

White House signals continued Iraq escalation as US death toll tops 4,000

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The White House delivered a strong signal Monday that President Bush is virtually certain to support a recommendation that the escalation of the US military intervention in Iraq continue indefinitely, despite the rising death toll among US troops.

Bush held a two-hour video conference with the chief commander of the US forces occupying Iraq, Gen. David Petraeus, and the American ambassador in Baghdad, Ryan Crocker, the day after a roadside bomb killed four US troops in southern Baghdad, bringing the total American death toll in the five-year war to 4,000.

Afterwards, White House spokeswoman Dana Perino told a White House press briefing that Bush sees “some merit” in the proposal to halt any further troop withdrawals after July. Asked if the president would approve the so-called “pause” that Petraeus is reportedly backing, she replied, “I think that’s not unlikely.”

She added that the president is under “no deadline” to make a decision on troop deployments, which now total approximately 155,000. Petraeus and Crocker are scheduled to return to Washington on April 8 to testify before Congress.

Also participating in Monday’s video conference was Admiral William Fallon, the chief of Central Command, which directs US military operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Fallon had argued against Petraeus’ position, calling for withdrawals to resume after a brief pause. The admiral announced his resignation, which takes effect at the end of this month, after the publication of an article citing his opposition to a war against Iran placed him publicly at odds with the policy of the White House.

Bush made a brief and oblique reference to the grim milestone in US casualty figures during a visit to the State Department Monday afternoon. Calling it a “day of reflection,” he perfunctorily declared his “deepest sympathies” to the families of those killed, “whether they were the first one who lost their life in Iraq or recently lost their lives in Iraq.”

Bush invoked the tragic squandering of 4,000 lives thus far in the US war of aggression to justify a continuation of the slaughter, vowing “to make sure that those lives were not lost in vain, that, in fact, there is an outcome that will merit the sacrifice that civilian and military alike have made; that our strategy going forward will be aimed at making sure that we achieve victory.”

Vice President Dick Cheney, speaking with ABC News in Jerusalem, sounded a similar note. Asked whether Washington would resume the drawing down of troop levels in the fall, Cheney replied, “That isn’t the way I think about it. It’s important to achieve victory in Iraq.

It's important to win, to succeed in the objective that we've established."

Cheney added that "conditions on the ground will determine" how many troops are still fighting in Iraq by the end of the year, when the Bush administration leaves office, indicating that it was pointless to make any projections about future withdrawals.

The Pentagon, meanwhile, sought to dismiss the significance of the American death toll having passed the 4,000 mark. "No casualty is more or less significant than another; each soldier, Marine, airman and sailor is equally precious and their loss equally tragic," a Defense Department spokesman said.

This official line from the White House and the Pentagon was largely echoed by the media. As the *Chicago Tribune* noted Monday, "In very few places was the number even front page news in a war now five years old."

The *Washington Post* relegated the story to page 9, while the *New York Times* carried an unintentionally self-indicting piece entitled, "War Endures, but Where's the Media?"

"Five years later, the United States remains at war in Iraq, but there are days when it would be hard to tell from a quick look at television news, newspapers and the Internet," the *Times* article noted.

It cited a new report released by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, which found that media coverage of the war has been drastically cut to less than one-fifth of what existed last summer. According to the study, while major print and broadcast media had devoted 18 percent of their prominent news coverage to Iraq during the first nine months of 2007, this declined to just 9 percent during the last three months of that year and plummeted to 3 percent during 2008.

Based on this report, the *Times* asserted: "The drop in coverage parallels—and may be explained by—a decline in public interest." This is a self-serving lie. There is no indication of a shift in popular opinion regarding the war. Every recent poll has shown less than a third of the population supporting the war and a decisive majority believing that it should have never been launched in the first place and that US troops should be withdrawn from Iraq.

What is happening is that the same media that promulgated the lies used to promote the war in 2002 and 2003 is now—more than five years later—largely promoting the official story that the so-called surge launched by the Bush administration over a year ago has pacified the country, leading to a marked improvement in conditions there.

