

# New Yorker journalist corroborates murder allegations against Iraq's prime minister

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20 January 2005

Jon Lee Anderson, a correspondent for the *New Yorker* magazine, provided further substantiation this week for allegations made last July that Iraqi interim prime minister Iyad Allawi carried out the extra-judicial execution of at least six prisoners being held in Baghdad's Al-Amariyah security centre.

Anderson's evidence is contained in three paragraphs of a lengthy and generally uncritical feature on Allawi that was published by the *New Yorker* on January 17. (See: "A Man of the Shadows")

Anderson belatedly confirms that he sat in while Australian journalist Paul McGeough, an award-winning foreign correspondent, interviewed an Iraqi man who witnessed the murders. In McGeough's original story, he had referred to "another journalist" being present when he interviewed one of the two witnesses he tracked down.

The two men were found and interviewed separately after McGeough investigated widespread rumours in Baghdad that Allawi had killed a group of prisoners. Both witnesses provided almost identical descriptions of the events at Al-Amariyah in mid-June. McGeough and his editors at the *Sydney Morning Herald* believed their stories to be credible and went to print on July 17, 2004, after American officials failed to provide a convincing refutation.

According to the witnesses, Allawi personally shot seven handcuffed and blindfolded prisoners who had been lined up against a wall in a courtyard of the prison. Six died immediately and their bodies were taken away by Allawi's bodyguards. The witnesses said that Allawi told a number of onlookers, including four to six American military personnel and Iraq's interim interior minister Falah al-Naqib, that the prisoners "deserved worse than death". One of the eyewitnesses told McGeough: "Allawi wanted to send

a message to his policemen and soldiers not to be scared if they kill anyone..."

McGeough's research led him to conclude that the names of three of the murdered men were Ahmed Abdulah Ahsamey, Amer Lutfi Mohammed Ahmed al-Kutsia, and Walid Mehdi Ahmed al-Sammarrai.

Allawi and Naqib laughed off the charges of murder on the few occasions they were questioned by journalists. Significantly, however, Richard Boucher of the US State Department, while indicating that no American investigation was taking place, refused to categorically deny the allegations when questioned at a press conference on August 3. Boucher would only state that the US government did not "have any information that would indicate those reports are true".

Anderson writes in the *New Yorker*: "[T]he story has lingered, never having been either fully confirmed or convincingly denied." During his recent trip to Jordan though, Anderson states that a "well-known former [Iraqi] government minister" told him "that an American official had confirmed that the killings took place". The American official told the ex-minister: "What a mess we're in—we get rid of one son of a bitch [Saddam Hussein] only to get another."

Allawi is commonly referred to in Iraq as "Saddam without the moustache". He was an informer and possibly worse for the Baathist regime until 1975. After falling out with Saddam Hussein, he worked with MI5 and the CIA. His Iraqi National Accord developed ties with disgruntled layers of the Iraqi regime, including military officers and members of Hussein's feared *Mukhabarat* secret police. As Allawi's cousin told Anderson: "He understands the *Mukhabarat* culture of intimidation."

There is only one reason why it has taken until now for further revelations about Allawi's actions last June

to appear in public. The international press, especially in the United States, deliberately censored or downplayed McGeough's story after it was published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and has made no attempt to follow it up.

In particular, the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* were distinguished by their silence. Both papers posture as the voices of liberal reason and objectivity. Yet, despite the lies over weapons of mass destruction and the revelations from Abu Ghraib prison, where American soldiers carried out the torture of Iraqi prisoners, both papers refused to probe the accusations that the White House had installed a thug as Iraq's leader and had abetted him get away with extra-judicial killings.

McGeough and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, in other words, were left out on a limb. They published what by any standard was a highly newsworthy story, only to have the entire official media establishment close ranks to protect the Bush administration and its puppet Allawi from scrutiny.

In a reply sent July 29, 2004, to questions from the WSWs, *New York Times* public editor Daniel Okrent defended the *Times* on the grounds that the paper would be guilty of unethical journalism if it reported allegations without being in a position to either substantiate or disprove them.

The WSWs answer to this position can be found at: "Murder allegations against Iraq's Allawi: an exchange of letters with the *New York Times*' public editor". Of more immediate interest given the *New Yorker* piece, however, is something else he wrote in his reply. One of the *Time*'s "best reporters", Okrent had been assured, was investigating the charges.

Paul McGeough's article last July provided a wealth of leads that would be the starting point for any follow-up investigative journalism: the approximate date the killings took place; where they took place; the names of three of the victims; the details of the killings; and that US personnel were present. In December, Jon Lee Anderson was able to find an ex-Iraqi minister prepared to state an American official told him the allegations were true. The *New York Times*, on the other hand, which has no lack of resources and contacts in the highest echelons of the US state and, one suspects, in the interim Iraqi regime, has uncovered nothing in the last six months.

Anderson's article underscores a point made by the WSWs last year. There is no innocent explanation for the reaction of newspapers such as the *Times* and the *Post* to the allegations against Allawi. In less than two weeks, an election will be held which the Bush administration is desperately attempting to portray as the democratic renaissance of Iraq after decades of dictatorship. The most favoured candidate in Washington is Allawi and his Iraqi National Accord. The failure to investigate credible accusations that he is a murderer flows from the American media's complicity in promoting the propaganda used to justify the Iraq war, and their policy of censoring any news that undermines the lie that the occupation is about "liberation".



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