

Inside Fallujah: An insightful report on US atrocities against Iraqi civilians

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A recent edition of Channel Four News included a special report by independent reporter Tara Sutton, who was one of the first journalists to enter Fallujah after the US siege of the city ended on April 30. Sutton has since returned to the city several times.

Introducing the footage, anchor John Snow said, "The importance of the battle of Fallujah was recognised by President Bush in his keynote speech earlier this week, praising US troops for their handling of the revolt by avoiding the use of 'massive strikes' that would alienate the local population. But that account is not supported by what we found on the ground."

Sutton's report began with the deaths of four American military contractors, against a backdrop of jubilant Iraqis dancing in the streets of Fallujah. The killings and public display of the corpses was the immediate pretext for a massive bombardment of the city and an offensive by US marines in which hundreds of Iraqi civilians were killed before the US army was forced to retreat.

"Within hours of their deaths, the very name of this Iraqi city became synonymous with barbarism. Within hours, all of America's military wrath was focused upon this Iraqi garrison," Sutton said.

Fallujah was the true test of America's ability to control Iraq and it had ended in defeat, she added. "Channel Four News went back to Fallujah to piece together the little known events of the 26-day battle."

"What had led some to such a visceral hatred?" she asked. She cited the fact that many Fallujah citizens had relatives in the Abu Ghraib prison and that stories of torture and abuse were rife throughout the town as early as August 2003. She also drew attention to the shooting of 17 Fallujah residents during an anti-American demonstration in April last year before stating, "This was the context of the March 31 lynching. The impact of the images upon American public opinion was huge."

The film failed to give any insight into real public opinion in America, but focussed on scenes culled from Fox News and other US media denouncing the killings as a barbaric act.

What followed was a damning indictment of the actions of the US occupying powers in Iraq.

The footage was interspersed with statements by US officials, such as an announcement by Brigadier Mark Kimmitt the day after the killings in which he said that any action taken would be with due regard for the civilian population. Sutton said, "We now know that while Brigadier Kimmitt was speaking, plans to encircle the city with 13,000 marines were already under way. A city of 300,000 civilians was being cut off from the outside world."

Sutton's description of the offensive which was unleashed on April 5 refuted Kimmitt's claims of concern for Iraqi civilians. "Helicopter gunships, F16s and F18s were used to bomb the city... The area

targeted was Julan, a densely populated suburb on the northwest edge where anti-American fighters were believed to be holed up.

"When we went back to Fallujah we found disturbing evidence which contradicts the American military's pledge. The bombing was not precise in Julan," Sutton said.

An interview with Mutaka and Ali Abass, who live on the outskirts of the district with their six children, provided an eyewitness account of the events of that fateful day.

"Behind us is a market... That's where the bombing started. A car was going round there. It was shooting at the Americans and the Americans bombed the houses and the schools. It was haphazard bombing," Mutaka said.

"With the city surrounded, fighters and the civilians of Fallujah were now trapped in the same streets," Sutton observed.

The footage then switched back to Kimmitt who declared, "We go out of our way to use every method, every technique, every tactic we know to make sure that the focus of our combat operation is against the people that would do violence to the people of Iraq and the people who would do violence to the coalition and try to keep the non-combatants as safe as possible."

Ali Abbas rejected this stating, "When a fighter is surrounded, where does he go? He seeks shelter in residential areas. The Americans know that and shell them."

Other accounts were presented of the horrific results of the US shelling. The number of casualties was increased by the fact that Fallujah residents attempting to leave the city were turned back at American roadblocks.

Mutaka Abbas said, "The Americans had blocked the roads so we couldn't go out. Every time my husband tried to go, they wouldn't let us."

American troops closed off the two main bridges to the city in order to seal it off. This also cut off the city's main hospital from the civilian population. Sutton pointed out that in doing so, "The Americans had gone directly against the Fourth Geneva Convention. This had terrible consequences, further increasing the number of casualties."

Dr Kamal Al Anni, the head surgeon at Fallujah General Hospital, had left the city shortly after the lynching of the US mercenaries and was trying to return. For three days roadblocks kept him out of the city. He phoned the hospital's director general and was horrified by what he heard.

"He said that they didn't allow us to enter the hospital and they didn't allow us transfer any instrument from the hospital. It was a moment I will never forget all my life," Dr Kamal said.

Sutton reported that while four fully-equipped operating theatres lay

empty in the cut off hospital, doctors were forced to treat the critically wounded in three make-shift clinics.

"You don't agree to do an operation on an animal like that, but we did. Either you do the surgery there or you do it outside, on a couch outside without anaesthetic," Dr Kamal said.

The report included devastating material on the attitude of the American administration to reports coming from Iraq, and in particular from the Arabic news satellite *Al Jazeera*. Sutton pointed out that *Al Jazeera* was the only broadcaster working in Fallujah at this time and as a result most of the world remained ignorant of what was taking place. On April 7 the station broadcast "shocking and very disturbing images of the aftermath of an American bombing raid," Sutton explained. The footage showed dozens of bodies laid out in front of a makeshift clinic.

