

# US and Britain step up bombing of Iraq

By Kate Randall and Patrick Martin  
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US and British forces have conducted three air strikes against Iraq over the past week. On Tuesday US warplanes bombed a site near An Nasiriya in southern Iraq, about 170 miles southeast of Baghdad. The target was reportedly a radar site used to guide Iraqi missiles.

Four days earlier, on Friday, August 10, US and British warplanes attacked targets in southern Iraq in the biggest assault since last February. About 20 US and British jets and 30 support aircraft carried out the strike. Earlier in the week, on August 7, US planes bombed targets in northern Iraq.

In last Friday's attack, the Pentagon said the warplanes used guided missiles and bombs to attack three air defense sites—an air defense control center, an anti-aircraft missile site and a long-range radar station, all located in the so-called “no-fly” zone in Iraq's south.

Iraq said Friday's attack targeted civilian facilities in Wassit and Thi Qar provinces, 110 and 190 miles southeast of Baghdad respectively. The Iraqi News Agency reported that one Iraqi was killed in the attack and 11 injured, and that Iraqi anti-aircraft defenses fired at the planes.

The US and Britain have drawn increasing international criticism for the military raids, which according to Iraqi government sources have left more than 300 dead since 1998. The Russian foreign ministry condemned the August 10 strike, commenting: “Such action, carried out in circumvention of the UN Security Council, is a blatant violation of the norms of international law and does nothing but complicate the search for a solution to the Iraqi problem.”

The Russian statement alluded to the fact that the US, Britain and France established the no-fly zones in northern and southern Iraq without a UN resolution to authorize this violation of Iraqi sovereignty. The Iraqis were banned by US decree from operating any aircraft—including helicopters—in these exclusion areas.

President George W. Bush issued a statement at his ranch in Crawford, Texas, where he is taking a month-long vacation, claiming that the air attacks were self-defense actions by US forces conducting aerial patrols in the no-fly zones. Bush noted that such strikes did not require specific White House authorization unless sites close to Baghdad were targeted.

An incident on July 24 provoked the particular ire of Washington, when the Iraqi military just missed shooting down a US U-2 spy plane in the southern no-fly zone. An Iraqi missile, believed to be a SAM-2 modified with extra fuel and operating without targeting radar, came so close to the unarmed, single-seat aircraft that the pilot felt a shock wave.

The US attempt to refashion the sanctions regime against Iraq, by pushing a resolution for “smart sanctions” through the UN Security Council, was blocked last month by a Russian veto. The US rejected a proposal by Moscow that would have lifted all sanctions in return for Iraqi compliance with UN inspection of weapons production facilities.

In practice, the new sanctions would have given Washington even tighter control on commercial deals with Iraq. Most Western European governments opposed the “smart sanctions” as well, seeing the US proposal as contrary to their business dealings with the oil-rich nation.

According to the UN, in the decades since the Gulf War, the lack of food and medicine, combined with the damage done to the country's infrastructure, have led to 1.5 million deaths, including those of more than 500,000 children.

The American project of isolating Iraq has unraveled in recent months, with dozens of countries renewing diplomatic and trade relations with Baghdad and thumbing their noses at the United States. One reason Washington has hesitated to strike at the Iraqi capital city is that any such attack would risk an international

incident because of the steady stream of high-level foreign visitors.

During the week of the three US-British bombing raids, cabinet ministers from Russia and Jordan were in Baghdad, together with the prime minister of Syria—a key US ally in the 1991 war. Iraq has signed trade agreements with Syria, Egypt and Tunisia during the past few months, and talks are under way for similar pacts with Algeria, Yemen, Lebanon and Jordan, leaving the smaller Persian Gulf sheikdoms and Saudi Arabia alone among the Arab states in refusing to reestablish normal ties with Baghdad.

The week before the raids, the Iraqi government announced that Germany would soon reopen its embassy in Baghdad. German trade with the Arab countries rose by 28 percent last year, including a 60 percent increase in imports, and the German government recently hosted a German-Arab Economic Forum in Berlin that drew hundreds of government and corporate officials. Speaking at the forum, Economics Minister Wolfgang Müller explicitly voiced the interest of the German government in reviving once-thriving business links with Iraq. Germany will also participate in next month's Baghdad International Trade Fair.

The intensified bombing of Iraq is thus a form of US saber-rattling, directed not only against Saddam Hussein but also at the European powers that are challenging American hegemony in the oil-rich region. Russia may be able to block US plans for more effective sanctions, China may supply high-tech gear to Baghdad, France and Germany may have well-advanced plans for economic penetration of Iraq, but the United States is seeking to serve notice that it remains the decisive military power in the Gulf.

Despite the show of force, the events of the past two weeks have exacerbated tensions within the Bush administration. Secretary of State Colin Powell is pushing for continued imposition of economic sanctions against Iraq, combined with continued patrolling of the no-fly zones, while Vice President Dick Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld reportedly favor stepped-up efforts to overthrow the Saddam Hussein regime, including funding and arming of pro-US Iraqi exile groups.

Rumsfeld and the Pentagon brass have voiced opposition to limited air strikes that are clearly no threat to the Iraqi regime and offer Baghdad

opportunities to shoot down American pilots—with potentially serious political consequences for the Bush administration. Bush himself criticized the Clinton administration during the 2000 election campaign for what he called “pinprick” attacks, only to find himself employing the same methods.

At a news conference last week at the Pentagon, Rumsfeld admitted that a major factor in limiting the scale of the US air attacks was the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. With hundreds of Palestinians killed by Israeli bullets, missiles and mortars, and widespread anger against the brutality of the Sharon government and US backing for the Israeli regime in all of the Arab states, the United States has felt obliged to hold back from actions which could cause Iraqi casualties on a similar scale.

The obvious crisis within US foreign policy circles over Washington's policy toward Iraq does not, however, lessen the likelihood of further military escalation. There is an ominous parallel between the logic of American policy towards Iraq and that of Israel toward the Palestinians. Just as the Sharon government brazenly targets Palestinian leaders for assassination in the name of “self-defense,” the United States could well launch even more brutal assaults on Iraq, using methods ranging from air strikes on key Iraqi government installations, in the hopes of killing Saddam Hussein, to a new round of saturation bombing in which the entire Iraqi population would be the target.

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