

Murder allegations against Iraq's Allawi: an exchange of letters with the New York Times' public editor

3 August 2004

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Below we are publishing an exchange of letters between WSWs correspondent James Conachy and Daniel Okrent, the public editor of the New York Times. The letters concern the failure of the Times to date to publish any articles or commentaries on public allegations that Iyad Allawi, the interim prime minister of Iraq, personally carried out the extra-judicial execution of six suspected insurgents.

Dear Mr Okrent,

Two unnamed witnesses were cited in a detailed report on July 17, in two major Australian newspapers, the *Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, alleging that the Iraqi interim prime minister, Iyad Allawi, personally carried out the extra-judicial execution of six suspected insurgents in mid-June at the Al-Amariyah security center in Baghdad. Among the details provided by the witnesses were the names of three of the men Allawi allegedly shot. They also allege that American military personnel were present during the killings. The Australian newspapers are standing by the credibility of their information and Iraq's Human Rights Minister, Bakhtiar Amin, announced yesterday that the witnesses' claims will be investigated.

To date, the *New York Times* has not reported what is clearly a newsworthy story.

Does the *Times* intend to report on the accusations against Allawi, and if not, why not?

Yours sincerely,

James Conachy

World Socialist Web Site

19 July 2004

Dear Mr. Conachy,

I've checked with the editors, and have learned that *The Times* is well aware of the allegations concerning Mr. Allawi. However, repeating them without either substantiating them or disproving them would be exactly the sort of journalism I frequently condemn. I am assured that one of the paper's best reporters is investigating the charges, and if they are found to be true *The Times* will certainly publish the details.

Yours sincerely,

Daniel Okrent

Public Editor

N.B.: Any opinions expressed here, unless otherwise indicated, are solely my own.

29 July 2004

Dear Mr Okrent,

The implication of your reply is that you believe it would be a breach of journalistic ethics, worthy of condemnation, if the *New York Times* were to report the allegations against Iyad Allawi without either substantiating them or disproving them.

This standpoint is not defensible. Like those publications that have reported this story, including the WSWs, the *Times* could make it clear that it is not taking a position on the truth of the allegations.

Times articles have, on numerous occasions, reported allegations against public figures, organizations or governments without independently proving or disproving them. For example, the *Times* has repeatedly cited the accusations made by US and Iraqi officials that Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr was responsible for the murder of a rival cleric in April 2003.

The *Times* routinely reports, as part of its news coverage, claims or statements by US officials that have not been independently verified. On July 27, just two days before your reply to my inquiry, the *Times* published an article by Eric Lichtblau on the indictment handed down last week by the US Justice Department against the Holy Land Foundation for Relief and Development. The indictment alleges that the Islamic charity is involved in funding terrorist activities, specifically charging that it helps finance Palestinian suicide bombers. The July 27 *Times* article reported charges by the foundation that the FBI used inaccurate and distorted translations of Israeli intelligence documents to "fabricate" a case against it. The article cited an FBI official, who "spoke on condition of anonymity," as saying "our investigation was based on the facts that were developed, and I'm not aware of any concerns expressed with regard to the translations used in the case."

It is certainly the responsibility of the media to critically assess unsubstantiated allegations and, if necessary, draw attention to the possible ulterior motives of those making them. This was the approach taken by the WSWs—unlike the

Times—toward the politically motivated allegations in 1999 against Los Alamos scientist Wen Ho Lee and the claims that the Iraqi Baathist regime possessed weapons of mass destruction.

The issue at hand, however, is that amidst widespread commentary on the authoritarian tendencies of the US-backed Allawi government, the *Times*' editors have decided to not even report to its readership the following facts:

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Paul McGeough, a leading Australian journalist, investigated rumors in Iraq that Allawi had personally executed six men in a Baghdad prison. He found two men, independently of one another, who claimed to have witnessed the killings. They were interviewed separately and gave McGeough virtually identical accounts of where the killings took place, the circumstances leading to the killings, how many people were killed, and what happened to the bodies. The witnesses did not receive payment for their stories and, far from condemning Allawi, both of the men expressed general support for extra-judicial executions.

The articles published by the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age* on July 17 allege that American military personnel were present during the killings. The articles name three of the victims as Ahmed Abdulah Ahsamey, Amer Lutfi Mohammed Ahmed al-Kutsia, and Walid Mehdi Ahmed al-Sammarrai.

Since these reports were published, Allawi himself, his human rights minister, Bakhtiar Amin, the American embassy in Iraq, British Prime Minister Tony Blair and a number of Australian politicians have been questioned about the charges at press conferences or in the course of media interviews.

Former British foreign secretary Robin Cook publicly called on the International Red Cross to investigate. An International Red Cross spokeswoman, Antonella Notari, told the *Sydney Morning Herald* it had no powers to do so. A spokesman for the United Nations Human Rights Commission, Jose Diaz, told the *Herald* it also had no means of independently examining the charges but "we note that the Iraqi Minister for Human Rights says he will investigate and we look forward to the outcome of that inquiry."

The *Times* editors are very likely aware of the *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial of July 26, headlined "Allegations That Cannot Be Ignored." The editorial defends the newspaper's decision to publish McGeough's report, notes that there are "plenty of leads to pursue," and expresses concern over the apparent lack of a serious investigation.

It states: "Ideally, the pursuing would be done by an independent body such as the United Nations or the Red Cross, or perhaps an international human rights group. But such organisations cannot investigate without permission from the nominally sovereign state of Iraq. And no such permission is likely from Dr. Allawi's administration. Dr. Allawi's office has already denied the allegations. Iraq's Human Rights Minister, Bakhtiar Amin, while promising to investigate, has

prejudged the matter; he says he doesn't believe the witness accounts.

"The US installed the Iraqi Government and Dr. Allawi. It did so in full knowledge of Dr. Allawi's murky past in and out of Iraq—first as an ally, then as a foe, of Saddam Hussein. One former CIA officer has publicly described Dr. Allawi as having 'blood on his hands;' another brands him 'a thug.' The allegations against Dr. Allawi raise the alarming prospect of an Iraq slipping back into the brutal injustices of the Saddam Hussein era. Any suggestion of such a retrograde trend must be confronted. The US has not only the responsibility but the power to see that the claims against Dr. Allawi are properly investigated. Australia, as one of America's closest allies, should be the first to demand that it use it." (<http://smh.com.au/articles/2004/07/25/1090693832544.html?oneclick=true>)

Most *Times* readers and many *Times* journalists and employees would have no hesitation in judging from the details cited above that the allegations against Allawi constitute a significant piece of news, worthy of being reported by the newspaper that has "All the News That's Fit to Print" emblazoned on its masthead.

The Bush administration took the United States to war with claims it would eliminate a brutal dictatorship that threatened the US and bring democracy to the Iraq. Thousands of Iraqi citizens, and over 1,000 American and allied troops are dead as a consequence. Some 140,000 US troops are still in Iraq, dying at the rate of one or two a day.

In the aftermath of the weapons of mass destruction reports and the revelations about Abu Ghraib, the US media should feel an obligation to report that allegations are being made that the new US-backed Iraqi interim prime minister in Baghdad is already conducting himself in a similar fashion to Hussein—if only to exert pressure to ensure that a fully independent inquiry is carried out and the truth established.

Yours sincerely,
James Conachy
World Socialist Web Site
2 August 2004



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