

Unexploded cluster bombs blanket Iraqi cities

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New evidence emerged this month of the widespread use by US and British forces of deadly cluster bombs in densely populated areas of Iraq. On June 1, the London-based *Observer* newspaper published a map produced by the US/UK military-run Humanitarian Operations Center (HOC), based in Kuwait, showing the location of unexploded bombs and land mines throughout the devastated country. [*The map can be accessed at <http://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Observer/documents/2003/05/31/landmines2.pdf>.*]

While most of the land mines were laid by Saddam Hussein's military going as far back as the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, cluster bombs were used exclusively by the US and British forces in their recent invasion, as well as in the 1991 Gulf War.

Using green diamonds to designate cluster bombs, the map shows the heaviest concentrations in metropolitan Baghdad, which was taken by the Americans, and in Basra, taken by the British, as well as along the main road connecting the two. A secondary concentration shows up in and around the northern city of Kirkuk.

The map exposes as a lie the claim made by UK defense minister Geoff Hoon before Parliament at the height of the fighting that the British government had ruled out the use of cluster bombs in Basra because of likely civilian casualties.

The HOC issued the map after humanitarian aid groups publicly demanded information on where cluster bombs had been dropped, to help focus their efforts to alert both civilians and their own workers to the dangers of accidental detonation, as well as to remove unexploded shells.

In addition to the dangers posed to the Iraqi people by lawlessness and the spread of disease due to the destruction of the sanitation infrastructure, the huge residue of live ammunition and land mines presents the most immediate threat to civilians trying to piece their

lives back together.

In a statement released June 7, the Swiss Foundation for Mine Action states: "Anti-personnel mines, remains from 'cluster bombs' and other non-exploded ordnance and ammunition kill and mangle daily dozens of civilian Iraqis." Another non-governmental organization, the Mines Advisory Group (MAG), reports that 77 percent of all serious injuries to children results from youngsters playing or tampering with unexploded mines and bombs.

In one of the worst single incidents, on May 13 in Missan Province north of Basra, nine children were killed when an Iraqi rocket that some of them were trying to dismantle blew up.

With the collapse of Saddam Hussein's government, fleeing soldiers abandoned large quantities of grenades and other shells in readily accessible locations. One report describes schoolchildren playing football among the stockpiles of ammunition, unaware of the danger. Another describes young boys taking out the propellants and setting them on fire to create a big flash—a game that often has deadly consequences.

In addition to the danger from children playing with left-over bombs, desperate men and older boys try to defuse the ordnance in order to extract bits of copper and other metals they can sell for scrap.

US military commanders not only disregarded the need to protect hospitals, power plants and other basic infrastructure—with the exception of oil facilities—they also failed to secure abandoned munitions, thus contributing to the general chaos. A number of unexploded munitions have found their way into some 800 refuse sites in Baghdad, for example, interfering with attempts to restore garbage collection.

The unexploded cluster bombs are especially dangerous and destructive. Each bomb contains hundreds of small bomblets, of which anywhere from 5 to 25 percent fail to explode on impact. Their bright

yellow or orange color and interesting shape attract small children, and they look similar to food ration packages distributed by the occupation authorities. When set off, they erupt with enough force to destroy a tank, killing anyone within 10 to 20 meters. In the months following the end of the 1991 Gulf War, some 1,600 civilians were killed and another 2,500 injured by unexploded cluster bomblets.

A documentary film on cluster bombs produced last year for the US public television network entitled *Bombies* describes another of their attributes: “Because the fragments travel at high velocity, when they strike people they set up pressure waves within the body that do horrific damage to soft tissue and organs: even a single fragment hitting somewhere else in the body can rupture the spleen, or cause the intestines to explode. This is not an unfortunate, unintended side effect; these bombs were designed to do this.”

The film points out that unexploded bomblets become less stable over time. Pointing to the estimated 90 million—some reportedly filled with sarin nerve gas—dropped by US forces over Laos during the Vietnam War, the documentary notes that even now hardly a day goes by without someone in Laos being killed by one of the remaining unexploded munitions.

In Iraq, the bombs’ instability is accentuated by the 100-degree-plus summer heat. For this reason, bomb removal experts are generally able to work only very early or very late in the day. Children at play, however, cannot be expected to take such precautions.

To date, General Richard Myers, the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, has acknowledged that US forces dropped 1,500 aerial cluster bombs during the assault on Iraq, which alone would produce hundreds of thousands of bomblets. However, the US military refuses to say how many cluster bombs were shot from tanks and other artillery, a number that could reach into the tens of thousands. Human Rights Watch obtained several videos of the US 3rd Infantry Division using what could only have been cluster bombs during its march on Baghdad.

British forces acknowledge dropping 60 cluster bombs from the air, while launching 2,000 from the ground. When challenged about the legality of using such indiscriminate anti-personnel weapons in heavily populated areas, British armed forces minister Adam Ingram told BBC radio: “Cluster bombs are not illegal.

They are very effective weapons. There were troops, there was equipment in and around built-up areas. Therefore the bombs were used accordingly to take out the threat to our troops.”

It is true that the 1999 Ottawa Treaty—ratified by Britain but not the US or Iraq—fails to ban cluster bombs specifically, even though unexploded bomblets function in a similar manner to the banned anti-personnel mines. However, the Geneva Conventions require combatants to take “all feasible precautions” to minimize civilian casualties, making the use of cluster bombs in Iraqi cities illegal under international law.

In the days leading up to the US-British invasion, numerous human rights groups appealed to the American and British governments to refrain from the use of cluster bombs entirely, or at least in populated areas. The appeals were ignored, leaving the Iraqi people to suffer the consequences for years to come.



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