

Deal on US bases sought

Rumsfeld, Rice fly to Baghdad to back new prime minister

Bill Van Auken
27 April 2006

Wednesday's surprise visit to Baghdad by both US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice served as a further indication of Washington's desperate crisis over the unraveling of its neo-colonialist project in Iraq.

Ostensibly, the purpose of the visit was to signal US support for Prime Minister designate Nouri Maliki, maneuvered into office as the result of months of pressure from Washington for Ibrahim al-Jaafari, the nominee of the parliament's dominant United Iraqi Alliance coalition, to step aside. Both men are leaders of the Shiite fundamentalist Da'awa Party.

The Bush administration is promoting Maliki as somehow more amenable to US proposals to form a government of "national unity" and to curb some of the excesses of the sectarian-based militias and death squads that are operating as uniformed members of the Iraqi interior and defense ministries.

What basis exists for such claims is far from clear. Maliki was an ally of Jaafari and is reputed to be a religious extremist, who zealously implemented the "de-Baathification" program that saw large numbers of Iraqi professionals expelled from their posts for serving under the old regime.

Indeed, when Rice made her last unannounced visit to Baghdad barely three weeks ago, she failed to even meet with Maliki, who then appeared to hold no special attraction for the US administration as it pursued a new form of "regime change" in Baghdad.

Rice insisted that the simultaneous arrival of herself and Rumsfeld was meant as an "important message to the American people." She told reporters on her airplane en route to Iraq: "We just want to make sure there are no seams between what we're doing politically and what we're doing militarily."

The remark suggested that national unity was an issue in Washington itself, where differences between the State Department and the Pentagon over Iraq policy have often been sharper than those dividing the two pro-war parties, the Democrats and Republicans. These tensions burst to the surface with Rice's remark earlier this month that the US had probably made "thousands" of "tactical errors" in Iraq, prompting Rumsfeld to lash back by declaring that the remark indicated complete ignorance of warfare.

The trip represents a desperate bid by the Bush administration to proclaim yet another "turning point" in its catastrophic intervention, under conditions in which a clear majority of the American people has rejected the war and supports a withdrawal of US troops.

Four months of political impasse have separated the US-orchestrated parliamentary elections and the American-engineered agreement on a new prime minister, who now has 30 days to form a government. This period has been among the bloodiest in Iraq's history, with the country sliding into civil war.

It has also been the bloodiest month for US occupation troops thus far this year, with at least 63 killed and many more wounded.

There is no reason to believe that installing a US-backed regime under Maliki will put a halt to either the sectarian violence or the resistance to American occupation. Indeed, the new government itself merely institutionalizes the sectarian divisions, with the prime minister's post going to a Shiite, the presidency to a Kurd and a Sunni tapped as the head of parliament.

The *Washington Post* reported Tuesday that Shiite militias are sending hundreds of fighters to the disputed, oil-rich city of Kirkuk, apparently in preparation for a battle against any attempt to annex it to an autonomous Kurdish region. The city is widely seen as the most likely flashpoint for a full-scale civil war.

While the US media for the most part went along with the Bush administration's attempt to paint the tenuous political arrangement in Iraq in rosy colors, it largely passed over what was undoubtedly the most substantive issue raised by the two cabinet secretaries during their lightning visit to Iraq.

Appearing before the press with Gen. George Casey, the top US military commander in Iraq, Rumsfeld said that one of the key subjects under discussion was the future of US military bases in the country and the way in which American military and the Iraqi security forces that it has created would work together in the coming period.

The defense secretary went on to note that the United Nations

Security Council resolution that provided the pseudo-legal cover for the continuing US military occupation will expire by the end of this year. Therefore new bilateral treaties are required to lend a pretense of legitimacy to the continued American military presence.

“The question of our forces’ levels here will depend on conditions on the ground and discussions with the Iraqi government which will evolve over time,” Rumsfeld said.

