

Hundreds of thousands march in Iraq to demand end of U.S. occupation

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In a huge demonstration marking the fourth anniversary of the fall of Baghdad to US invasion forces, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis marched in the city of Najaf Monday to demand an end to the American occupation of their land.

Large crowds of men, women and children waving Iraqi flags—signaling an appeal to national unity against the occupation—marched behind banners reading “Down with Bush, Down with America.” Others burned American flags or stomped them with their shoes.

The overwhelmingly Shia demonstration, called by radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, was the largest seen in Najaf since the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Marchers chanted, “No, no, no to America ... Muqtada yes, yes, yes,” “Yes to Iraq, yes to sovereignty, no to occupation” and “The terrorist Bush should leave.” The massive march began outside a mosque in Najaf’s twin city of Kufa and proceeded to the center of Najaf, considered a holy city by the Shia community.

On the eve of the demonstration, al-Sadr issued a call for Iraqi soldiers and police not to fight on the side of the Americans against their co-religionists in the Mahdi Army, the Shia militia that is loyal to him. In an apparent indication of the potency of such an appeal, soldiers and police in uniform joined the demonstration in significant numbers.

The appeal came in the midst of the fierce fighting that erupted Friday as US and Iraqi forces laid siege to Diwaniya, a city of over 400,000, 110 miles south of Baghdad.

A stark indication of the deep distrust felt by the US military toward Iraqi security forces came in the form of a leaflet airdropped on the city warning local police to stay inside and warning that any of them seen carrying a weapon would be shot on sight.

The fighting, dubbed Operation Black Eagle by American commanders, included air strikes by US warplanes. A missile attack Saturday demolished a house, killing at least six people inside, including two children and a woman. Attack helicopters also hovered over the crowded urban area. Forces apparently organized by the Mahdi Army were reported to have destroyed and burned at least one US tank and two armored Humvees in the early stages of the fighting.

There were reports of scores of dead and wounded. The Iraqi press quoted Dr. Hamid Ja’ati, the general director of health services in Diwaniya, charging US forces with barring ambulances from transporting the wounded to the local hospital. He also issued an appeal for emergency medical aid to be rushed to the city.

The White House and US military spokesmen made the ludicrous attempt to cast the mass anti-US protest in Najaf as a measure of success for the invasion and occupation.

American military spokesman Col. Steven Boylan declared that Iraqis “could not have done this four years ago,” referring to the mass anti-US protest. “This is the right to assemble, the right to free speech ... This is progress, there’s no two ways about it.” That the demonstrators were supporting a movement that is engaged in armed conflict with the US occupation seemed to have escaped the colonel.

Similarly, a White House spokesman Gordon Johndroe commented, “Iraq, four years on, is now a place where people can freely gather and express their opinions ... this is a country that has come a long way from the tyranny of Saddam Hussein.”

Perhaps the most absurd of all the attempts to place a positive “spin” on the events in Iraq was that of Senator Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, who was defeated in last year’s Democratic primary because of his slavish support for the Iraq war, but then successfully defended his seat as an independent. He seemed to suggest that Sadr’s nationalist appeal was indicative of the success of the Bush administration’s “surge,” presumably because the American military escalation had succeeded in uniting all factions against the occupation.

“He is not calling for resurgence of sectarian conflict,” said Lieberman in an appearance on CNN. “He’s striking a nationalist chord ... He’s acknowledging that the surge is working.”

Those participating in the protest, however, had a very different conception of the “progress” in the four years since the fall of Baghdad.

“The fall of Saddam means nothing to us as long as the alternative is the American occupation,” Haider Abdul Rahim Mustafa, 23, an Interior Ministry employee, told the *New York Times*.

“What freedom? What liberation?”

“In four years of occupation, our sons have been killed and women made widows,” 39-year-old Ahmed al-Mayahie, a Shia from the southern city of Basra, told a news agency. “The occupier raised slogans saying Iraq is free, Iraq is liberated. What freedom? What liberation? There is nothing but destruction. We do not want their liberation and their presence. We tell them to get out of our land.”

A statement was read to the demonstration from al-Sadr, who has gone into hiding—US officials claim he is in Iran, while his supporters insist he has remained in Iraq—in response to the US-led security crackdown in Baghdad.

He described the US occupation as “48 months of anxiety, oppression and occupational tyranny” that had brought the Iraqi people only “more death, destruction and humiliation.” He continued, “Every day tens are martyred, tens are crippled and every day we see and hear US interference in every aspect of our lives, which means that we are not sovereign, not independent and therefore not free. This is what Iraq has harvested from the US invasion.”

Al-Sadr’s call for the massive demonstration was widely seen as an attempt to placate the growing anger of his supporters and the Iraqi people as a whole against the four-year-old

occupation and the 30,000-troop escalation ordered by Bush earlier this year. Within the Shia population, in particular, there is growing disquiet over al-Sadr's apparent decision not to resist the US military's entry into the sprawling slums of Sadr City and the attacks and arrests carried out against elements of the Shia militia.

In 2004, al-Sadr's Mahdi Army militia forced the US occupation forces to beat a tactical retreat when it resisted their attempts to gain control of Najaf, Karbala and Sadr City. The Shia uprising coincided with fierce resistance to US attempts to dominate the predominantly Sunni city of Fallujah, which was only conquered in a murderous siege launched later that year, after a truce was concluded with the Shia forces.

Now, al-Sadr is once again promoting Shia-Sunni unity against the US occupation, which was the conception underlying the massive display of Iraqi flags, not only on the demonstration in Najaf, but throughout Sadr City on the anniversary of Baghdad's fall. Within the Sunni population, however, elements of the Mahdi Army, including units that have entered the Iraqi security forces, are blamed for much of the sectarian death squad killings that have claimed thousands of lives.

To the extent that the US presses its offensive against the Mahdi Army and forces al-Sadr to retaliate in order to hold on to his popular base, the future of the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki becomes ever more precarious. With 32 members in parliament and six government ministers, al-Sadr's movement is a principal component of this government and without its support it is doubtful that the government could survive.

The chief spokesman for US forces in Iraq, Rear Admiral Mark Fox, gave a more frank assessment of the crisis confronting the occupation, tempering claims of "accomplishments" with the admission that "the past four years have also been disappointing, frustrating and increasingly dangerous in many parts of Iraq."

As the naval officer spoke, the number of US military personnel killed in Iraq had climbed to 3,282, with 10 soldiers losing their lives just last weekend and another reported killed in the fighting in Diwaniya on Monday. The number of wounded has risen to over 26,000.

Just since the beginning of this month, 36 US soldiers have been killed, raising the prospect of April becoming one of the deadliest months since the invasion was launched more than four years ago. Already, January, February and March constituted the deadliest first quarter since the invasion, with 244 US military deaths, compared with 148 in 2006.

There is growing evidence that the Bush administration's "surge" is responsible for the mounting casualties. Not only are more troops being deployed in combat situations, but the growing strain caused by the increased deployments means that more soldiers are being sent into dangerous conditions without adequate recuperation, training or equipment.

On Monday, the Pentagon revealed the identity of four more Army National Guard brigades, a total of 13,000 troops, which are to be sent to Iraq. The units are from Arkansas, Indiana, Ohio and Oklahoma. Sources also indicated that some 18,000 US soldiers already in Iraq may have their tours of duty extended.

For Iraqi civilians, the carnage continues unabated. The US "surge" has only served to shift the endemic violence from Baghdad—which was totally paralyzed Monday by a 24-hour ban on all vehicular traffic—to outlying areas. Deaths continue to be reported on the level of

approximately 100 a day throughout the country.

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