

Rice, US generals signal stepped-up bloodletting in Iraq

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In a series of bellicose statements, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and US military commanders have signaled that there will be no letup in the bloodletting and terror that have been unleashed against Baghdad's crowded and impoverished slum neighborhood of Sadr City.

For nearly a month, US occupation troops and Iraqi puppet forces have carried out air strikes and ground assaults in this sprawling eastern suburb of Baghdad, which is home to over 2 million people. The stated objective of this offensive is to suppress militias operating outside of government control and destroy "special groups," a term introduced by the Pentagon to describe militia units that it alleges have been trained and armed by Iran.

In reality, the offensive, like that launched against the southern port city of Basra on March 25, is aimed at suppressing the Mahdi Army, the militia loyal to the nationalist Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, and weakening his political and social movement in advance of provincial elections set for this coming October.

The immense fire power of the US military is being employed in a bid to destroy what is arguably the only Iraqi political movement that can claim a mass social base—centered among the most impoverished layers of the Shia working class—because of its stated opposition to the US occupation as well as Washington's plans to carve up Iraq's oil wealth between the major US-based energy conglomerates.

Rice used a press conference in Baghdad's Green Zone Sunday as an opportunity to launch a personal attack against Moqtada al-Sadr, implying that the cleric was a coward. More than five years after the US invasion of Iraq, Rice herself, like all US officials, was forced to enter the country secretly and under heavy guard for fear of being targeted by Iraqi opponents of the US occupation.

"It's been very difficult to get a read of what his motivations are and what his intentions are," Rice said of Sadr. "I know he's living in Iran. I guess it's all-out war for everybody but him. His followers can go to their deaths and he will still be living in Iran. I don't know how seriously to take him or not."

The insult, coming just a day after Sadr had threatened to wage an "open war until liberation" if the US and Iraqi government troops failed to halt their offensive in Sadr City, drew some comparison to George W. Bush's infamous "bring 'em on" statement made at the outset of the Iraqi resistance that would claim the lives of more than 4,000 US troops.

Rice denounced Sadr's movement, declaring that it "had completely destroyed law and order in Basra and somebody had to deal with that."

Asked how long US forces would continue their assault in Sadr City, Rice answered only that it would "take a while to really analyze what happened in Basra as well as what's happening in Sadr City." She described the operation as a "classical case of trying first to clear, and then to hold and build."

Apparently the present stage of this process involves the "clearing" of Sadr City; i.e., the hunting down and killing of Iraqi resistance fighters. Senior US military officers Sunday vowed that this process would be

continued and intensified.

In a statement to the French news agency AFP, Lieutenant Colonel Steven Stover, spokesman for the US occupation forces, blamed what he called "Iranian-supported Special Group Criminals" for "turning the streets of Baghdad into a battleground."

This claim that it is Iranian-supported units that are responsible for the attacks on US forces in Iraq, repeated incessantly by both the administration and the Pentagon, has yet to be supported by any substantive proof.

"Anyone with rockets or carrying weapons, we'll take them out," Stover told AFP. He gave a rundown of killings by US forces carried out through the day on Monday. He claimed that a US patrol operating in Jadida, which borders Sadr City, came under attack at 8:30 in the morning and returned fire, killing three "Special Group" members. How it was known that those killed were part of a "Special Group," the military spokesman did not bother to explain. Less than two hours later, he said, two more men carrying weapons were killed in an air strike, and 40 minutes after that a US helicopter killed another two alleged gunmen. Shortly after noon Baghdad time, he added, a US M1 tank fired a round into a truck that was said to be transporting a "rocket team," killing an unknown number of people.

Other statements issued by the US military claimed eight people killed in Sadr City on Sunday afternoon and evening. The issuing of "body counts," previously avoided by the Pentagon, has become an increasingly common feature of US operations and appears to suggest a certain desperation to produce positive indices under conditions in which the American military is being thrust into a counterinsurgency campaign against an entire urban population.

Meanwhile, Major General Rick Lynch, the commander of US forces in central Iraq, answered Sadr's threat of "war until liberation" with a threat of his own. "If Sadr and Jaish al-Mahdi (Mahdi Army) become very aggressive," said Lynch "we've got enough combat power to take the fight to the enemy."

Given the carnage already inflicted on Sadr City—at least 400 dead and over 1,300 wounded in the past three weeks, according to Iraqi hospital reports—the vow to employ "enough combat power to take the fight to the enemy" suggests a wholesale massacre.

The operations already unleashed against Sadr City constitute a war crime under international law, with an entire population sealed off for over two weeks and subjected to collective punishment. US unmanned aerial drones, warplanes and attack helicopters regularly unleash Hellfire missiles and bombs from the sky destroying homes and killing civilians below.

Both supporters of the Sadr movement and international relief agencies have referred to the conditions that the US-led assault has inflicted on the people of Sadr City as a "humanitarian tragedy."

The military encirclement of the neighborhood with American armor and checkpoints, together with the imposition of curfews and bans on

vehicular traffic as well as random air strikes, has reduced large sections of the population to prisoners in their own homes.

Meanwhile, the US occupation forces have begun erecting a massive concrete wall, partitioning Sadr City in two along one of its major thoroughfares. It would cut off the Tharwa and Jamilla districts—those nearest the fortified Green Zone—in the south from the center of Sadr City to the north. Twelve-foot-high concrete blocks are being lifted into place with heavy cranes, as US armored patrols fight off insurgents bent on stopping the repressive project.

“Building such barriers will put additional pressure on Sadr City and isolate the citizens,” said Salah al-Obeidi, a spokesman for the Sadr movement in the city of Najaf. “This barrier aims to cut off the district from other important institutions.”

Hundreds of such walls have been thrown up by US occupation forces in other areas of Baghdad, largely for the purpose of segregating the city’s population into Sunni and Shia ghettos. They have served to choke off the life of the city and formalize its division along sectarian lines.

In Sadr City, however, the wall appears to have an even more sinister purpose. In keeping with Rice’s “clear, hold and build” prescription, it seems designed to seal off an area where US and Iraqi puppet troops can then subject an imprisoned population to relentless block-by-block raids, house-to-house searches and wholesale killings of suspected insurgents.

Food, meanwhile, is in short supply and prices have soared, in large part due to the destruction of one of the area’s main wholesale markets earlier this month in a fire ignited by the fighting.

There are critical shortages of potable water in some areas, in part because heavy US armor has torn up streets, destroying pipes and mixing drinking water with raw sewage. Repairs are impossible because of the constant US bombardment and attacks.

UNICEF reported Monday on the conditions facing Iraqi children and schools in the besieged area.

“Life for children there has become harder and more frightening,” the UN relief agency reported. “Addressing shortages of water and medical supplies in Sadr City are immediate humanitarian priorities.”

The report continued: “Education is also under threat. Most of the city’s primary and secondary schools are closed. More than 20 schools have been reported damaged in the violence, with unconfirmed numbers of students and teachers killed.”

Pointing out that some of the schools had been occupied by US and Iraqi puppet forces, UNICEF stressed that schools “are protected under international law as zones of peace. No matter what the circumstances, the only proper use for an Iraqi school is to educate and protect Iraqi children.”

While the agency said that it was continuing to make emergency water deliveries into Sadr City, despite the threats, “the psychological impact on children will be far harder to heal. It is absolutely critical that they see an end to this violence and can get back into school as soon as possible.”

Moqtada al-Sadr, meanwhile, condemned Rice’s presence in Iraq. “We demand that such visits of terrorist occupiers to our holy land be stopped,” he said in a statement released late on Sunday. He also condemned what he said was a US massacre in which scores of people were killed and wounded in Nasiriya on Saturday. He charged that “the US troops killed them in the most gruesome of ways and then burned them, and refused to hand over their pure bodies for burial.”

After leaving Baghdad, Rice attended the so-called 6+2+1 meeting in Bahrain, consisting of the six feudal monarchies that make up the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council, Jordan and Egypt, and the US. Washington had convinced these states, which the US is attempting to forge into an anti-Iranian alliance, to allow the participation of the US-backed Iraqi regime of Nouri al-Maliki.

On the eve of the meeting, Rice lashed out at these states in undiplomatic terms, expressing the Bush administration’s frustration over

its failure to persuade even its closest allies in the Arab world to recognize the legitimacy of the government in occupied Iraq.

“The neighbors keep making a case that the security situation needs to get better. It has,” she declared. “They keep making the case that political reconciliation needs to be making strides forward. It is. I think it’s fair to say the neighbors could do more to live up to their obligations.” Washington is demanding that the Arab regimes offer Iraq debt relief, full diplomatic relations and enhanced cooperation on refugee and border issues.

The reaction to this arm-twisting appeared to be largely hostile. There was little in the way of concrete pledges on debt relief or diplomatic ties. Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed Al-Sabah issued a pointed rejection of being lectured by Rice on the country’s obligations in the region. “We don’t need a foreigner to tell us about the importance of opening an embassy in Baghdad,” he said.

The mood was summed up in an editorial published in the *Gulf News*.

“Iraq remains today remains entrapped in violence and under occupation,” commented the English-language daily. “The recent call by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on Arab nations to provide assistance to Iraq by offering diplomatic ties and debt relief is just meaningless.”

It continued: “The real issue at hand here is the ineffectiveness and serious failure of the American post-invasion plan. Now it is too late for the American administration to urge or persuade others to act in the interest of Iraq.”

There is no reason to expect that Rice and the Bush administration will fare any better Tuesday at a conference in Kuwait that is to be attended by Iraq’s neighboring states—including Iran—as well as member states of the United Nations Security Council, including China and Russia.

The conference, which is a follow-up on a similar gathering held last May at the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sheikh, is meant to drum up international support for the crisis-ridden US occupation of Iraq. It will be overshadowed, however, by Washington’s escalating threats against Iran as well as the deep divisions among the major powers over the US drive to establish military hegemony over the oil-rich Persian Gulf region.



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