

US military launches massive assault in Iraq

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Backed by armored columns and helicopter gunships, some 10,000 US troops have launched a massive assault on the provincial capital of Baquba and other areas north and east of the Iraqi capital of Baghdad.

The operation, dubbed Arrowhead Ripper, is one of the largest since the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003. It is being portrayed as an offensive aimed at clearing Al Qaeda terrorists from Diyala province, which is said to have become a new stronghold for the group.

“The end state is to destroy the Al Qaeda influences in this province and eliminate their threat against the people,” Brig. Gen. John Benarek, deputy commanding general of the 25th Infantry Division, declared in a statement.

In reality, the attack is directed at crushing opposition to the US occupation in a region where the overwhelming majority of the population opposes the American presence and is therefore a center of resistance in which Al Qaeda plays a decidedly limited role.

In one of its first communiqués, the Pentagon claimed that a “quick-strike nighttime air assault” by the 3rd Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division had included an assault by attack helicopters and ground forces which had “engaged and killed 22 anti-Iraqi forces in and around Baquba.”

“Anti-Iraqi forces” is the Orwellian term used by the American military command to describe any Iraqis who resist the US occupation of their country. How many have really been killed and the breakdown between resistance fighters and civilians is by no means clear.

The offensive follows the announcement last week that the buildup of US combat forces announced by President George W. Bush last January is complete, with an additional 30,000 troops deployed in the country.

The operation is the largest since US troops laid a murderous siege to the predominantly Sunni city of

Fallujah in November 2004, killing thousands, reducing most of its buildings to rubble and turning tens of thousands more into refugees.

Baquba, about 30 miles northeast of Baghdad, is roughly the same size as Fallujah—both had pre-war populations of over 300,000. Whether it will be subjected to similar devastation remains to be seen.

The siege of Baquba was joined with a series of other actions by US and allied forces in the southern suburbs of Baghdad as well as in the predominantly Shia south of the country.

In the Arab Jubour area south of the capital, an offensive began with a nighttime raid by American B-1 bombers, which dropped “precision-guided bombs” in heavily populated areas.

Meanwhile, further south in Maysan province, US and British forces launched attacks on Shia militiamen, who fought back with machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades. The US-led forces called in air strikes, which left dozens dead. The action saw the most intense fighting between the occupation forces and the Mahdi Army since this militia loyal to Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr spearheaded a two-month uprising against the occupation in April 2004.

From each of these fronts in the US-led counteroffensive against the Iraqi resistance there emerged reports of atrocities, civilian deaths and sweeping house-to-house raids together with the roundup of many Iraqis as “security detainees.” Television broadcasts from Baquba included footage of long lines of blindfolded Iraqi males being held at gunpoint or herded into vehicles for transfer to one of the large US prison camps in the country.

According to one Iraqi press report, the US assault force brought in tanks to attack the Abudullah bin Mobark Mosque in the “teachers” area of Baquba Sunday afternoon. Eyewitnesses said the mosque had sustained heavy damage and that nearby houses were

also struck, killing five civilians, including two women.

In regard to the fighting in the southern suburbs of Baghdad, the Association of Muslim Scholars in Iraq (AMSI) issued a press release denouncing the mass arrest of at least 20 people in the village of al-Ahmad al-Azzawi.

“The crime occurred when the occupation forces encircled the area and carried out a landing on rooftops; then [they were] breaking furniture and property, and killed a citizen (Hussein Mohamed Azzaoui) while [he was] sleeping in his bed,” the release said.

In southern Iraq, the Iraqi paper *Az-Zaman* reported that over 115 Iraqis were killed or injured in the clashes, including many civilians. Witnesses reported that at least 32 corpses from the town of Amarah, a focus of the fighting, were brought to the Shiite holy city of Najaf for burial on Monday, many of them women and children.

Meanwhile, in Amarah itself, the director of the local health department, Jamel Mohammed, confirmed receiving 16 bodies and taking in 37 wounded.

The chief of the province’s security council, Latif al Tamini, described the operation a “catastrophe,” declaring that occupation troops had fired indiscriminately.

“Many innocents were killed because in the summer people sleep on the roofs to avoid the heat,” Hamid Nouri, a clergyman loyal to Sadar in Amarah, told the media.

The spokesman for the British military declared that the operation “was conducted under the directive of [Prime Minister] al-Maliki and the government of Iraq. Iraqi special operations forces were very much in the lead.”

In reality, what has characterized all of these operations is the relatively minor role played by the Iraqi puppet forces, with foreign troops and airpower carrying out the bulk of the offensive.

Senior US military officers have warned that the offensive cannot sustain the suppression of the Iraqi resistance without the deployment of substantial Iraqi forces prepared to continue the crackdown. Yet, after over four years of US occupation, these forces do not exist.

Maj. Gen. Martin Dempsey, who just completed a 22-month tour in Iraq directing the training and arming of Iraqi security forces, expressed the frustration of the

Pentagon over the Iraqi forces, reporting that Iraqi units were being deployed with only 75 percent of the forces they had on paper because of desertions and absences, while one in six of the Iraqi police trained by the Americans have been killed, wounded or have deserted.

Asked by the media whether he anticipated that the next Iraqi units to be rotated into Baghdad would be even weaker and less able to conduct operations than those now deployed in the capital, he responded, “I’m absolutely convinced that’s exactly what we’ll see.”

While, the Bush administration’s surge was billed as a campaign to provide security in Baghdad, the bulk of the newly deployed US troops have now been sent out of the capital. The failure to achieve security was made tragically apparent once again on Tuesday, when a massive truck bomb struck a Shia mosque, killing at least 78 people and wounding an estimated 200 more.

The attack on the Khillani mosque in Baghdad’s commercial district of Sinak came just two days after the occupation authorities lifted a four-day curfew imposed in the wake of the bombing of another Shia mosque in Samarra last week.

Press reports from the scene of the latest bombing indicated that local residents blamed the US occupation forces for the atrocity, many voicing the opinion that such attacks are allowed to take place as a means of sowing division between Iraq’s different religious and ethnic groups.



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