

US uses cluster bombs to spread death and destruction in Iraq

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“Weapons of mass destruction” have truly been unleashed in Iraq: new-generation cluster munitions are being used by US and British forces to massacre and terrorise the Iraqi population. Not a single Iraqi biochemical weapon has been witnessed, but the “liberators” have already resorted to weapons notorious for their vast and indiscriminate destruction of human life.

After days of denials or refusals to comment, American and British government leaders and military commanders have admitted that high-flying bomber squadrons have dropped cluster bombs, which are designed to kill and maim thousands of people at a time. There is clear evidence that cluster weapons are also being fired from jet fighters, tanks, artillery and off-shore missile launchers.

Gruesome pictures and footage of the mutilated bodies of Iraqi children and other innocents—images that the Western media has largely refused to show—reveal the bloody face of the “liberation” that Washington and London have in mind for the Iraqi people. These methods of warfare are a warning of the reprisals and repression that will follow any military victory.

A clear pattern has emerged from the reports of cluster bomb carnage coming from places like Basra, Najaf, Karbala, Hilla and Baghdad itself. Wherever Iraqi soldiers and civilians have resisted or even obstructed the invading forces, cluster weapons have been deployed against them. The closer the US-British forces get to the outskirts of the sprawling Iraqi capital, the more the Pentagon and British military are utilizing these high-tech weapons of terror.

In the worst atrocity so far, a day and night of furious American bombing on Monday and Tuesday left at least 61 Iraqi civilians dead and more than 450 seriously injured in the region of Hilla, 80 kilometers south of Baghdad. Most were children.

Roland Huguenin-Benjamin, a spokesman for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Iraq, described what happened in Hilla and neighboring villages as “a horror.” His team saw “several dozens of bodies which were completely blown to pieces” and “dozens of severed bodies and scattered limbs.” Huguenin-Benjamin confirmed there were at least 460 wounded, being treated in an ill-equipped 280-bed hospital that was “completely unable to cope.” All victims were “farmers, women and children.”

Arab cameramen working for Reuters and Associated Press filmed babies cut in half, amputated limbs, children whose faces were a web of deep cuts. There were also two trucks full of bodies—mostly children and women—parked outside the Hilla hospital.

Dr. Hussein Ghazay from Hilla hospital confirmed that “all the injuries were either from cluster bombing or from bomblets that exploded afterwards when people stepped on them or children picked them up by mistake.” Iraqi journalists on site and later an Agence France Presse photographer said they saw debris equipped with small parachutes characteristic of cluster bombs—which release up to 400 time-delay bomblets.

Just south of Hilla, US tanks blew apart a civilian bus heading toward Najaf, killing all but one of its 35 passengers. “Many of the people on the bus were decapitated,” said hospital surgeon Dr. Dhiya Sultani.

Robert Fisk of the British *Independent* newspaper described the Hilla mortuary as “a butcher’s shop of chopped-up corpses.” After visiting the hospital, he wrote: “The wounds are vicious and deep, a rash of scarlet spots on the back and thighs or face, the shards of shrapnel from the cluster bombs buried an inch or more in the flesh. The wards of the Hilla teaching hospital are proof that something illegal—something quite outside the Geneva Conventions—occurred in the villages around the city once known as Babylon.”

Reports indicate that the cluster bombs used in Hilla were a type known as BLU97 A/B. Each canister contains 202 small bomblets—BLU97—the size of a soft drink can. These cluster bomblets scatter over a large area approximately the size of two football fields. On average, at least 5 percent do not explode upon impact, turning them into de facto anti-personnel mines.

Victims interviewed by Fisk remembered seeing bomblets filling the air. Rahed Hakem heard “the voice of explosions” and looked out to see “the sky raining fire.” Muhammad Moussa said clusters of “little boxes” fell like “small grapefruit.” He added: “If it hadn’t exploded and you touched it, it went off immediately. They exploded in the air and on the ground and we still have some in our home, unexploded.”

The hospital’s deputy administrator and a doctor said a US Special Forces operation involving Apache helicopters nearby had gone spectacularly wrong one night when militiamen forced them to retreat. Shortly afterward, the cluster bomb raids began, although the targeted villages appeared to have been on the other side of Hilla to the abortive American attack.

Victims and relatives bitterly denounced the Bush administration. One mother, whose five-year-old son lost his arm to a bomblet, pointed to six other beds occupied by youngsters with bloodstained bandages and bruises, and cried: “What did these little children do to the Americans? What did they do to Bush?”

Bassan Hoki, 38, said he was in the bus attack. Surgeons had amputated his right arm above the elbow, and seeping bandages covered deep wounds on both his legs. His mother, who was seated beside him, was killed instantly in the blast. “I looked around me, it seemed like everyone was dead,” he said. “People’s heads were snapped off their bodies. The bus was torn to pieces.”

He added, “I have just one thing to say to George Bush. He is a criminal and a liar to talk of bringing us freedom. He attacks civilians for no reason. This is a crime, a crime, a crime.”

Hussein Ali Hussein, 26, a salesman who lost most of one leg when a car was hit by an American tank shell, said: “We believed the Americans, when they said they were not going to attack civilians. Why would the Americans do this to me? But we Iraqis will never accept that this country is ruled by anybody but Iraqis, so we will fight to the last drop of our

blood.”

