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Air attacks in Iraq are still relatively low compared with the numbers of weapons dropped in Afghanistan - 929 this year as of May 15.

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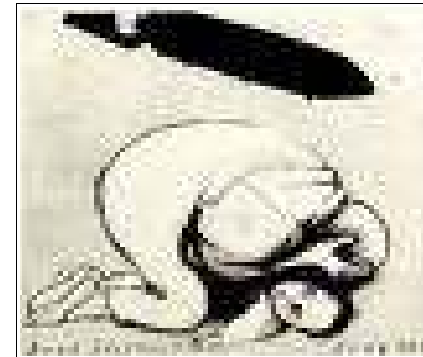
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U.S. airpower dropping bombs on Iraq at twice last year's rate

CHARLES J. HANLEY , International Herald Tribune, 6/5/07

Four years into the war that opened with "shock and awe," U.S. warplanes have again stepped up attacks in Iraq, dropping bombs at more than twice the rate of a year ago. The airpower escalation parallels a nearly four-month-old security crackdown that is bringing 30,000 additional U.S. troops into Baghdad and its surroundings - an urban campaign aimed at restoring order to an area riven with sectarian violence. It also reflects increased availability of planes from U.S. aircraft carriers in the Persian Gulf. And it appears to be accompanied by a rise in Iraqi civilian casualties.



In the first 4 1/2 months of 2007, American aircraft dropped 237 bombs and missiles in support of ground forces in Iraq, already surpassing the 229 expended in all of 2006, according to U.S. Air Force figures obtained by The Associated Press.

"Air operations over Iraq have ratcheted up significantly, in the number of sorties, the number of hours (in the air)," said Col. Joe Guastella, Air Force operations chief for the region. "It has a lot to do with increased pressure on the enemy by MNC-I" - the Multinational Corps-Iraq - "combined with more carriers."

The Air Force report did not break down the specific locations in Iraq where bombings have been stepped up. But U.S.-led forces also

are locked in new and dangerous fronts against insurgents outside Baghdad in such places as Diyala, a province northeast of the capital.

A second U.S. Navy aircraft carrier on station since February in the Persian Gulf has added some 80 warplanes to the U.S. air arsenal in the region.

At the same time, the number of civilian Iraqi casualties from U.S. airstrikes appears to have risen sharply, according to Iraq Body Count, a London-based, anti-war research group that maintains a database compiling news media reports on Iraqi war deaths.

The rate of such reported civilian deaths appeared to climb steadily through 2006, the group reports, averaging just a few a month in early 2006, hitting some 40 a month by year's end, and averaging more than 50 a month so far this year.

Those are maximum tolls based on news reports, and they count those killed by Army helicopter fire as well as by warplanes, Iraq Body Count's John Sloboda said. The count is regarded as conservative, since it doesn't include deaths missed by the international media.

The U.S. military itself says it doesn't track civilian casualties.

"The reality of civilian deaths is a year-on-year increase," said Sloboda, a psychology professor at Britain's Keele University. "This particular part of it - airstrikes - have rocketed up more than any other."

Air Force figures show that, after the thousands of bombs and missiles used in the 2003 "shock and awe" invasion, U.S. airpower settled down to a slow bombing pace: 285 munitions dropped in 2004, 404 in 2005 and 229 in 2006, totals that don't include warplanes' often-devastating 20mm and 30mm cannon or rocket fire, or Marine Corps aircraft.

The number of Air Force and Navy "close air support" missions, which usually involve a flyover show of force or surveillance work, rather than bombing, also has grown by some 30 to 40 percent this spring, said Army Lt. Col. Bryan Cox, a ground-forces liaison at the regional air headquarters.

Examples of attacks, as reported in the Air Force's daily summary:

- Last Friday, an Air Force F-16 fighter dropped a guided 500-pound (227-kilogram) bomb near the northern city of Tal Afar that destroyed a vehicle laden with explosives to be used as a bomb.

- The day before, an F-16 dropped a similar bomb on "an inaccessible building being used by insurgents" near Samarra, north of Baghdad, with "good effects."

- Last Wednesday, another F-16 dropped bombs on "an illegal bridge and an insurgent vehicle in Baghdad."

Over 600,000 Iraqi civilians died in violence between the beginning of the US invasion in March 2003 and July 2006 according to a study by the John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

Police and other Iraqi sources sometimes report civilian casualties in such airstrikes that are not reflected in the official U.S. accounts.

Air Force Col. Gary Crowder, deputy director of the regional air operations center, said such casualties "pale in comparison" with civilian casualties from ground combat.

"In Iraq, we minimize our deployment of air-delivered weapons in populated areas," he said.

Crowder, Guastella and Cox were interviewed outside Iraq at the regional U.S. air headquarters. Journalists are allowed to visit that low-profile base on condition they don't disclose its location, a