

# Iraq: US Congress approves \$82 billion as colonial war grinds on

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12 May 2005

The US Senate's unanimous vote Tuesday for an \$82 billion "emergency" appropriation to fund combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan marks another milestone in the deepening crisis confronting Washington in the prosecution of its colonial-style wars.

While from a budgetary standpoint the emergency is a gimmick meant to mask militarism's impact upon the mounting deficit crisis, from the perspective of the situation confronting US imperialism on the ground in both Afghanistan and Iraq, it is all too real.

As Senators cast their votes, mass rioting was spreading in Afghanistan in response to published reports that US interrogators at the US detention camp in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, tormented Muslim prisoners by urinating on the Koran, setting copies of the book on fire and throwing them in the toilet.

A crowd estimated at 10,000 took to the streets of Jalalabad chanting "Death to America" and carrying banners denouncing the US and the Washington-backed puppet regime of President Hamid Karzai. The crowd overwhelmed Afghan security forces, who opened fire, killing four demonstrators.

The last month has seen a marked increase in US casualties in Afghanistan, with at least 20 killed since April 6.

Meanwhile, in Iraq, two years after George W. Bush declared "mission accomplished" and an end to "major combat operations," the carnage that has claimed the lives of more than 1,600 US troops continues unabated. Since the installation of the new Iraqi government on April 28, 35 American military personnel have died in Iraq. For the Iraqis themselves, the death toll during this same period has risen to over 400.

The approval of the massive new funding was accompanied in Iraq by the launching of the largest US military operation since last November's siege of Fallujah. A force of over 1,000, composed primarily of Marines, has been sent into western Iraq near the Syrian border to raid towns and villages along the Euphrates River. The stated purpose of the attacks, dubbed "Operation Matador" (Spanish for "killing"), is to wipe out safe havens for "foreign fighters," a term the US invaders use to describe Arabs who cross the border to resist the occupation.

In the first three days of the operation, the US force has met unexpectedly heavy resistance. It is evident that those defending the villages had been warned well in advance of the impending American offensive, probably by elements within the US-organized Iraqi security forces. Their preparations forced US

troops to engage in bloody house-to-house fighting in which they have suffered significant casualties.

The American commanders have responded by calling in air strikes by F-18 Hornet fighter jets and Cobra attack helicopters against houses. While the Pentagon issued a "body count" claiming to have killed 100 fighters, reporters embedded with the task force say that those directly involved are far less certain as to how many they have killed or who they are. It is impossible to know whose bodies lie beneath the rubble of bombed homes.

The media reported that residents fleeing the advancing American columns have themselves come under attack. According to one report, troops fired on a taxicab early Tuesday, killing a female passenger and her baby.

The *Washington Post*, meanwhile, reported on fierce fighting in the town of Ubaydi—15 miles east of the Syrian border—in which a group of four or five fighters held off "wave after wave" of Marines backed by a tank and an F-18 fighter that dropped 500-pound bombs. The battle ended only with the use of rockets to bring the house down upon its defenders. At least two Marines were killed and several more wounded.

While intended as a show of force, "Operation Matador" exposes the intractable character of the counterinsurgency campaign being waged by the US military and the inadequacy of the military forces that Washington has deployed.

Assembling the 1,000 troops for the offensive was apparently a significant hurdle, requiring calling on forces from a number of different units.

Citing a military commander in Iraq, a UPI report explained, "Of the 145,000 troops in Iraq, fewer than half are actually available for patrols and combat.... The others are support troops who rarely come in direct contact with the enemy."

In Western al-Anbar province, where the present operation is taking place, a force of 10,000 is deployed to cover an area the size of Texas. Given the breakdown described above, this would mean less than 5,000 available combat troops. With inadequate forces, the effect of such offensives is largely to push the anti-occupation fighters from one area to another.

The Bush administration planned the war in Iraq on the assumption that the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime would mean an end to significant resistance, allowing a speedy drawdown of US troops. The opposite has proven the case.

When then Army Chief of Staff Gen. Eric Shinseki presciently warned that an occupation force of "several hundred thousand"

troops would be needed to secure the country, he was ridiculed by the civilian architects of the war.

