

Britain's dossier on Iraq: human rights as a pretext for war

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The latest propaganda initiative in support of a US-led war against Iraq by Britain's Labour government backfired badly this week.

Foreign Secretary Jack Straw issued a Foreign Office dossier detailing human rights abuses perpetrated by the Iraqi regime, explicitly linking this in his accompanying speech with the question of arms inspections and thus the possibility of war.

Following a video presentation including images of torture victims and children killed in gas attacks on the Kurdish town of Halabja in 1988, Straw declared that the report was necessary so "people understand the comprehensive evil that is Saddam Hussein".

He added, "He has got these weapons of mass destruction, chemical, biological and probably nuclear weapons which he has used in the past against his own people as well as his neighbours and could almost certainly use again in the future."

The human rights organisation Amnesty International was highly critical as to the timing of the dossier's publication. Spokesman Richard Bunting said, "We are afraid this is opportunistic and selective.... The British and US are being selective, conveniently ignoring other countries and using that record to drive forward foreign and military goals."

Hania Mufti of the US-based Human Rights Watch said, "The timing would not be so much of an issue if it came against a background of previous actions by the Government to expose human rights violations." The group said that when it collected evidence of Saddam Hussein's abuses at Halabja and elsewhere in the Kurdish area of Iraq, the Foreign Office ignored it.

Labour MP Tam Dalyell, who is Father of the House of Commons as the longest serving parliamentarian, said, "I think that this highly unusual, indeed, unprecedented publication is cranking up for war."

Labour MP Alice Mahon asked, "Why is this being

published now? We know all of this is part of a softening-up exercise."

Significant sections of the British media were critical of the government's move.

The *Daily Mirror* published an article by campaigning journalist John Pilger that pointed out, "When Blair and Bush incessantly refer to Saddam 'using chemical weapons against his own people', specifically the Kurdish village of Halabja in 1988, they never explain that Britain and America were accomplices."

"Not only did both governments secretly and illegally approve the sale of chemical weapons' agents, officials in Washington and Whitehall tried to cover up the Halabja atrocity, with the Americans even faking a story that Iran was responsible."

Even the state-owned BBC's diplomatic correspondent James Robbins was moved to explain that the dossier was "a political document intended to achieve a particular political effect."

Straw's efforts were received no better in Europe, which Britain hopes will back America's war aims. In Germany, for example, the *Berliner Zeitung* called the dossier "part of its [Britain's] propaganda war for the disarming and possible overthrow of the Iraqi dictator".

The *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* commented, "It is apparent that the report is aimed at the British public, whose support is seen as necessary by the Blair government in the event of a military intervention alongside the United States."

The *Frankfurter Rundschau* said the report "leaves behind a bitter aftertaste".

The government was immediately placed on a back foot. Britain's spokesman on Iraq, Mark Sedwill, issued a pathetic denial that the report was intended to build a case for military action against Iraq. Speaking in the Jordanian capital Amman just prior to its release, he said, "There is a strong impression around in the Middle East that Britain

has a desire to prepare for military action on Iraq. It isn't so. We want a peaceful way out of this."

A Foreign Office official at the press launch of the dossier said it was not the job of the present government to have to justify the Conservative governments of the 1980s.

The Foreign Office later had to retract Straw's assertion that in all likelihood Iraq possesses nuclear weapons, which is contradicted by all US and British intelligence reports. It claimed that he had been "referring to Saddam Hussein's intention to acquire such weapons".

The dossier has been issued because of the concerns of the Blair government that the United Nations arms inspections will not produce evidence that makes the case for a renewed military bombardment of Iraq. Since the UN inspectors arrived in Iraq on November 28, they have been given unrestricted access to the sites they wished to view, including Hussein's palaces, and have found nothing. Baghdad has also promised to issue its list of any weapons programmes it is undertaking on December 7, one day before it was required to do so, and has said that this would prove that the country has no weapons of mass destruction.

However, the US has indicated that it will essentially ignore the UN's findings and instead compare Iraq's report with its own undisclosed intelligence to justify military action. Speaking on the day Straw issued his dossier, President Bush expressed deep scepticism about the ability of the UN inspectors to uncover weapons of mass destruction. He insisted, "A regime that fires upon American and British pilots is not taking the path of compliance. A regime that sends letters filled with protests and falsehoods is not taking the path of compliance."

He said that it was up to Iraq, not the inspectors, to disclose its weapons programmes, or it would face a serious response.

Bush cited two alleged examples of Iraqi anti-aircraft fire as supposed proof of a lack of compliance. In reality, the US and Britain have massively stepped up their ongoing bombardment of Iraq in an effort to provoke such retaliatory action. According to reports, ordinance dropped on Southern Iraq has increased by 300 percent since March to nearly 54 tonnes in September.

The US welcomed Britain's dossier as a valuable addition to its own propaganda offensive. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld told the media, "Disarmament is only one of the steps required of Iraq in Resolution 1441.... [It] also calls for Iraq to end repression of its

civilian population."

In a veiled attack on European countries opposed to war, he added, "That this pattern of human rights violations seems not of concern to some nations is disturbing.... A regime with weapons of mass destruction and such contempt for human life, even the lives of its own people, ought to be considered what it is: namely, a particular kind of danger."

As if to reinforce the widespread accusation of political opportunism, Straw's next move following the issuing of his dossier was to visit the Turkish capital of Ankara. His mission was to help bring Turkey on board the US-British war effort in return for assurances of British support for Turkey's membership of the European Union.

Turkey's appalling human rights record was not a subject for discussion despite the fact that, according to a few brief extracts from Amnesty's annual report, the following conditions exist in the country: "Torture in police custody remained widespread and was practised systematically.... Dozens of political killings were reported, some of which may have been extrajudicial executions.... Repression of political parties and organisations in the mainly Kurdish southeast continued.... There were numerous reports of torture and ill-treatment of men, women and children.... The most frequently reported methods included severe beatings, blindfolding, suspension by the arms or wrists, electric shocks, sexual abuse, and food and sleep deprivation."

Straw was followed to Turkey by Paul Wolfowitz, the Deputy Defense Secretary in the Bush administration, who secured Ankara's agreement that US troops would be allowed to use its air space and facilities. The number being considered is 100,000. In return, Wolfowitz promised Turkey economic support to tide it through any instability that might ensue from military confrontation on its doorstep and that the Kurds in northern Iraq would not be allowed to set up their own state.



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