

International health experts demand inquiry into number of Iraqi war casualties

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The *British Medical Journal* has published a statement issued by 23 public health and epidemiology experts condemning the US and British governments for their ongoing failure to monitor the number and rate of Iraqi war-related casualties.

Demanding that a comprehensive and independent inquiry be convened, the statement reads, “Monitoring casualties is a humanitarian imperative.” It continues, “Understanding the causes of death is a core public health responsibility, nationally and internationally. Yet neither the public, nor we as public health professionals, are able to obtain validated, reliable information about the extent of mortality and morbidity since the invasion of Iraq. We believe that the joint US-UK failure to make any effort to monitor Iraqi casualties is, from a public health perspective, wholly irresponsible.”

Ten British experts issued the statement, including Professor David Hunter, the chairman of the UK Public Health Association. Seven eminent American physicians and scientists also signed the document, as did three Australians, two Spaniards, and one Canadian.

“Counting casualties can help to save lives both now and in the future by helping us to understand the burden of death, and residual burden of injury, disease and trauma across the population,” the statement explained. “We have waited too long for this information.”

The signatories reproached the coalition’s policy of relying on the Iraqi Ministry of Health to issue casualty figures. The extremely limited information released through this channel only counts violent deaths reported through the health system, beginning in April 2004. As the US and Britain are well aware, this grossly underestimates the extent of the war’s ongoing impact on ordinary Iraqis. Between April and October

2004, the health ministry counted 3,853 civilian deaths and 15,517 injuries.

Left unrecorded and unacknowledged are every death that occurred in the first 12 months of the occupation, as well as casualties caused by disease and malnutrition. Epidemics of preventable diseases such as cholera and typhoid have flourished because of the severe war damage to water and electricity networks.

Last October, the *Lancet* medical journal published a study that estimated that the war had led to the deaths of approximately 100,000 Iraqis. This report, the first scientific statistical analysis of the human cost of the war, laid bare the coalition’s claim to have liberated the Iraqi people. Both governments immediately rejected the journal’s findings, and argued that its methodology was imprecise.

“But this recognised lack of precision in the *Lancet* study arises chiefly from practical limitations imposed upon the researchers, in particular the size of the sample that could be obtained by an unofficial study,” the 23 scientists’ statement noted. “The obvious answer to removing uncertainties that remain is to commission a larger study with full official support and assistance, but scientific independence.”

There is an equally obvious answer as to why such a project will never be officially commissioned—which is that the deaths of tens of thousands of Iraqis is of absolutely no interest to the US or Britain. The coalition forces made it clear from the outset that they would keep no account of their killing. “We don’t do body counts,” General Tommy Franks declared.

Any examination of the numbers of dead today would draw attention to the brutality of the war—from the initial “shock and awe” bombardment to the wholesale destruction of cities such as Fallujah.

Furthermore, an accurate assessment of Iraqi

casualties would reveal something of the nature and extent of the war crimes that continue to be committed on a daily basis by the occupying forces. This is a subject that the US and British governments—together with their accomplices in the media—have done their utmost to suppress. Both President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair are acutely aware that any discussion on these issues would further inflame anti-war sentiment among ordinary people.

The scientists' statement was accompanied by a *British Medical Journal* editorial, "Counting the dead in Iraq." "The plain fact is that an estimate of 100,000 excess deaths attributable to the invasion of Iraq is alarming," it read. "This is already half the death toll of Hiroshima. Apart from the practical arguments, the principled ones stand and will always stand. Have we not learnt any lessons from the history of sweeping alarming numbers of deaths under the carpet? This is not something about which there can be any political discretion 60 years after Auschwitz."

The journal observed that the occupying forces have a responsibility under the Geneva Conventions to maintain a record of Iraq casualties and pointed to some of the broader political questions involved. "Public access to reliable data on mortality is important. The policy being assessed—the allied invasion of Iraq—was justified largely on grounds of democratic supremacy. Voters in the countries that initiated the war and others—not least in Iraq itself—are denied a reliable evaluation of a key indicator of the success of that policy. This is unacceptable."

The US and British response to the *Lancet* report and to the latest statement in the *British Medical Journal* underscores the reality that these governments are completely indifferent as to the democratic and humanitarian implications of their actions. In a brief statement, the British Foreign Office rejected the scientists' demand for an independent inquiry, and defended the Iraqi Health Ministry's casualty estimates on the basis that they did not rely on extrapolation. The *British Medical Journal* described this position as "absurd."



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