Asked about the dispute during testimony before the Senate Appropriations Committee last week, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld responded angrily, “I must say I am tired of the Shinseki argument being bandied about day after day in the press.”

The hard reality, however, is that Washington requires a larger force to secure Iraq. The car bombings, abductions—including this week of the Iraqi governor of al-Anbar Province, where the American offensive is taking place—and generalized violence are symptomatic of a country in which there is mass opposition to the occupation and no government recognized as legitimate.

The legitimacy of the Iraqi government is not only called into question by the Iraqi people, but by Washington itself. The Bush administration, the Pentagon and the CIA have systematically prevented the newly elected Iraqi officials from exercising any real authority over the newly formed Iraqi security forces, which remain under the tight control of the US occupation.

As a report by Knight-Ridder earlier this week revealed, the CIA “has refused to hand over control of Iraq’s intelligence service to the newly elected government” because of “doubts the Bush administration has over the ability of the Iraqi leaders to fight the insurgency and worries about the new government’s close ties to Iran.”

The article quotes elected Iraqi officials as saying that the agency, headed by an ex-Baathist general, is being used not only to suppress resistance to the occupation but to spy on them as well.

Deprived of any real control over the most essential functions of the state, the Iraqi government remains little more than a façade for US colonial occupation, something that is evident to the Iraqi people.

Under these conditions, maintaining US domination over the oil-rich country will require the deployment of large numbers of American troops for the foreseeable future. The limitations of the Iraqi security forces—composed largely of recruits motivated to join by mass unemployment and poverty—was indicated by the absence of any Iraqi troops in the ongoing offensive in the West.

The crisis confronting the US military in Iraq is driven not only by the resistance in Iraq, but by the mass opposition to the war at home. Hostility to the intervention in Iraq is expressed not only in successive opinion polls, but more fundamentally in the inability of the Pentagon to secure the recruits it needs for what is an all-volunteer military.

In April, the Army fell short of its recruiting target by 2,800 recruits, or 42 percent of its quota. It was the third month in a row to see such a shortfall. Just as severe is the crisis facing the Marines, which for the first time in a decade has fallen short of its recruiting goals for four straight months.

The growing opposition to the war finds no significant expression in the US two-party system. Having attempted to exploit popular hostility to the war as an election issue in 2004, the Democrats have largely shelved their complaints about the Bush administration’s policy. Their bipartisan unity with the Republican White House expresses the consensus within the American ruling elite that US imperialism must maintain its grip on Iraq and its oil resources, whatever the cost.

Thus, last month, the Democratic Party’s new chairman, Howard Dean, who postured as an antiwar candidate in the party’s 2004 presidential primaries, solidarized himself with the Bush war effort.

“Now that we’re there, we’re there and we can’t get out,” he told an audience in Minneapolis. “The president has created an enormous security problem for the United States where none existed before. But I hope the president is incredibly successful with his policy now that he’s there.”

Similar sentiments were expressed in the Congressional vote on the emergency appropriations.

When an “emergency funding” package worth \$87 billion was rammed through Congress in November 2003, more than double the number of Democrats in the House opposed the measure as compared to this time around. The Senate issued its final approval in 2003 by voice vote.

Massachusetts Democratic Senator Edward Kennedy, who had previously expressed opposition to the war and the administration’s funding measures, this time voiced his support. “While this bill is imperfect, it has many important provisions that our soldiers cannot be denied,” Kennedy said.

The “emergency” character of the war-spending bill will also find its expression in an emergency for millions of working and poor people in the US as the government moves to slash social spending and basic benefit programs such as Medicaid and Social Security to pay for the war and offset the immense effect it is having on the US economy.

As the *Washington Post* pointed out Wednesday: “For fiscal 2005, the Pentagon has now been allocated about \$100 billion for war costs, 45 percent more than last year. That total is nearly 30 percent of the \$350 billion deficit the federal government is projected to run for this year.”

The colonial occupation of Iraq can be continued only by imposing ever-greater sacrifices—both in lives and social conditions—upon working people in the United States. As Pentagon officials acknowledge, the \$82 billion approved this week is unlikely to last much past the coming summer.



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