

No troops for Iraq

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ratio of one-to-three. It is desperate to relieve its glum, tired, demoralised soldiers. It is now concentrating on its recruitment efforts on South Asia and, secondarily, Turkey. That's the context for the visits of Generals Richard Myers and John Abizaid to this

It is a telling comment upon the dented, eroded moral authority of the world's sole Superpower that it approached some 90 countries the world over for military assistance in Iraq, but managed to persuade only 19 of them to send troops. Their commitment of a total of 13,000 troops is but a small fraction of the number needed to relieve the 158,000 US and British soldiers currently in Iraq, and an even smaller proportion of the strength required to instil a minimal sense of security among ordinary citizens. Even with its NATO allies, the US has had poor luck: only about a fourth of them are willing to send soldiers to further America's war.

Evidently, the US is a military giant with political feet of clay. Domestically, in both America and Britain, fresh political crises are gathering over the reported suicide of the whistle-blower microbiologist David Kelley, and disclosures that the US allegations that Saddam Hussein bought uranium from Niger were pure fabrications.

It would be a surprise if George Bush and Tony Blair emerge unscathed from these episodes. Kelly's death is a particularly serious matter. The expert, who visited Iraq 37 times, knew Blair was lying when he claimed that Iraq was a mere 45 minutes away from deploying its weapons of mass destruction. In his assessment, Iraq was nowhere near weaponising its chemical or biological capabilities, leave alone its (primitive) nuclear programme.

Complicating this political crisis is Iraq's domestic situation, marked by growing resistance to the occupation, widespread chaos, lawlessness, breakdown of public services, and antipathy towards the US and its clients. An opinion poll commissioned by the conservative British "Spectator" magazine reveals that 75 percent of Iraqis say that Baghdad is more dangerous than it was before the war (including 54 percent who say it is "much more dangerous"). Two-thirds fear being attacked in the streets.

Forty-five percent believe the US attacked Iraq "to secure oil supplies" and 41 percent "to help Israel". Just 6 percent think that the main motive was "to find and destroy WMD".

The occupation is unpopular. Only 29 percent favour the Americans, although only 7 percent want Saddam Hussein back. Only 13 percent want occupation troops to leave immediately. But 71 percent want power handed over to the Iraqi people within 12 months.

Three-and-a-half months after the fall of Baghdad, the US has failed to restore order or public services. Baghdad has a pathetically inadequate 3,900-strong police force. Human Rights Watch says women are much more insecure than under the Saddam regime. Destitution is rampant. Thousands of competent technocrats have been sacked under wholesale "de-Baathification" - although many became members of the Baath Party out of compulsion. Occupation troops have failed to instil a sense of security among Iraqi civilians.

The occupation is proving extremely costly - over and above its hefty \$4 billion monthly bill. Fifty American troops have been killed since May 1 and over 150 since March 20. US soldiers' morale is extremely low, and falling.

The New York Times quotes a sergeant from the 3rd Infantry Division saying, "we feel betrayed" at the cancellation of the division's scheduled return home. "It was like a big, big slap in the face ..." Relatives have been circulating an anonymous email message from a soldier. "Our morale is not high or even low", it says. "Our morale is non-existent."

Iraq is witnessing something akin to "imperial overstretch": the US has failed to control the political and military situation despite deploying 16 of its army's total of 33 combat brigades. This is well in excess of the recommended combat-deployment

region.

All South Asian countries must reject US requests for troops, for at least four reasons. First and foremost, the case for war on Iraq was based on a hoax - falsified evidence, sexed up intelligence, and fanciful inferences. No WMD have been found in Iraq. A war mired in such dishonesty, fraud and deception could only have been grossly unjust. Equally immoral and illegal is the resulting occupation.

Second, in bypassing the Security Council to wage war, the US mocked at the United Nations, violated its Charter and undermined the principle of multilateralism. Under the Charter, no state can use armed force against another without the Security Council's prior authorisation - except in self-defence.

Iraq's invasion was the consequence of the new, dangerous US doctrine of "pre-emptive" or "preventive" war. The world would become a lawless jungle if mighty states invaded others on suspicion that they might some day pose a threat. We in South Asia must not legitimise such doctrines or work against a multi-polar rule-based world order with multilateralism at its core.

Third, the US is desperate to put a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, plurilateral gloss on Iraq's essentially First World occupation force. It would be extraordinarily foolhardy for South Asians to oblige it and become targets of Arab nationalist resistance. Joining hands with an insolent Superpower, which the Arab masses hate, will compromise our peoples' - and migrant workers' - safety and security. Right since 1953, when the US toppled Mossadegh in Iran, and set back the cause of democracy in the Middle East, America has repeatedly destabilised that volatile region. It would be mindless for us to ally with the US.

And fourth, US actions in and plans for Iraq cannot be isolated from the agenda of the Neoconservatives who now rule Washington. The Neocons have spelled out their goal: a US global Empire based on military supremacy. If the post-9/11 attack on Afghanistan was the first step in that process, the war in Iraq is the second (and much bigger) step.

The pursuit of this agenda is unleashing forces of discontent and disorder whose full dimensions the US can barely comprehend, leave alone control. Blinded by militarism, Washington has no political strategy to deal with the phenomena (terrorism) it wishes to eliminate. In building a new global Empire, it seems destined to visit havoc and devastation upon the world.

It would be suicidal for Pakistan, India, or Bangladesh to collude with the US Empire. This will bring them into hostile confrontation with Arab public opinion and earn them the hatred of the bulk of the Third World. Iraq has become a quagmire thanks to Washington's own cynical policies since the 1960s, when it promoted one Baathist faction (Saddam's) against another, and through the 1980s when it sided with him against Iran even as he used chemical weapons.

The US is a bad "nation-builder". It fails to translate military victory into peace. A recent study by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace says the US has so far conducted over 200 overseas military interventions. A mere 16 of these were "nation-building" attempts. Only four (post-War Germany, Japan, Granada-1983 and Panama-1989) succeeded in establishing democracy lasting 10 years or longer.

Iraq is already turning sour. It could become a gigantic misadventure. Only the foolhardy would want to become America's partner in disaster.