A 21-minute videotape of the Hilla hospital carnage has been seen by reporters in Baghdad. In one sequence, according to the *Independent*, the video shows a father holding pieces of his baby and screaming “Cowards, cowards” at the camera.

Cluster bomb casualties have also been reported in Basra, Najaf, Karbala and Baghdad. On Thursday, Iraq’s information minister Mohammed Saeed al-Sahaf accused US-led forces of dropping cluster bombs on the Douri residential area of Baghdad, killing 14 people and wounding 66.

International law flouted

Widely used by US forces in Vietnam, the 1991 Gulf War, Kosovo and Afghanistan, and by Israel in the 1982 siege of West Beirut, cluster bombs have been condemned by human rights organizations. They compare their effects to anti-personnel mines, which are outlawed by the 1999 Ottawa Treaty.

The bomblets are so lethal they can demolish a tank, but they are notoriously erratic in their dispersal and many do not explode on impact—the failure rate is as high as 30 percent. Apart from inflicting immediate casualties, half-buried small yellow cylinders remain for years—deadly threats to civilians, especially children, who easily mistake them for toys or food parcels. [See accompanying article].

In a report released just before the Iraq invasion began, the New York-based Human Rights Watch organisation said cluster munitions dropped in the 1991 Gulf War were to blame for the deaths or injuries of more than 4,000 civilians after fighting ended.

The anti-landmine charity set up to commemorate the late British Princess Diana joined the condemnation. “It’s appalling that, despite the well-documented problems with cluster weapons, the US and UK are dropping them on Iraq,” said Andrew Purkis, chief executive of the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund.

Using cluster bombs in civilian areas violates the Geneva Conventions on war, which demand protection for civilians even if they are intermingled with military personnel. Amnesty International stated: “The use of cluster bombs in an attack on a civilian area of al- Hilla constitutes an indiscriminate attack and a grave violation of international humanitarian law.”

For the US and British forces it is a reckless policy that also endangers the lives of Allied ground troops. Human Rights Watch noted that two US marines were killed—one Sunday and the other the next day—after stepping on unexploded cluster bombs. In 1991, six US army combat engineers were killed while disposing of cluster bombs.

US and British officials have flatly defended the resort to cluster weapons, while denying they were used in civilian areas. The US military said Wednesday that B-52 bombers had for the first time dropped six new CBU-105 bombs—1,000-pound (454 kg) cluster bombs—on Iraqi tanks defending Baghdad.

A Central Command spokesman, Navy Captain Frank Thorp, said the munitions were playing a tactical role in the battlefield and working well against large targets, such as an airfield. “It’s a very effective weapon,” he said. While protecting civilians was important, he said, “Let’s be very clear, weapons are designed for war. There is no weapon that doesn’t cause harm except for the leaflets we have been dropping for the past month.”

British military commanders denied a BBC report on Thursday that they used cluster bombs in and around the southern city of Basra. BBC correspondent Hilary Andersson, with UK troops in southern Iraq, was

told L20 cluster munitions had been used in Iraq’s second city of 1.5 million people, which British forces have failed to conquer despite more than two weeks of fighting.

British military spokesman Colonel Chris Vernon admitted that his forces were using such bombs, insisting they were “a legitimate munition,” but only against “Iraqi regular forces, where appropriate.” Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon confirmed this position in Parliament, claiming that cluster bombs had been considered in Basra but ruled out because of the likely civilian toll.

A more honest statement of the thinking in the British political and military establishment came from General Patrick Cordingley, who commanded a British armoured brigade in the Gulf War in 1991. He told the BBC that the British people must “harden our hearts” and accept that mistakes are made.

Other civilian deaths are being reported throughout Iraq. Early Thursday, reporters on the bus to Hilla said they saw the park set aside for Baghdad’s annual international trade fair with about a dozen large buildings completely flattened with smoke still rising. Iraqi officials said later that the strike had hit a maternity clinic on the fairground, killing nine women.

Al-Mustansariya University in Baghdad has been bombed, as had a Red Crescent maternity hospital. In Al Janabi, in the southeast of Baghdad, a farm was pulverized by missiles, leaving at least 20 dead, including 11 children.

The *Independent* has established that an American missile was responsible for the devastation at the Shu’ale market in Baghdad on March 28, where at least 62 civilians were killed. Serial numbers found on fragments of the missile indicated that it was either a high speed anti-radiation missile (Harm) or a Paveway laser-guided bomb, both manufactured by Raytheon in Texas.

The Bush administration, the Blair government and the US Central Command continue to blame the market massacre in Baghdad on misfired Iraqi missiles. With the cluster bombs, however, no such evasion is possible.

Since there is no evidence that a single Iraqi aircraft has taken off since the start of the Anglo-American invasion, not even the US and British propaganda machine can claim the cluster bombs were dropped by Iraq.

The outrage expressed by the Hilla massacre survivors reflects the seething hostility developing throughout the Middle East. Even in Egypt, where the pro-US Mubarak regime has sought to suppress antiwar sentiment, the semi-official *al-Ahram* newspaper was compelled to conclude in a recent editorial: “The ‘clean war’ has become the dirtiest of wars, the bloodiest, the most destructive. Smart weapons have become deliberately stupid, blindly killing people in markets and popular neighborhoods.”



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