Explaining that 26 members of one family had died in the bombing, Sutton said that, when questioned about civilian casualties, Kimmitt dismissed the *Al Jazeera* report as propaganda. The report then switched to Kimmitt telling journalists, "Change the channel. Change the channel to a legitimate, authoritative, honest news station."

Kimmitt's remarks only served to fuel the reaction of Iraqis, horrified at what had taken place. "Far from pacifying the town, the Americans had inflamed the entire country," Sutton commented.

Images of Iraqis in Baghdad, queuing to give blood were shown, with one woman stating, "I give my blood to people in Fallujah, to help them. And I want to be with them to fight the enemy, the Americans."

A similar picture was shown throughout the country as people gathered at the Mosques to pray for Fallujah and show solidarity with its people. "The fight held enormous symbolic power," Sutton remarked. "Now both Sunni and Shia were united in their sense of outrage."

"Marines were now fighting a street-by-street urban war. The very thing they had dreaded when they came to Iraq," she added.

The film included a brief interview with *Observer* reporter Patrick Graham, who encountered Marines who were under attack.

"We stopped at a checkpoint in the middle of nowhere. There were about eight marines and they were terrified. I've never seen American soldiers like that except in Vietnam films. They were saying things like, 'We told our officers to get us out of here but they won't let us go. We are stuck here. They mortared us three times the first night and 12 times last night. They are getting better and better.' They were terrified."

As news of an American tank hit by rebel rockets reached America, Senator Edward Kennedy referred to Iraq as President Bush's Vietnam. This was the background to the April 9 ceasefire, though Sutton made clear that no suspension of fighting actually took place.

Stating that the order came from Washington, Sutton said that one of the conditions of the American ceasefire was that the *Al Jazeera* reporter "who had broadcast to the world the shocking images of dead children must leave Fallujah."

Daniel Senor, the spokesman for the provisional authority, appeared in the report stating, "We have reason to believe that several of the news agencies do not engage in truthful reporting and we want to raise your attention to that."

Against background footage of heavy gunfire between marines and resistance fighters, Sutton said, "But it was a ceasefire in name only. One that many resistance fighters had not agreed to."

As many civilians tried to leave the city, they were picked off by American snipers. "We now know that American soldiers used sniper

fire against civilians, often just for stepping outside of their homes," Sutton reported. The film crew was taken to the place where Ali Abbas was shot at while attempting to leave the city.

"It was deserted but for a scattering of empty half-built homes. We entered one. Inside we found obvious signs that marines had been there," Sutton said as the camera focussed on a bullet on the floor. She pointed out, "A clear line of site to the Abassi car. Just outside a machine gun post constructed from cinder blocks."

"The doctors from the makeshift clinic were also seeing the work of snipers," Sutton said, introducing Dr Salam Al Aoudi who added, "I saw a child shot in the head. I saw a young man, 18 years old, and I saw a 75-year-old shot in the heart directly."

The nominal ceasefire officially ended on April 27, when American marines under heavy attack inside Fallujah called in air support.

Sutton reported, "Plans were already afoot for the Americans to disengage from the city. But before their exit strategy became public the Americans launched one final blitz on the besieged town. As the world watched live on television it was, American generals admit, the most intense aerial bombardment of Iraq since major combat ended a year ago."

Two days later a peace deal was struck in what was a serious setback for the occupying American powers. The report concluded with the Channel Four News team entering Fallujah that same day. "The city's football stadium is now a grave yard. There is nowhere else to bury the dead," Sutton reported. Surveying the stadium and its makeshift headstones, she added, "I counted 248 graves."

The American soldiers left the city having suffered 36 casualties, compared to the hundreds of Iraqis killed. Control was handed to an Iraqi general, who was to be replaced after a few hours because of his too obvious ties to the Baathist regime. However he was replaced by another former general, with ties to the old regime.

The report pointed to irony of the fact that Fallujah was now under the control of "a man from the very regime the Americans had come to Iraq to overthrow."

The fact is that the war and subsequent occupation of Iraq was not directed against the regime of Saddam Hussein, but at seizing control of the nation's oil reserves. This inevitably demands the subjugation of the Iraqi people as a whole. It is for this reason that the ongoing occupation has provoked such hostility among the population. It is also the reason why, despite immensely superior weaponry, the US military was forced into a humiliating withdrawal from Fallujah.

Sutton concluded, "Much of Fallujah is in rubble but the people are proud. They fought the Americans and in their eyes they won."

Whatever the weaknesses of analysis, the report is a refreshing change from the servile propaganda that constitutes much reporting of Iraq. Sutton should be commended for her honesty. Given the vitriol with which any objective reporting of events within occupied Iraq has been greeted, the decision to make such a report is a brave one.



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