

Attacks on Abu Ghraib highlight continuing Iraqi armed resistance

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On April 2, Iraqi insurgents launched one of the highest profile attacks of the two-year guerilla war against the US-led occupation: an assault on the Abu Ghraib prison complex in Baghdad where thousands of Iraqis are being detained.

As dusk fell, as many as 50 well-armed guerillas unleashed a barrage of mortar rounds and rocket-propelled grenades at a prison watchtower, giving cover to suicide bombers who detonated two explosive-filled vehicles in attempts to blow a hole in the prison walls.

Over the next two hours, the insurgents fought a pitched battle with prison guards and US military reinforcements before carrying out a military-style withdrawal into the surrounding residential neighbourhoods. In the course of the firefight, 44 American troops and at least 13 prisoners were wounded.

On April 4, a second attack on the prison was carried out. A suicide bomber detonated a tractor laden with explosives outside the complex, wounding five civilians in the vicinity.

There is little doubt that Abu Ghraib was targeted to ensure the insurgents' actions were widely reported and to develop political support for the armed resistance. Once notorious for the brutality of Saddam Hussein's rule, the prison has become a symbol of the crimes being committed against the Iraqi people under US occupation, especially since the publication last year of photos showing detainees being tortured and degraded by American interrogators and prison guards.

Many of the 3,500 Iraqis currently held in the prison camp were seized by American troops during the massive US assault that reduced the city of Fallujah to rubble last November, or in the course of more recent raids. Hundreds of men are being held for little more than being of fighting age, members of the former ruling Baathist Party or the relatives of suspected insurgent leaders—so-called "security detainees". Many have no idea when or if

they will face trial and have no access to legal counsel. There are widespread allegations of overcrowding, abuse, poor food and denial of family visits.

A leaflet had been circulated at Baghdad's Sunni mosques just days before the first attack, allegedly authored by a female prisoner at the complex, claiming she was being raped by American troops and appealing for the resistance to carry out a rescue operation.

On April 1, the day before the attack, the appalling conditions facing US-held detainees provoked a riot at Camp Bucca, the largest US-run prison camp, located near the southern city of Umm Qasr. The riot was led by supporters of Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, who have been held in the facility since being rounded up during the uprising of Iraqi Shiites from April to September 2004.

The timing of the guerilla assault on Abu Ghraib—which had little prospect of military success—suggests that it was also a propaganda effort by the insurgent groups to demonstrate they had not been broken by the wave of American crackdowns over the past six months.

Amid the manoeuvring over the formation of an Iraqi transitional government over the past two months, the American military and the locally-recruited security forces have conducted another series of offensives in primarily Sunni Muslim areas of Iraq, where the majority of the population boycotted the January 30 elections.

In February, US forces initiated a major operation, codenamed River Blitz, to round up suspected insurgents in the area around Ramadi. The city, with a population of 300,000, was placed under an 8 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew, with US tanks stationed on the main streets. By March 5, the US military claimed that over 400 Iraqis had been detained in American raids and at roadblocks.

More recently, two major operations have been carried out by US and local Iraqi forces against alleged insurgent training camps and hideouts. On March 21, US forces claimed to have killed 85 guerillas at a camp on the

outskirts of Baghdad. On March 26, they reported the capture of 131 insurgents during raids near Karbala, 100 kilometres south of the capital. Iraqi defence ministry sources asserted that the captured men were members of the Sunni fundamentalist organisation Ansar al-Sunna.

On Monday, another raid by US and Iraqi government troops on a suspected guerilla hideout, this time in Diyala province to the east of Baghdad, resulted in a four-hour battle and left at least 17 insurgents and two American soldiers dead.

The number of anti-occupation fighters killed, wounded or detained this year in what is called the “Sunni Triangle” almost certainly exceeds 1,000. Despite the repression, however, there are few indications that the insurgency is close to being quelled or, as British general John Kiszely declared on April 4, “running out of steam”.

At the beginning of 2004, guerilla groups were mounting an estimated 10 to 20 attacks per day on American-led forces. In March this year, despite what has been described as a “lull” since the large number of clashes from November 2004 to January 2005, at least 40 to 45 attacks were carried out each day.

Commenting on the security conditions this week, the *New York Times* noted that it “showed that Baghdad was still very much a city under siege. Apache attack helicopters circled the skies, while the Iraqi police set up checkpoints along the major roads downtown”.

One justification for asserting that the insurgency is dying out is the fall in the American casualty rate since the end of the January 30 elections. Whereas 107 American troops were killed in January, the death toll fell to 58 in February and 36 in March. A large factor in the decline in American dead and wounded, however, is the increasing use of Iraqi military units and police to conduct the more dangerous operations. Instead of US troops, Iraqis are being deployed to repress the population with roadblocks, armed patrols through the streets and night raids on residential areas.

While the rate of US casualties has fallen back to one or two deaths and 10 to 20 wounded per day, an estimated 200 locally-recruited Iraqi security personnel were killed in March. As well, at least 240 civilians died, many of them employees of the US-sponsored government or people associated with the pro-occupation Iraqi political factions.

The casualties are shaping up to be even higher this month. On April 5, three Iraqi soldiers were killed and over 40 wounded in western Iraq, when the bus in which they were traveling was struck by a remotely-detonated

car bomb. Other attacks in the past seven days include: a deputy director of education was assassinated and an interior ministry general kidnapped in Baghdad; 11 Iraqi employees at a US base near Ramadi were found executed; an official of a pro-US Kurdish party was assassinated in Mosul; the headless bodies of 10 Iraqi soldiers were found south of Baghdad; a provincial government representative in Hillah was gunned down; a government translator was wounded in a drive-by shooting in Baqubah; and police were hit by car bombs in Basra.

An Iraqi army officer told Associated Press this week: “The Iraqi army and police are easy targets for the terrorists. They lack the modern equipment of the Americans.”

Nevertheless, the Bush administration and the Pentagon are stepping up the use of Iraqi forces to enforce the occupation. The *Washington Post* reported this week that an entire area of the volatile city of Mosul has been handed over to Iraqi army units. The trial use of Iraqi troops in Mosul, the article stated, is “at the centre of the US military’s strategy to hand off counterinsurgency operations to Iraqi security forces and ultimately draw down the number of American troops”.

Over the coming weeks, US troop numbers in Iraq are expected to fall back to 135,000—down from the 150,000 deployed in the country to suppress the insurgency in the months before the January elections. The reality in Iraq remains that the anti-occupation resistance has not been broken. The local forces ostensibly loyal to the US-sponsored government in Baghdad are not capable of doing so.

A US military advisor attached to the Iraqi units, Staff Sergeant Craig E. Patrick, commented to the *Washington Post*: “It’s all about perception, to convince the American public that everything is going as planned and we’re right on schedule to be out of here. I mean, they [the Bush administration] can [mislead] the American people, but they can’t [mislead] us. These guys [the Iraqi security forces] are not ready.”



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