

Despite US denials, cluster bombs continue to claim lives in Iraq

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As George W. Bush gloats over the US “victory” in Iraq, Iraqi civilians continue to be terrorised by unexploded cluster bomblets. American officials, however, have responded to the numerous reports of the horrifying effects of cluster weapons by lying about the numbers of civilians who have been killed.

Cluster bombs, which are notorious for their inaccuracy, were dropped from fighter planes and shot from artillery and tanks in their hundreds during the invasion of Iraq. They are designed to fragment before detonation into small “bomblets”, a large proportion of which fail to detonate upon impact, leaving behind a deadly threat to the civilian population. Depending on the type of cluster bomb used, up to 650 bomblets can be released from each cluster bomb.

In a press conference on April 18, US General Richard Myers claimed that around 1,500 cluster bombs were used in the war against Iraq. Responding to questions about the resulting civilian casualties, Myers declared that there was only one confirmed death of an Iraqi civilian due to this particular type of weapon.

Myers’ claim is a deliberate lie—part of the post-war US policy of preventing the people of the United States and the world from learning the truth about the ongoing suffering of the Iraqi people. While the US military refuses to disclose, or even count, the number of Iraqi war casualties, cluster bombs have undoubtedly been responsible for the deaths of hundreds and possibly thousands of Iraqi men, women and children.

In his press conference, General Myers admitted that his forces had bombed civilian areas with cluster weapons. “In some cases, we hit those targets knowing that there would be a chance of potential collateral damage.” Myers went on to declare it was “unfortunate that we had to make these choices about hitting targets in civilian areas. But as we’ve said before, as well, war is not a tidy affair, it’s a very ugly affair”.

A number of journalists in Iraq have witnessed the reality of this “collateral damage”. In one devastating US attack on April 9, cluster bombs hit the Ghazaliya civilian district of Baghdad. As *Newsday*’s James Rupert reported on April 22, they “fell into large suburban neighbourhoods like explosive rain, blasting craters and spewing steel shrapnel into homes, schools and civilians”.

A “partial survey” conducted by Rupert recorded 27 civilian deaths and 54 injuries from that raid alone. “But actually, we must be afraid that the real death toll might easily be two or three times this number,” warned Dr Hussain Nasser, head of the first aid station at Ghazaliya’s Siddiq Mosque.

In the aftermath of the Ghazaliya attack, unexploded cluster bomblets have continued to maim and kill civilians, including a high proportion of children. The can-sized bomblets are often picked up by children, who are unaware of their deadly nature. Designed to detonate if disturbed, they explode with such force that they can pierce through tanks and thick steel armour.

The US military is fully aware of the effects of cluster bombs on civilians. In the war against Yugoslavia in 1998, six percent of all the bombs dropped were cluster munitions, but these weapons were responsible for one-fifth, or 20 percent, of total civilian deaths. As in 1998, the US and UK have shown no concern whatsoever about the threat posed to Iraqi civilians. While millions of dollars have been spent on “psychological-operations”, including the dropping of hundreds of thousands of propaganda leaflets, there has been no serious attempt to inform the Iraqi people of the dangers posed by unexploded cluster munitions.

This criminal neglect on the part of the occupying forces is having predictable consequences. In one case, *Newsday* reported on the Hijazi family of Baghdad. Walid Hijazi, 20, saw more than 100 cluster bomblets around his uncle’s home on April 11. Not knowing what they were,

and believing they might be of some value, Walid brought six of the bomblets back to his family's apartment. The next morning, one of the bomblets exploded, blowing off both legs of Walid's baby sister, who died soon after.

Four cluster bomblets remained on the car floor as neighbours drove injured family members to hospital. Suddenly realising what they were, the family panicked and threw them out of the window. Shrapnel from the exploding bomblets blew out the car's tires and seriously injured the driver, Walid's uncle, Mohammed. The family only made it to hospital after passers-by gave them a lift.

Similar stories have been reported throughout Iraq. In the city of Najaf, Reuters reported "dozens" of unexploded cluster bomblets in one street in the Hay Karama area, just metres from homes. Dr Safa al-Amaidi, director of the Najaf Teaching Hospital, said his hospital alone had recorded 256 civilian deaths from cluster bombs, with another 393 wounded. "On one night, we received 35 dead from cluster bombs," Dr al-Amaidi said. "After the cessation of hostilities most of the casualties were from cluster bombs".

In northern Iraq, the *Guardian* reported that unexploded ordnance, mostly cluster bomblets, had killed and maimed more civilians since the fall of Baghdad than during the fighting itself. Civilian casualties have been recorded in every part of northern Iraq, including Mosul, Kirkuk, and Jaluln. The non-governmental Mines Advisory Group has also found anti-armour cluster bomblets in remote fields, with 75 percent of all bomblets in this area failing to detonate upon impact.

In the aftermath of the war against Iraq, human rights organisations, as well as many other groups, such as the Federation of American Scientists, have stepped up their demands for the weapons to be immediately outlawed.

The effects of unexploded cluster bomblets are similar to those caused by anti-personnel mines, which were banned under the 1999 Ottawa Treaty. Even if the treaty were extended to include cluster bombs, however, this would not affect the US military, since the US government refuses to recognise it. Irrespective of this, it is highly likely that, under the principles established by the Geneva Convention, the use of cluster bombs constitutes a war crime. One of the Geneva conventions requires armed forces to "take all feasible precautions in the choice of ... methods of attack with a view to avoiding, and in any event minimising, incidental loss of civilian life."

Human rights organisations have strongly condemned

General Myers' defence of the use of cluster bombs in known civilian areas. Joanne Mariner, Human Rights Watch attorney and a columnist for the FindLaw web site, also criticised as "highly disingenuous" Myers' claim that only 1,500 cluster bombs were dropped on Iraq.

Myers' figure only covers air-dropped cluster bombs, and not those cluster munitions fired from tank and artillery positions. As Mariner pointed out, in Baghdad and a number of other Iraqi cities, the majority of cluster bombs were surface-launched. These weapons have been responsible for many more civilian deaths than those dropped from the air, but the US military has provided no information about how many they used.

Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch, accused Myers of "whitewashing the facts", and demanded that the Pentagon "come clean" about the use and effects of cluster munitions in Iraq.

The UK Ministry of Defence has admitted using more than 2,000 cluster bombs, but, like the Americans, has provided none of the detailed information essential for clearing the tens of thousands of unexploded bomblets. "The United States and United Kingdom need to come clean on what they've done with these weapons," said Reuben Brigety, a researcher with the Arms Division of Human Rights Watch. "They are not doing all they can to protect civilians from the deadly after-effects of their cluster attacks."

The *Los Angeles Times* quoted an unnamed US defence official as saying that the US does not monitor the use of ground-launched cluster bombs. "If the Pentagon doesn't keep track of ground-launched cluster munitions, it had better start," declared Brigety. "This information is very important, especially when the weapon has been improperly used in urban areas."

The "improper use" of cluster bombs was, in fact, a deliberate and calculated part of the "shock and awe" campaign devised by the Pentagon to intimidate and terrorise Iraqi soldiers and civilians alike. The use of cluster bombs appears to have had a direct relationship to the level of resistance put up by the Iraqi people against the US-led invasion.



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