

Eyewitness to air assault denounces media cover-up

US and British bombs killed hundreds of Iraqi civilians

Barry Grey
24 December 1998

Jean Marie Benjamin, a priest at a Christian humanitarian foundation in Iraq, on Monday confirmed Iraqi government reports of heavy civilian casualties and denounced the Western media for concealing the devastating impact on innocent men, women and children of last week's US-British air assault.

Benjamin left Baghdad after the four-day bomb attack. He said he personally saw children hospitalized for burns undergoing operations without the benefit of anesthesia. He further charged that the so-called smart bombs had destroyed houses, hospitals and other nonmilitary facilities, and killed hundreds of victims.

The barrage of 400 cruise missiles and 650 sorties against a defenseless country took a terrible toll. Baghdad has officially acknowledged 62 soldiers killed and 180 injured. For its own reasons, the Iraqi government has given no precise account of the number of civilian dead and wounded and the extent of damage to civilian facilities. But Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz said on Monday the brunt of the air strikes had been born by civilians.

Casualties among civilians were 'much, much higher' than among military personnel, Aziz said. Declaring: 'They want to ... strip Iraq of any serious industrial capabilities,' Aziz recalled the statement of former Secretary of State James Baker, who told him in 1991, 'We will bring you back to the pre-industrial age.'

Nizar Hamdoon, Iraq's ambassador to the United Nations, told CNN on Sunday that 'thousands of Iraqis' had been killed or wounded in the air raids.

In addition to Republican Guard barracks, presidential palaces, Ba'ath Party headquarters, air defense installations, communications facilities, intelligence centers, missile factories and an oil

refinery, US missiles struck colleges, post offices, dormitories and a museum, according to the Iraqi government.

The carnage inflicted by American and British hi-tech weapons of mass destruction has compounded the death and suffering caused by eight years of crippling economic sanctions. Last October Denis Halliday, head of UN humanitarian operations in Iraq, resigned his post in protest over the refusal of the UN, under pressure from Washington, to lift the sanctions.

He told a briefing in Washington that UN estimates of 5,000 to 6,000 Iraqi children dying every month as a result of the sanctions were 'probably modest.' He attributed the death toll to a lack of clean water, a breakdown in the sanitation system, inadequate diet and a lack of medical care.

According to the UN's own figures, the sanctions are responsible for an increase of 90,000 deaths per year. Various reports estimate that between 500,000 and 1,000,000 Iraqi children have died since 1990 as a result of the sanctions.

The US government has no doubt made an estimate of Iraqi civilian dead and wounded from the 70-hour bombing campaign. When the US was on the verge of launching the air war in mid-November, the Pentagon advised Clinton that the 'rolling' attacks would possibly kill 10,000 Iraqis. 'That was the medium case scenario,' one administration official said at the time.

The Clinton administration, with the complicity of the mass media, is remaining silent on the civilian toll from the air war in keeping with its general policy of concealing from the American public the human impact of its vendetta against Iraq.

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