. There they are surrounded by a generally hostile population with resistance fighters active on the periphery of the camp boundaries. The bases, which are under constant rocket and mortar fire, are dependent for supplies and ammunition on transport convoys, which are regularly subjected to attacks themselves.

One soldier was killed near the dining hall at Marez in a mortar attack in May, and two soldiers were killed in November when mortars exploded in their living area on the same base. Similar mortar attacks have also targeted the mess halls at a base in Tikrit and in Baghdad, including within the Green Zone where US and Iraqi government offices are located.

Like the failure to provide adequate armor for vehicles, the constant dangers facing soldiers inside their camps have prompted little response from the Pentagon. Personnel who have visited Camp Marez said the dining area is a tent-like facility with no hardened protection—and that soldiers had specifically raised concerns that they could be targeted by insurgents at meal time. One had told CNN it was only a matter of time before there was an attack on the mess hall.

A new concrete facility was originally scheduled for completion by Christmas, but military contractor Halliburton failed to meet the deadline and the building is not due to be completed until February. Bill Nemetz, a reporter with the *Press-Herald* of Portland, Maine, who was embedded at the base said the camp’s chief medical officer in April expressed concern about the mess hall being targeted and was assigned to draw up a “mass casualty” plan.



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