

US unleashes renewed bombing raids on Iraqi towns

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The US military launched bombing strikes against Iraqi civilians last weekend for the first time since President Bush declared an end to major combat on May 1. The air campaign, involving F-16 bombers, targeted two towns, Tikrit and Fallujah, which have become centres of popular resistance to the US occupation. It was aimed at terrorising the Iraqi people in response to the escalating number and sophistication of attacks on American troops in the last weeks.

While American officials, from President Bush down to senior military commanders, continue to claim that “progress” is being made, the reality on the ground is that the US is sinking into an ever-deepening quagmire. Washington’s answer to growing popular hostility and increasingly well-organised resistance is to revive the methods used by US forces during the Vietnam war: mass roundups, death squads and the wholesale destruction of villages and towns.

Lt. Col. George Krivo, a spokesman for the US command, told the media that military action was being intensified against all “noncompliant forces”. The campaign, code-named “Operation Ivy Cyclone”, began last Friday night with air bombing raids, coordinated ground-troop assaults and mass arrests. According to media reports, the US Army has so far admitted to killing five Iraqis and arresting 140 people.

A US officer speaking on condition of anonymity said the army was on “offensive operations” and that the attacks would continue for several days. “You can expect to see an increase in the level of intensity and the amount of activity,” he said. In a chilling reminder of US terror in Vietnam, the officer continued: “Part of warfare is coercion and affecting the hearts and minds of the enemy”.

In the first week of November alone, 34 US troops were killed, the highest losses since the American-led

occupation began on March 21, and more than the total fatalities in all of October. Over 150 American soldiers have been killed in combat since May 1.

Sixteen US soldiers lost their lives on November 2 when guerilla fighters downed a Chinook helicopter in Fallujah. This was followed by the death of six American troops on Friday November 7 when a Black Hawk helicopter was shot down in Tikrit.

Two of those killed on Friday were from the Department of the Army headquarters at the Pentagon and an American major general travelling in another helicopter narrowly escaped death. This was the third US helicopter hit in the last two weeks.

Washington responded to the Black Hawk crash with an extended assault on Tikrit, Saddam Hussein’s home town, beginning at midnight and lasting until just before dawn on Saturday. US troops bombarded the area near the helicopter crash site with mortar fire and then attacked a warehouse and two houses with rockets, missiles and heavy-machine guns, claiming that anti-coalition forces were using the properties as hideouts. F-16 jets then dropped three 227-kilogram laser guided bombs to completely destroy the buildings.

Lt. Col. Steven Russell of the 4th Infantry Division who led the raid told Associated Press: “We want to remind this town that we have teeth and claws and we will use them.” According to the press agency, “soldiers yelled, ‘knock, knock’ and ‘good morning’ in celebration as the structure crumbled amid plumes of dust and smoke.”

US military officials have attempted to blame the mounting resistance on “Saddam Hussein loyalists, criminals and foreign fighters”. But claims about “foreign fighters” are beginning to wear thin. Russell admitted to the press last weekend that US forces are “yet to kill or capture a foreign fighter in Tikrit.”

In fact, the US military, conscious of the widespread and popular character of the resistance, is increasingly directing its repression against the Iraqi population as a whole.

In Al Auja, a Tikrit suburb and the birthplace of Saddam Hussein, the US has established virtual concentration camp conditions. Surrounded by almost eight kilometres of razor wire the 3,000-strong community is permanently guarded and patrolled by heavily armed US troops. No one is allowed in or out of the area without US Army permission, and US troops have interrogated nearly every male in the suburb. Last Friday American soldiers poured into Al Auja before dawn and ordered all residents 18 years and older to register for identity cards.

Like Tigris, Fallujah has become another key target. Since April, when American troops opened fire on a crowd of protesters, killing 15 people, the town has become a major centre of resistance to the US occupation.

Late on Saturday, US troops and airforce planes began bombarding parts of Fallujah after three paratroopers from the 82nd Airborne Division in the area were wounded. The US military has provided little details about the attack, but at least three 227-kilogram bombs were dropped on the town and scores of Iraqis detained.

Hours before the bombing, General John Abizaid, chief of US Central Command, threatened community officials and tribal chiefs from a nearby province who were meeting in Fallujah. He described the province as a “hot area” and warned that unless officials cooperated with the US military there “might be another policy”.

Fallujah mayor Taha Bedawi quoted the general as saying: “Irresponsible behaviour such as explosions and strikes against coalition forces were prohibited and we will take measures. We have the capabilities and the equipment.”

While the US military claims “Operation Ivy Cyclone” is having the “desired effect”, resistance attacks have continued unabated throughout the country, with at least three Americans and one British soldier killed since the weekend. Two US soldiers were fatally wounded on patrol in Fallujah when their vehicle hit a roadside bomb, and a rocket-propelled grenade killed a US military police officer in Iskandariyah, 60 kilometres south of Baghdad.

Mortar bombings on the west side of the Tigris River, where the Coalition Provisional Authority headquarters and other key occupation facilities are located, are also conducted on a daily basis. Several loud explosions echoed across Baghdad on Sunday night when mortars hit properties in the area. At the same time, patrolling US troops came under small arms fire in Baghdad’s Kamal Jumblatt Square and immediately fled the scene.

In the midst of the new American onslaught, US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage admitted during a heavily guarded visit to Baghdad, that the US military confronted major problems in Iraq. “[I]t’s not a secret to anyone that in the Baghdad, Tikrit, Ramadi, Fallujah area, we’ve got a security problem [and] we’re sobered by the problem,” he told the press.

Armitage made clear, however, there would be no letting up in US violence. The military had “a very solid plan to go out and get these people,” he said. “We’re going to take this fight to the enemy”.

These threats are in line with recent comments by Republican Senator Trent Lott who declared: “If we have to, we just mow the whole place down, see what happens. You’re dealing with insane suicide bombers who are killing our people and we need to be very aggressive in taking them out.”

Far from intimidating the resistance, such methods will only produce deepening hostility to the illegal occupation.

Commenting on the Tikrit bombings local resident Najih Latif Abbas told Associated Press: “Neither America, nor the father of America, scares us”. Abbas said his 17 children were terrified as bombs shook their house. “Iraqi men are striking at Americans and they retaliate by terrifying our children.”

Sixty-year-old farmer, Fakhri Fayadh, insisted that the US reprisals “will only increase our spite and hatred of them. If they think they will scare us, they are wrong. Day after day, Americans will be harmed and attacks against them will increase.”



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