The mounting of the US death toll to 4,000—900 having been killed since the "surge" began—does not fit into this good news story. Therefore, it has received far less coverage than when the death toll topped 1,000 in September 2004, 2,000 in October 2005 and 3,000 in December 2006.

In reality, this appalling new statistic does not begin to reveal the massive human cost of the Iraq war. It has been estimated that for every fatality in Iraq, 15 troops are wounded—an unprecedented ratio attributable to better protective gear and improved medical technology. Many tens if not hundreds of thousands more have suffered serious psychological damage from their participation in a brutal colonial war.

According to credible estimates, for every American soldier and Marine killed in Iraq, some 250 Iraqis have lost their lives over the five years since the US invaded and occupied the country.

The prominent British polling agency, ORB, produced an estimate of 1.2 million civilian deaths last September, a figure that closely tracked the findings of a public health survey conducted 18 months earlier by a team of scientists from Johns Hopkins University, which placed the most likely Iraqi death toll at 665,000 as of early 2006.

In addition to the dead, over 4 million Iraqis have been driven from their homes by violence—half of them forced into exile and the rest becoming refugees in their own country. Tens of thousands of Iraqis are imprisoned without charges in a US-run gulag, where many have faced torture and ill-treatment. Since the “surge,” the numbers of Iraqis arrested daily by US forces has doubled.

Agence France-Presse quoted one of the many millions more who have been left devastated by the carnage unleashed by the US war.

“Um Mohammed, a 49-year-old widow in Baghdad’s western Mansur neighborhood, whose husband was abducted and shot by gunmen 15 months ago, bitterly blamed the US military for the loss, which has profoundly affected her and her family,” AFP reported.

“Why does the world care so much about the 4,000 soldiers killed? No one cares about the Iraqis,” she said. “All the killings in Iraq are because of the Americans. They are the cause of all the bloodshed. I ask Allah to kill all the American soldiers—to count them all and not leave any one of them. The world regards the American soldiers as our saviors but they are murderers.”

These sentiments are representative and ensure that armed resistance will continue as long as a single American soldier remains in Iraq.

Meanwhile, there are growing indications that the principal developments that underlie the supposed successes of the “surge” are beginning to unravel.

The first is the ceasefire with the Mahdi Army, loyal to Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. The militia staged a show of force in Baghdad Monday, ordering shops to close in what it termed a “civil disobedience” campaign in protest over the arrest of some of its leading members by US troops and Iraqi puppet forces.

“This disobedience is to express our objections against what is happening to us. It is a peaceful protest. Our demands are to stop these aggressions and to release all the Sadrist prisoners,” said Nassar al-Rubaie, the head of the Sadrist bloc in the Iraqi parliament.

The US military claims it has launched operations only against “renegade” followers of Sadr, but the organization has charged that the repression has been indiscriminate.

At the same time, the Pentagon issued a statement Monday denying that six people killed in a strike by a US helicopter gunship in Samarra the day before were members of the Sons of Iraq, a US-backed Sunni militia. Iraqi sources had reported that they were indeed members of the militia, who were targeted while manning a roadblock.

Such attacks, together with the continuing refusal of the Shia-dominated government to

integrate any of these Sunni forces into the Iraqi army or police, have led to growing threats that the militias, composed largely of former insurgents, will resume their resistance to the American occupation.

In an ominous development, General Petraeus Monday charged that a major mortar and rocket attack carried out the day before against the Green Zone—the heavily fortified enclave that houses the US Embassy and Iraqi government buildings—was the work of elements armed and trained by Iran.

“The rockets that were launched at the Green Zone yesterday...were Iranian-provided, Iranian-made rockets,” he said. The group that fired them, he added, were financed and trained by the Iranian Quds Force.

“All of this in complete violation of promises made by President Ahmadinejad and the other most senior Iranian leaders to their Iraqi counterparts,” said Petraeus.

These charges, completely unsubstantiated, are part of a steady drumbeat by the Bush administration against Iran, which, coupled with Fallon’s recent resignation, suggest that even as the death toll in Iraq rises, Washington is preparing a new and even bloodier war.

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