

Britain: Blair's claims on Iraqi mass graves refuted

Elaine Gorton
30 July 2004

In November 2003, British Prime Minister Tony Blair said, of Iraq, "We've already discovered, just so far, the remains of 400,000 people in mass graves."

This oft-repeated claim has been challenged by the *Observer* newspaper. A July 18 article reveals that the government massively exaggerated the number of bodies found. Blair has, according to the newspaper's investigations, inflated the actual number of bodies discovered by occupation forces tenfold. A spokesman for the prime minister was forced to admit that the number of bodies he had quoted as being found was untrue.

The *Observer* stated, "Of 270 suspected grave sites identified in the last year, 55 have now been examined, revealing, according to the best estimates that the *Observer* has been able to obtain, around 5,000 bodies."

It continued, "While some sites have contained hundreds of bodies—including a series around the town of Hilla and another near the Saudi border—others have contained no more than a dozen."

The *Observer's* sister paper, the *Guardian*, delved deeper in to the story. An article by Brendan O'Neill stated that "when I asked Joanna Levison of the US state department how many bodies have been exhumed, she said: 'Through official procedures? None.'"

This was confirmed by Jonathan Forrest, who is part of a team that carried out the forensic tests on the gravesites in 2003. Forrest told O'Neill, "I do not believe that any forensic scientists have exhumed any bodies in Iraq at all."

With no official forensic evidence, how did Blair come up with his figure of 400,000 bodies discovered in mass graves in Iraq?

O'Neill writes, "Forrest believes that he might, inadvertently, have played a part in giving prominence

to this figure. He says journalists in Iraq constantly asked his team how many were in the graves. "So we adopted the Human Rights Watch figure of 290,000, and rounded it up to 300,000."

This was already a dubious figure. The paper revealed that the "HRW's figure is an estimate for the number of Iraqis who disappeared under the Ba'athists, 'many of whom are believed to have been killed'—not for the number buried in mass graves."

The reality is that the figure is an estimate of an estimate, not even based on bodies in graves, that was rounded up—after which another 100,000 was added by Blair.

Even this was not enough. As O'Neill points out, in a press conference with a senior US official on November 20, a journalist asked about Blair's claim that 400,000 bodies had been exhumed. The official replied, "We've seen numbers that are in the hundreds of thousands. It's certainly absolutely at least 300,000 or more; it could be as high as ... 500,000."

The Ba'athist regime was brutal and there is no excuse for minimising the political crimes it carried out against the Iraqi people. But the Western powers, which for years backed Saddam Hussein, share direct responsibility for these crimes.

O'Neill correctly notes regarding the HRW estimate of 300,000 Iraqis killed by the Ba'athists: "According to the US state department, most of the graves discovered to date correspond to five major atrocities committed by the Saddam Hussein regime: the 1983 attack against Kurds of the Barzani tribe; the 1988 Anfal campaign against the Kurds, for which estimates of the numbers killed vary from 50,000 to 180,000; chemical attacks against Kurdish villages from 1986 to 1988; the 1991 massacre of Shia Muslims during their uprising at the end of the Gulf war; and the 1991

massacre of Kurds who fought for autonomy in northern Iraq after the Gulf war.”

The offensive against the Kurds in the 1980s took place during the Iran-Iraq war, in which the US supported and armed Iraq. The suppression of a Kurdish uprising in the north that was supported by Iran in 1988 was also given tacit support by Washington. And again, the attack on the Shia Muslims in 1991 was carried out to suppress an uprising that was encouraged and then abandoned by the administration of Bush senior following the first Gulf War.

Equally important, it is clear that turning 5,000 to 400,000 to half a million bodies was no simple slip of the pen. It served a clear political purpose.

The focus on mass graves began under conditions where the claim peddled by Blair and others that the world was immediately threatened by Saddam Hussein’s possession of weapons of mass destruction was discredited. And in order to legitimise the war at a time when the United States was in the process of consolidating its own puppet regime, the emphasis of propaganda emanating from Washington and London shifted to the benefits of “regime change” for the Iraqi people.

The existence of 400,000 bodies in mass graves gave Blair and President George W. Bush a moral imperative for war. It allowed the Ba’athist regime to be equated with other perpetrators of genocidal crimes. The USAID website stated, “If these numbers prove accurate, they represent a crime against humanity surpassed only by the Rwandan genocide of 1994, Pol Pot’s Cambodian killing fields in the 1970s, and the Nazi Holocaust of World War II.”

Blair’s public declarations followed this template. If this number of bodies had been unearthed, was it not his moral duty to change this brutal regime? Indeed, if the UK and US, along with their coalition partners, had not acted then they would have been turning a blind eye to a crime against humanity—a position that was by implication attributed to those opposed to war.

The only trouble is, like the weapons of mass destruction, the bodies are simply not there.

Such lies and exaggerations have become the stock-in-trade of the Western powers in seeking to legitimise their own crimes. As the *World Socialist Web Site* pointed out in a November 9, 1999 article, “Investigations belie NATO claims of ‘ethnic

genocide’ in Kosovo”:

“During the conflict, the NATO powers asserted that somewhere between 100,000 (according to US Defence Secretary William Cohen) and 500,000 (according to an April 1999 statement of the US State Department) Albanian Kosovars had been killed by Serb forces... But now the much-reduced official estimate of 10,000 Kosovar deaths has been discredited by the results of investigations carried out by the Hague war crimes tribunal and other agencies. Most post-war surveys estimate the actual number of deaths attributable to Serbian forces at less than 2,500.”

At the time, Serbian ethnic cleansing operations were also compared with the Nazi death camps. And NATO and its ally, the Kosovo Liberation Army, claimed that as many as 1,000 bodies a day had been dropped down mine shafts at Trepca, incinerated or dissolved in hydrochloric acid. In the aftermath of the war, however, investigators surveying the mine complex have found no evidence of executions.

A Spanish team investigating one zone in Kosovo found no mass graves and only 187 bodies, all buried in individual graves. One team member, Emilio Perez Pujol, said, “There never was a genocide in Kosovo. It was dishonest and wrong for Western leaders to adopt the term in the beginning to give moral authority to the operation.”

In Iraq, as in Kosovo, when the dust of war begins to settle, stubborn and more sobering facts about scale of deaths at the hands of those targeted by the Western powers emerges. Once again Washington and London have been revealed as having mounted a systematic and deliberate campaign of lies in order to justify their wars of aggression, while the bulk of the media was more than willing to act as a conduit for these lies.



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