

Death toll continues to rise as US military launches new offensive in Iraq

James Cogan
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Six American soldiers were killed in Iraq on Wednesday during the US military's New Year offensive against anti-occupation insurgents in the province of Diyala, north of Baghdad. The operation, codenamed Iron Harvest, is the fourth major assault in the area during the past six months and underscores the entrenched nature of the guerilla war against the US occupation and the US-backed Iraqi government. The casualties were the heaviest daily loss suffered by US forces since September and take the American death toll in January to 17.

Some 4,000 American troops, backed by Iraqi government forces, moved from different directions into an area of farming towns and hamlets along the Diyala River, nicknamed the Breadbasket, during the early hours of Tuesday morning. The objective was to trap and kill an estimated 200 fighters alleged to be members of the Sunni fundamentalist organisation Al Qaeda in Iraq.

The soldiers were killed when a massive explosion detonated while they searched a booby-trapped house. Four others were wounded. Embedded *New York Times* journalists reported that US troops have "encountered numerous improvised roadside bombs and booby traps, barely detectable except for telltale filaments of copper wire glinting in the morning sun through the undergrowth and orange trees". The US military reported that at least three armoured vehicles have been struck by roadside bombs, wounding three soldiers.

Occupation spokesmen claim that Sunni extremists driven out of the western province of Anbar and the suburbs of Baghdad have relocated north to Diyala and the neighbouring province of Salahaddin, as well as further north to areas surrounding the cities of Kirkuk and Mosul. American and Iraqi government forces in these locations have come under increased attack. The

US military has reported that of the 4,749 incidents in December, 2,014 took place in the north-central provinces compared with just 808 in Anbar—the province where the most intense fighting took place during the first four years of the occupation.

The US commander in northern Iraq, Major General Mark Hertling, told journalists that Raider Harvest was "a massive operation to really squeeze in the Breadbasket what we think is a major Al Qaeda logistics site and to a lesser degree command and control operations. The intent of this operation is to hit them hard here, make them defend and at the same time stop them from flowing to other places."

As the operation unfolds, however, US commanders are again expressing frustration that the majority of the Iraqi insurgents have either fled the area in advance or been able to blend into the local population. Before US troops launched an assault on Diyala's capital Baqubah last June, an estimated 500 fighters left the city. Last September, insurgents abandoned the town of Muqdadiya in the face of a US assault, leaving American forces to navigate through booby-trapped streets and houses and confront ongoing guerilla attacks.

Despite some 24,000 US troops being positioned in northern Iraq, along with 50,000 government troops and an increasing number of so-called citizens groups—or US-paid militias—the Iraqi guerillas appear to have had little difficulty eluding the latest operation. According to Hertling, only "20 to 30" insurgents were killed in the first 24 hours of the carefully planned trap.

In the lead-up, considerable efforts were made to prevent the insurgents receiving advance knowledge of the attack. US forces made it appear they were building up their forces for an offensive on villages south of Baqubah. Most significantly, however, Iraqi military

commanders whose units were slated to take part in the operation were deliberately given false information about the target. A US officer, Major Eddie Sedlock, told the *Washington Post*: “We didn’t tell them about it until the day, knowing they were probably infiltrated by Al Qaeda.”

Just as in Afghanistan, where the term “Taliban” is being applied to any Afghan resisting US occupation, in Iraq insurgents are simply branded Al Qaeda. The reality is that the majority of Iraqis, including in the Iraqi Army, are hostile to the US presence. While they oppose the political perspective of Islamic extremists and the killing of civilians, millions of Iraqis sympathise with attacks on American and other foreign troops. After close to five years of indiscriminate US bombings and killings, they particularly identify with the communities that are the target of US operations.

While a US officer blamed the “increase in helicopter traffic overhead” for alerting the guerillas to the US intentions, there is little doubt that American commanders suspect that tip-offs were passed on from the highest levels within the Iraqi government and military. According to the *New York Times*, US units noticed “an unusual number of women and children fleeing south in cars in recent days”.

As in all previous colonial wars, the US military confronts a population that will take every opportunity to hinder, sabotage and strike back against the occupation of the country. Troops, for example, encounter great difficulty in getting help to locate explosive devices and booby traps. The inevitable consequence is that terrified American soldiers begin to regard all Iraqis as their enemies, with the inevitable result being atrocities against civilians.

Washington Post journalist Amit Paley matter-of-factly reported on January 9 what appears to be the callous shooting and detention of an innocent Iraqi. The new offensive, he wrote, “is showing how difficult it is to determine whether someone is an insurgent. One of the Iraqis wounded and then detained on Tuesday was shot because US soldiers said he refused to listen to their commands. ‘He just did the wrong thing at the wrong time’, one soldier told Coffey [the unit commander] over his radio. ‘But I don’t know if we can call him a detainee. I don’t think he has anything incriminating against him’.”

There is no indication in the article as to whether an

investigation resulted. The incident, which has been reproduced countless times in one form or another, simply adds one more to the toll of death and injury inflicted on the Iraqi people by US imperialism in the course of its criminal occupation.

With the US presidential race well underway, no effort is being spared to promote the Bush administration’s claim that its “surge” of additional troops last year is bringing the Iraq war to an end. For 24 million Iraqis and 160,000 American soldiers, the reality is very different. The lives of 17 Americans and over 200 Iraqis have already been squandered this year to feed US ambitions to control the country’s oil resources and territory.



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