Much of the media interpreted these remarks as indicative of US planning for the withdrawal of its military forces from Iraq—standing down, as the Iraqi government stands up—as early as this year. They are nothing of the sort. While the Pentagon is no doubt already engaged in the repositioning of American forces, Washington has no intention of leaving Iraq.

There is ample evidence that the US is preparing to maintain a permanent presence in the country, both to assure its domination over Iraqi oil reserves and to provide its military with a forward base for interventions throughout the Middle East.

In its latest edition, *Newsweek* magazine describes four “superbases” where the Pentagon intends to consolidate US military forces (two more are to be controlled by the British) over a protracted period for the purpose of carrying out rapid-reaction force attacks and air strikes against outbreaks of resistance.

The article, entitled “Don’t dream about full exits. The military is in Iraq for the long haul,” provides a detailed description of one of these installations, Balad air base, 43 miles north of Baghdad. It is, according to the magazine, a “15-square-mile mini-city of thousands of trailers and vehicle depots.” *Newsweek* quotes the base commander, Gen. Frank Goenc, putting monthly air traffic at Balad—virtually all of it by the US military—at 27,500 takeoffs and landings, second only to London’s Heathrow airport.

The article describes the use of the base to launch unmanned Air Force Predator drones armed with Hellfire missiles capable of killing Iraqis on the ground. These devices are guided via satellite by airmen manning controls at a military installation outside Las Vegas, Nevada.

“It’s safe to say Balad will be here for a long time,” General Gorenc told *Newsweek*. He added, with apparently unintended irony: “One of the issues of sovereignty for any country is the ability to control their own airspace. We will probably be helping the Iraqis with that problem for a very long time.”

The vast scale of Balad and other US bases, *Newsweek* warns, constitutes “hard evidence that, despite all the political debate in Washington about a quick US pullout, the Pentagon is planning to stay in Iraq for a long time—at least a decade or so, according to military strategists.”

The *Christian Science Monitor*, meanwhile, reported in an April 3 article: “It seems clear that the Pentagon would prefer to keep its bases in Iraq. It has already spent \$1 billion or more on them, outfitting some with underground bunkers and other

characteristics of long-term bases. Some US bases in Iraq are huge, e.g., Camp Anaconda, north of Baghdad, occupies 15 square miles, boasts two swimming pools, a gym, a miniature-golf course, and a first-run movie theater. The \$67.6 billion emergency bill to cover Iraq and Afghanistan military costs includes \$348 million for further base construction.”

As the US Congress came back into session this week, among the first items on its agenda was another multibillion-dollar “emergency” supplemental appropriations bill to fund the ongoing US occupation in Iraq. The draft legislation provides funding, not only for base construction, but also for elaborate support infrastructure, including military communications networks, airfields and military “bypass” roads that would skirt Iraqi population centers.

The Senate Appropriations Committee, increasingly chafing at the administration’s policy of funding virtually the entire war through such “emergency” appropriations, has warned that it will not approve new base funding unless the administration spells out its long-term plans for Iraq.

In its report on the 2006 emergency supplemental bill, the committee declared: “It is the current policy of the United States to establish no permanent military bases in Iraq. The United States has not proposed to change that policy, and there is not yet a formalized means by which Iraq can accept or reject such a proposal were it offered. The committee recommends approval of only those requested projects that immediately support operations ongoing in Iraq, rather than those requests which propose a longer-term presence. While these projects may indeed be of military value, they intend a more permanent presence than is the policy of the United States.”

Whatever action is finally taken by the Senate will be reconciled with the decisions of the House of Representatives and then implemented by the Pentagon itself. There is little doubt, the committee’s protest notwithstanding, that the building up of these bases will continue unhindered.

US Ambassador to Iraq Zalmay Khalilzad, meanwhile, gave an interview to the *Los Angeles Times* Tuesday, warning that the US would continue its intervention in Iraq and the broader Middle East for years to come. According to the *Times*, he “urged war-weary Americans to dig in for the long haul: a years-long effort to transform Iraq,” that would take place “regardless of which party controls the White House.”



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact