

US and British planes kill Iraqi civilians in weekend bombing raid

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US and British planes bombed two civilian installations in Iraq over the weekend, killing two civilians and injuring more than 20 people.

The first attack was made on Friday, August 11 at approximately 11 p.m. local time. The Iraqi News Agency (INA) reported that US and British planes fired around a dozen rockets at the main distribution centre used to store food permitted under the United Nations oil-for-food programme in the city of Samawa, 175 miles south of the capital Baghdad. Two civilians were reported killed and 19 injured in the attack.

According to INA, on Saturday evening US and British planes struck the Samawa railway station and injured “a number of citizens and inflicted damage to nearby houses.”

Both the US and Britain claimed to have been targeting “military installations”. The two countries' planes patrol a “no-fly zone” over southern and northern Iraq imposed by the Western powers after the 1991 Gulf war. Ostensibly established to protect Kurds in the north and Shi'ite Muslims in the south from attacks by the Iraqi regime, the patrols have been used to mount almost continuous bombing raids.

Iraq says that around 300 civilians have been killed and 900 wounded in British and US attacks over the last decade. The bombing raids were stepped up in 1998 in response to Iraqi efforts to win support from other countries for an end to the total trade embargo imposed at the conclusion of the Gulf War.

According to the UN's own figures, the economic blockade has already left at least one million Iraqis dead, with children accounting for at least half a million. UNICEF, the UN children's fund, states that the country is facing an “ongoing humanitarian emergency”. The country's hospitals lack basic drugs and equipment, and there are growing cases of

malnutrition.

There had been a six-week lull since the last US-British raid. The decision to resume military operations seems to have been prompted by the visit to Iraq one day earlier by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez—the first by a head of state since the 1991 Gulf War. America and Britain pinned their hopes on sanctions undermining Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, to bring about a change in the country's leadership to one more favourable to the West.

These plans have backfired, however, leading to growing criticism of the sanctions policy. In the past years several leading former US and UN officials have publicly opposed the Iraqi sanctions—including Denis Halliday, former UN assistant secretary-general; Scott Ritter, former UN weapons inspector in Iraq; and Count Hans von Sponeck, UN humanitarian coordinator in Iraq.

The UN Security Council is also split over the issue, with China, France and Russia calling for sanctions to be lifted immediately.

Despite this, the US and Britain continue to insist that sanctions remain in place until Iraq has proven to the UN Security Council that it has not only rid itself of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons and long-range missiles (so-called “weapons of mass destruction”), but even the “capacity” to make them—an impossible task. The two countries had begun to proceed more cautiously in the face of mounting disagreements and had not made any bombing raids for several weeks, prior to last weekend.

Chavez's visit is the most serious public challenge to date to US policy. The US and Britain reacted angrily to his decision to meet Hussein. The US in particular put intense pressure on him not to make the journey, with State Department spokesman Richard Boucher

claiming that it “bestows an aura of respectability upon Saddam Hussein” that Iraq would use for propaganda purposes. Boucher has hinted that Chavez could be considered in violation of UN sanctions and that his trip would be something the US would “keep in mind” in any future dealings with Venezuela.

The Venezuelan government had made clear it would not conform to US demands. Prior to the trip, Foreign Minister Jose Vicente Rangel warned: “Nobody can influence our decision.... He [Chavez] is going to arrive, whether it be on a skateboard or a camel.” During his visit Chavez openly attacked the US, condemning it at one press conference for “meddling” in the internal affairs of a “sovereign country”. “We say to the United States: don't panic. You have plenty of other problems to worry about, so don't place too much importance on this [visit],” Chavez stated. He offered support for Iraqi efforts to end UN sanctions, stating his government's opposition to “any kind of boycott or sanctions that are applied against Iraq or any other country in the world.”

A former paratrooper, Chavez was recently re-elected as president of Venezuela after running a populist campaign aimed at assuaging mounting discontent over growing poverty in the country, despite its oil wealth. He visited Baghdad as part of a 10-day tour of OPEC (Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries) members in preparation for a summit to be held in the Venezuelan capital Caracas on September 27. Chavez has called for “OPEC to show its power” once again on the world market and unite against US economic power. Venezuela is a major oil supplier to the US. Recently the price of a barrel of crude oil surged above \$30, following the release of data from the American Petroleum Institute showing a fall in US crude stocks.

Following his visit to Iraq, Chavez went to Tripoli for talks with Mummar Gaddafi. Both leaders were reported to have visited the site where the Libyan leader's adopted daughter died in a US bomb attack in 1986. The forthcoming OPEC summit will be only the second meeting of the 13-member organisation, established in 1960, which includes Iraq, Libya and Indonesia. At the weekend, Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid added his own voice to demands for an end to sanctions against Iraq, following talks with Chavez in Jakarta. Wahid indicated that he would make his own visit to Baghdad later this year.



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