US secretary of state meets angry Iraq war protests in England

Julie Hyland, Barry Mason
3 April 2006

By any measure, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's visit to England was a public relations fiasco. Dogged by antiwar demonstrators wherever she went, Rice was reduced to sneaking in and out of side doors and speaking to small, handpicked audiences.

Her 48-hour trip to the north of England, which began Friday, March 31, was ostensibly in reciprocation for Foreign Secretary Jack Straw's tour of Rice's home town of Birmingham, Alabama, last year and apparently without any overt political agenda.

However, at its close, the two made a surprise trip to Baghdad in an effort to strong-arm the country's dominant Shiite coalition into joining other sectarian-based parties in forming a government of "national unity."

Likewise, behind the scenes, Rice and Straw are playing the central role in driving forward Washington and London's plans for aggressive action—including military attacks—on Iran.

Just days before Rice arrived in England, she had appeared before a US Senate panel where she threatened Iran, declaring it to be "the single biggest threat from a state that we face." The following day, after weeks of behind-the-scenes bullying by Washington, the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted a statement demanding Iran halt its uranium enrichment programme—the first step in the paper trail that is being created as a pretext for action against Tehran.

In March, the *Times* of London published a leaked confidential memo written by John Sawers, a leading British diplomat, addressed to his counterparts in France, Germany and the US, urging a united campaign to secure "a United Nations resolution that would open the way for punitive sanctions and even the use of force if Iran were to refuse to halt its controversial nuclear programme."

Rice had stopped off in Paris and Berlin on her way to England, where she no doubt discussed such a joint offensive. On Sunday April 2, the *Sunday Telegraph* reported that a "high-level meeting" was to be held Monday in the Ministry of Defence (MoD), where senior military officials, along with officials from the Foreign Office and Downing Street, would "consider the consequences of an attack on Iran."

The MoD denied such a discussion, but according to the newspaper, "an American-led attack, designed to destroy Iran's ability to develop a nuclear bomb, is 'inevitable' if Tehran's leaders fail to comply with United Nations demands."

Such was the context in which Rice and Straw began their tour of northern England—their first stop a visit to a BAE factory to see the construction of the Joint Strike Fighter jet, a $256 billion US-UK project.

Rice's sightseeing tour of the North West was always going to be highly contentious. Blackburn, Straw's political constituency, is an impoverished former mill town of 100,000 people. Twenty percent of the population are Muslim, many of whom came to England from Pakistan in the 1950s to work in the cotton mills. Up to 4,000 police were reportedly mobilised to guard the pair, along with some three dozen US security officers.

A planned trip to a mosque was cancelled at the last moment, after mosque leaders withdrew their invitation, and at Pleckgate School in the town, where Rice had also been invited to discuss with pupils, the US Secretary of State had to enter via the back door to avoid antiwar demonstrations by parents and students. Dozens of pupils left classes to protest her visit, chanting outside the gates "Hey, hey, Condi hey, how many kids did you kill today?"

Rice fared no better in Liverpool, England's fifth largest city. Demonstrators greeted her at her visit to the Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts, where, during a musical recital, a group of more than 20 students stood in silent protest at war and torture.

© World Socialist Web Site

On Friday evening, several thousand demonstrators gathered on the steps of the city's Catholic cathedral. After a rally addressed by members of the Stop the War Coalition and Abuker Deghayes, the brother of Omar Deghayes, a British resident imprisoned in Guantánamo Bay, the protesters marched behind a coffin carried by six pallbearers wearing orange boiler suits, to the Philharmonic Hall.

The arrival of Rice and Straw at the Philharmonic to attend a concert was met with prolonged boos and chants by the demonstrators, who were hemmed in by a ring of mounted police. Inside the hall, Rice and Straw were publicly humiliated when one of the artists, Jennifer John, chose to sing John Lennon's "Imagine" in protest at the Iraq war as the audience clapped along to "Give peace a chance."

Afterwards, John explained, "There was no way on earth that I would be prepared to sing at this event purely for entertainment value. I felt it would have been immoral for me to not make a stand."

"After conversations with Simon Glinn [executive director of the Philharmonic], we agreed that the song I could and should sing was 'Imagine'.

"The opportunity to stand opposite the most powerful black woman in history, whose politics I do not share, and sing 'Imagine'is not something that I could refuse."

Even a planned visit to Blackburn football ground the following day ended in fiasco after a planned match was rescheduled, leaving Rice to walk around an empty stadium.

The hostility towards the US secretary of state prompted the *Daily Mail* to editorialise, "Whatever your feelings about Iraq and the conduct of the British and American governments, it is a sad day for British diplomacy when the U.S Secretary of State—the third most powerful politician in Washington—is treated with such discourtesy on her visit to these shores."

Certainly, the Iraq war was "a tragic folly," the newspaper continued, but such protests and calculated insults against a representative of "our greatest ally" were symptomatic of "a dangerous divide."

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to several of those attending the demonstrations. In Liverpool, Bavinda, an Asian woman from neighbouring Wirral, who had come with family members to the protest, said she had made the journey because it was "the first chance to actually demonstrate in person against the war in Iraq. There have been loads of demonstrations around the country, but it's the first time it's been actually close enough for us as a family to come. I wanted to make it to make it quite clear to Condoleezza Rice that she is not welcome here.

"I think it's a really disgusting thing that thousands of innocent people have been killed in the name of democracy and freedom. It's about time that America looked after its own business rather than poking it into other people's. The troops must be pulled out, it's as simple as that... leave the country to get on with governing themselves."

On Saturday morning, Rice returned to Blackburn for a meeting with Muslim community leaders. The talk's venue at the town hall was sealed off from demonstrators by barriers and a large phalange of police surrounded the building. Other police were in reserve, and police spotters were posted on the roof of nearby buildings.

The WSWS spoke to Ali, a 48-year-old factory worker. He explained that he had come along to protest over the "discrimination of Muslims all over the world. One man and his country rule all over the world, and he [Bush] thinks he can do as he likes.

"Many people are starving—for example, in Somalia—but nobody goes out there because there is no oil. Iraq and Iran have a third of the world's oil. The Bush administration fabricates things about these countries to invade. It's just about oil and not liberation.

"Iraq is in a worst state than it's ever been. They've killed 25,000 civilians; the real number is probably five times that. The Americans used to support Saddam Hussein, but because he wasn't a 'yes' man, they turned against him."

His young companion Iqbal, added, "We're here for the people who can't speak in Guantánamo Bay and Iraq."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site