

Film documents American use of chemical weapons in Iraq

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The Italian state television network, RAI, has broadcast a documentary that contains footage and testimony proving that the American military has used chemical weapons in Iraq, including in civilian areas. The film, titled *Fallujah: the hidden massacre*, specifically examined the use of white phosphorous, an incendiary and corrosive chemical agent, during the US assault on Fallujah in November 2004. Former US soldiers, Iraqi doctors and international journalists were interviewed, and graphic images were shown of Iraqi civilians killed by chemical weapons.

The filmmakers spoke with former army specialist Jeff Englehart, who participated in the Fallujah offensive. He was asked if US forces had used chemical weapons. "From the US military, yeah, absolutely," Englehart replied. "White phosphorus, possibly napalm may or may not have been used, I don't know. I do know that white phosphorus was used, which is definitely, without a shadow of a doubt, a chemical weapon."

The former soldier, who is now strongly opposed to the war, described how he saw the corpses of those killed by phosphorous. "Burned. Burned bodies. I mean, it burned children, and it burned women. White phosphorus kills indiscriminately. It's a cloud that will within, in most cases, 150 metres of impact will disperse, and it will burn every human being or animal...."

"The gasses from the warhead of the white phosphorous disperse in a cloud. And when it makes contact with skin, then it's absolutely irreversible damage—burning of flesh to the bone.... If you breathe it, it will blister your throat and your lungs until you suffocate, and then it will burn you from the inside. It basically reacts to skin, oxygen, and water. The only way to stop the burning is with wet mud. But at that point, it's just impossible to stop."

The documentary contained footage shot by a team of Iraqi doctors who entered Fallujah after the offensive to assist with the burial of the dead. The film's narrator

described the horrific images: "The bodies of civilian casualties, of women still clutching the *masbaha*, the Islamic rosary, their bodies showing strange injuries, some burnt to the bone, others with skin hanging from their flesh. There is no sign of bullet wounds. The faces have literally melted away, just like other parts of the body. The clothes are strangely intact... Some animals are also dead without any apparent injury."

The documentary also broadcast a number of still images collected by Mohamad Tareq al-Deraji, the director of the Centre for the Study of Human Rights in Iraq. The photographs showed men and women burned beyond recognition, their skin either caramelised or completely dissolved. In some cases little more than the victims' skulls and teeth remain. None of the clothes on the bodies are burnt, indicating that conventional weapons could not have been responsible.

After independent journalists first reported the accusations of Fallujah residents that chemical weapons were used against them, the US military issued a formal denial in December 2004. "US forces have used [phosphorous shells] very sparingly in Fallujah, for illumination purposes," the statement declared. "They were fired into the air to illuminate enemy positions at night, not at enemy fighters." The Italian documentary proves this to be a lie—the chemical shells killed both resistance fighters and civilians.

The offensive use of white phosphorous is a clear breach of international law and represents yet another war crime committed by US forces in Iraq. The 1980 UN Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons outlaws the use of incendiary and chemical weaponry in civilian areas.

Speaking on the "Democracy Now!" radio program, Lieutenant Colonel Steve Boylan, US military spokesman in Iraq, attempted to deny this. "[The filmmakers are] calling white phosphorous an illegal weapon," he said.

“And that is an error. It’s a perfectly legal weapon to use by all conventions of land warfare.” He also insisted that the dead civilians shown in the documentary could have been killed by conventional explosives. Boylan could not explain, however, how the clothes of the dead could have remained intact.

The military’s use of chemical weapons in Fallujah was part of its collective punishment of the city’s entire population. Fallujah became one the main centres of the resistance after April 2003, when US forces shot into crowds of unarmed protestors on two occasions, killing 16 people. In April 2004, US commanders were humiliated when resistance fighters repulsed a ground offensive that was aimed at regaining the occupation forces’ control over the area.

The subsequent massacre in November was intended to serve notice to the entire Iraqi people, warning them against supporting the resistance. Once the assault on Fallujah began, no males aged between 15 and 55 were permitted to leave the city. Despite earlier US demands for a mass evacuation, an estimated 100,000 civilians were either unable or unwilling to leave. Insurgents armed with little more than AK-47s and rocket-propelled grenades were pounded by massive artillery fire from ground and air. US forces shelled and bombed the entire city, reducing much of it to rubble.

The US army subsequently claimed to have killed 1,200 insurgents, but refused to issue any estimate of civilian casualties. Those killed were quickly buried, many in mass graves, and to this day no one knows exactly how many died. Shortly after US forces recaptured the city, Iraqi Red Crescent spokesman Muhammad al-Nuri estimated that at least 6,000 people had been killed.

Jeff Englehart described the rules of engagement he was issued before the November attack. “I was personally involved with escorting a commander to Fallujah for Operation Phantom Fury,” he told RAI. “We were told [before] going into Fallujah, into the combat area, that every single person that was walking, talking, breathing was an enemy combatant. As such, every single person that was walking down the street or in a house was a target.”

When asked what he would tell his child about the operation, the former soldier replied, “It seemed like just a massive killing of Arabs. It looked like just a massive killing.”

Englehart also confirmed that the assault was timed so it would not interfere with President George Bush’s re-election campaign. “That was definitely the case,” he

declared. “Even in the ranks, in the military ranks, we knew it was going on. They told us that we were going to wait [until] after the election, the American election, before going into Fallujah. And we had already set up the whole operation, like it was ready to go. And we were waiting for two or three days for this election to be over with.... When Kerry conceded, though, it was like within a matter of a day, it was going, it was happening. That was definitely the case.... We were told directly from the Pentagon to wait until after the election before going into Fallujah, and that’s exactly what we did.”

The Italian-produced documentary also examined the use of MK-77 by US forces, an incendiary explosive, which, in composition and effect, is almost identical to napalm. The Pentagon has admitted employing the weapon during the 2003 invasion, though it maintains that the chemical was used only against Iraqi military targets.

The use of chemical weaponry by the US-led forces in Iraq is indicative of the criminal character of the entire war. Chemical weapons are indelibly associated with many of the most barbarous episodes of the twentieth century—from the use of mustard gas in the trenches of World War I to the indiscriminate unleashing of napalm and Agent Orange in the Vietnam War. History will soon come to remember the Bush administration’s crimes in Iraq alongside these atrocities.

Fallujah: the hidden massacre, produced by Sigfrido Ranucci and Maurizio Torrealta, is available in English translation, and can be downloaded here: <http://www.rainews24.rai.it/ran24/inchiesta/video.asp>



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