

# “Steel curtain” in Iraq—another US war crime

Bill Van Auken  
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Once again the US military has laid siege to an Iraqi city. Dubbed “Operation Steel Curtain,” the offensive launched by some 2,500 American troops and 1,000 US-trained Iraqi forces entered its third day Monday in the Euphrates River market town of Husaybah.

The town of 30,000 is a suburb of al-Qaim, which has about 150,000 residents, and is 200 miles northwest of the Iraqi capital of Baghdad.

Major US media outlets—the *New York Times* and CNN—have their reporters embedded with the assault troops, reporting on their progress. They uniformly talk of troops battling “al Qaeda-led insurgents” and an operation designed to halt the influx of “foreign fighters” into Iraq.

As to the impact of such a military operation upon the people who live in Husaybah, the media is relatively silent. Needless to say, none of their reporters are embedded with the men, women and children facing this onslaught.

Nonetheless, there is enough in even these reports—despite their slant toward military propaganda—to establish that the Bush administration and the Pentagon are conducting another war crime against the Iraqi people.

“U.S. forces have used Hellfire missiles and dropped 500-pound bombs on homes believed to house insurgents,” CNN reported. “Marine Capt. Brendon Heatherman said troops were clearing every home in central Husaybah, looking out for homemade bombs and ‘bad guys,’” the network added.

“It’s a cesspool; it’s time for this area to get cleaned up,” Col. Stephen W. Davis, of the Second Marine Division, said of Husaybah,” the *Times* reported.

“Some officers called in airstrikes,” the newspaper reported. “Others ordered Abrams tanks to blast away with their main cannons. ‘I got bombs; he got bombs,’ Colonel Davis said. ‘I got more bombs than he got.’”

“There had been an exodus of families during the past several weeks, officers said,” according to the *Times*, which added, “The Marine Corps says it plans to go through all the residences in Husaybah and the immediate area, a total of 4,000 homes.”

What are the effect of Hellfire missiles and 500-pound bombs on mudbrick Iraqi homes? What happened to those who joined the exodus from the city? What becomes of those who remain behind, when heavily armed combat troops told they are being sent into a “cesspool” kick down their doors? Neither the *Times* nor CNN provide any insight on such matters.

There are reports that give at least a partial answer to these questions, but they find little reflection in the American mass media.

According to the United Nations-affiliated news agency, IRIN, scores of civilians have been killed and thousands driven from their homes by the offensive against the impoverished city near the border with Syria.

“The situation is becoming critical,” Ferdous al-Abadi, spokesman for the Iraqi Red Crescent Society (IRCS) told IRIN. “People are seriously suffering.”

According to the news agency, “One doctor in al-Qaim said [on Saturday, the first day of the offensive] that the US military’s regular use of anti-personnel cluster bombs had left at least 31 dead and 44 wounded, among them women and children.”

According to the International Red Crescent Society, people began fleeing Husaybah a week before the US onslaught began, IRIN reported. It added that the relief agency’s local volunteers put the number of displaced persons at 4,000, many of whom are living in makeshift camps and tents in the desert.

The Arab satellite news agency Aljazeera reported that strikes by US warplanes in al-Jamahir, al-Risala and other Husaybah neighborhoods had demolished homes and killed or wounded dozens of people.

Quoting an Iraqi journalist, the news network reported, “The US shelling has demolished government buildings, including al-Jamahir primary school, al-Qaim preparatory school for boys, the educational supervision building, al-Qaim post office and communication centre, al-Qaim education directorate and two mosques in the city.”

The journalist added, “The city is suffering a complete lack of all of life’s basic necessities. There is no fuel and

winter is upon us. There is no food and there are no services whatsoever, not even health services.” He added that ambulances cannot respond to emergencies because they face being fired upon by US forces.

The Associated Press, meanwhile, reported that “Scores of terrified Iraqis fled the besieged town of Husaybah Sunday, waving white flags and hauling their belongings to escape a second day of fighting...” The news agency added, “Residents said coalition forces warned people by loudspeakers to leave on foot because troops would fire on vehicles.”

The Pentagon chose to launch the offensive on the final day of Eid al-Fitr, a three-day festival that is one of Islam’s principal holidays. The *Washington Post*, which had an Iraqi correspondent in Baquba, spoke by cell phone to a 45-year-old government employee as he trudged out of Husaybah with his wife and three children: “We are in the third day of Eid,” he said “We are leaving the town not for fun but to save ourselves from death. Instead of having my family for a picnic in an amusement park, I am taking them out of the town, walking and expecting death every moment. Let Bush see how he created a generation that hates the Americans.”

The violence unleashed against Husaybah follows a series of bombing raids against neighboring al-Qaim on October 31. The US military said that the air raids involved the use of “precision guided munitions” and destroyed two “terrorist safe houses.”

According to a doctor in the city, however, the bombs killed and injured scores of people and made hundreds homeless. The local hospital put the number of dead at 43, including a large number of women and children. A local tribal leader insisted that there were no “terrorists” in either the demolished homes or the surrounding neighborhood.

Once again, Washington claims that it is unleashing murderous firepower in order to defeat “Al Qaeda” and “foreign fighters.” It was the same a year ago in Fallujah, when it could claim to have killed only 35 such “foreigners”—Arabs who share with the Iraqis a common language, culture and history of struggle against foreign imperialist oppression—out of some 2,000 people massacred there.

While the US military has reported arresting hundreds in Husaybah, it has given no indication as to the nationality of those detained. The Associated Press indicated that the prisoners were members of “a pro-insurgent Iraqi tribe.” No doubt, if the Pentagon could identify Syrian or other “foreign” fighters, it would do so

to further the Bush administration’s lying claim that the struggle in Iraq is one being waged to defeat “terrorism.”

This is clearly not the case. The US occupation forces are waging a dirty colonial war against the Iraqi people with the purpose of suppressing mass opposition to the country’s subjugation.

The methods that are being employed in Husaybah, like those used in Fallujah a year ago, constitute war crimes under the terms of the Geneva Conventions and the precedents set by the Nuremberg trials of the leaders of Germany’s Nazi regime.

In defending the administration’s policy in Iraq before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last month, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice declared: “Our political-military strategy has to be to clear, hold and build: to clear areas from insurgent control, to hold them securely, and to build durable, national Iraqi institutions.”

In reality, this strategy has been reduced to “clearing” cities with massive violence, only to see resistance reemerge as soon as the operation has ended. This is the third such major offensive that the American military has conducted in the area in the last few months. Last May, the Pentagon declared “Operation Matador” a success, and then it launched two such offensives—“Operation Iron Fist” and “Operation River Gate” in the same area a month ago.

The *New York Times* article acknowledged in a rare moment of candor that it is “as hard as ever for the Americans to win widespread support among the people.” As Colonel Davis told the paper, “We don’t do a lot of hearts and minds out here because it’s irrelevant.”

Meanwhile, one US marine was shot to death in Husaybah and another four US soldiers were killed south of Baghdad Monday when a suicide car bomber drove into a checkpoint they were manning. These latest casualties bring the total number of American soldiers killed since the war began to 2055. Twenty-six troops have been killed in the first week of November alone, a rate that is on track for making the month the deadliest since last year.



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