

US occupation authority suppresses study of Iraqi civilian casualties

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In a crude effort to cover up the extent of its crimes in Iraq, the US occupation authority has brought pressure to bear on the country's health ministry officials to halt a count of civilians killed and injured during the US-led invasion in March and subsequently.

Head of the ministry's statistics department Dr Nagham Mohsen told the media last Wednesday that she had been summoned by the director of planning Dr Nazar Shabandar last month and told to stop a survey of hospitals aimed at tallying civilian casualties. He had also ordered her not to release any of the partial information that had been collected to date.

Mohsen said Shabandar had been acting on behalf of Health Minister Dr Khodeir Abbas—a member of US-imposed puppet administration, the Iraqi Governing Council. “We stopped the collection of this information because our minister didn't agree with it,” she said. “The CPA [the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority] doesn't want this to be done.”

Abbas is out of the country at a conference in Egypt but, at the prompting of the CPA, issued a statement denying he or US occupation authorities had anything to do with the order. “I have no knowledge of a civilian war casualty survey even being started by the Ministry of Health, much less stopping it,” he stated, adding: “The CPA did not direct me to stop any such survey.”

Abbas' comments are simply not credible. The ministry began its survey in July by sending out letters to all hospitals and clinics in Iraq, asking them to send details of civilians killed or wounded in the war. The study was reported in the media as early as August and a preliminary figure of 1,764 deaths has been made public. A final report was being anticipated by the media and human rights organisations. Significantly neither Abbas nor the CPA has moved to reinstate the study.

From the outset, the Pentagon has refused to keep its own tally of Iraqi casualties. US military spokesmen have contemptuously dismissed news of civilian deaths and injuries as the unfortunate but inevitable consequence of war, insisting that American and allied troops have avoided targetting civilians. But reports from a variety of sources tell a different story: that thousands of civilians have been killed, many of them through indiscriminate air strikes and the extensive use of cluster bombs.

A *Los Angeles Times* survey of 27 Baghdad hospitals found that at least 1,700 civilians died in the Iraqi capital alone in the five weeks from March 20, when the US invasion was launched. A more comprehensive tally by Associated Press based on information from about half of Iraq's hospitals put the civilian death toll at 3,240 for the month following March 20.

In late October, the Project on Defence Alternatives, a US thinktank, published a report based on hospital records, official US military statistics and news reports. It estimated that between March 20 and May 1, when Bush declared the end of major combat operations, between 3,200 and 4,300 non-combatant civilians were killed in the fighting.

The Iraq Body Count, which estimates the number of civilian deaths based on a careful correlation of media reports, puts the figure far higher. Between March 20 and May 1, between 5,708 and 7,356 Iraqi civilians were killed and the number has continued to climb. The latest figures listed on its website [www.iraqbodycount.net] put the death toll at between 7,935 and 9,766.

A report released last week by the US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) pointed out that even hospital figures would not tell the full story. “Though hospitals have records of some of the deaths in the war, a certain

percentage of casualties, due to religious practices, were not taken to hospitals, not even to obtain death certificates. Finally, as in any war, in some instances, there were few if any remains by which to identify the dead.”

HRW found that the methods of the US military and its allies had directly contributed to the high death toll. “The widespread use of cluster munitions, especially by US and UK ground forces caused at least hundreds of civilian casualties... Although cluster munition strikes are particularly dangerous in populated areas, US and UK ground forces repeatedly used these weapons in attacks on Iraqi positions in residential neighbourhoods.” The use of more than 12,000 cluster munitions resulted in the dispersal of at least 1.9 million deadly bomblets, many of which remained unexploded, including in residential areas.

The report also criticised the Pentagon for the indiscriminate use of air strikes. “Many of the civilian casualties from the air war occurred during US attacks targetting senior Iraqi leaders. The United States used unsound targetting methodology that relied on intercepts of satellite phones and inadequate corroborating intelligence.” Satellite phone signals can only provide bombing coordinates to an accuracy of 100 metres. Based on such inaccurate information, an airstrike in a built up urban environment would put hundreds, if not thousands, of innocent people at risk.

“This flawed targetting strategy was compounded by a lack of effective assessment both prior to the attacks of the potential risks to civilians and after the attacks of their success and utility. All of the fifty acknowledged attacks targetting Iraqi leadership failed. While they did not kill a single targetted individual, the strikes killed and injured dozens of civilians. Iraqis who spoke to Human Rights Watch about the attacks it investigated repeatedly stated that they believed the intended targets were not even present at the time of the strikes,” HRW stated.

These reports and estimated casualty figures are just a pale reflection of the human misery that has been caused by the Bush administration’s illegal occupation of Iraq. It is obvious why the Pentagon and the Coalition Provisional Authority do not want a comprehensive survey of Iraqi hospitals to confirm just how many innocent Iraqi men, women and children have been killed and maimed by the American military.

In the first place, such a study would further fuel the growing opposition to the US-led occupation, both inside Iraq and internationally, including within the US itself. Secondly, it would provide additional evidence of the war crimes carried out by the US military in Iraq, for which the Bush administration is directly responsible.

As the HRW report cautiously noted, the Geneva Conventions not only bar direct attacks on civilians but also prohibit indiscriminate attacks. These include strikes against “military objectives and civilians or civilian objects without distinction” and those that are expected to cause civilian casualties “which would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated”.

The widespread use of cluster bombs in built-up residential areas and air strikes against ill-defined targets are another expression of the Pentagon’s callous indifference to the consequences of its actions for Iraqi civilians and its contempt for international law.



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