

Cindy Sheehan condemns Australian prime minister as an “illegal combatant”

Richard Phillips
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US antiwar activist Cindy Sheehan denounced the Australian government for its participation in the Iraq war and called for the release of David Hicks from Guantánamo Bay and the closure of the notorious US military prison camp at a demonstration in Melbourne last Friday.

Sheehan rejected US and Australian government claims that Guantánamo inmates “did not deserve civil rights” because they were “illegal enemy combatants”. The four-and-a-half-year incarceration of Hicks, in violation of Geneva Conventions and his basic legal rights, has been fully endorsed by the Howard government.

“George Bush and John Howard and Tony Blair are illegal combatants,” she said, “there’s nothing about this war on terror that is legal. These people perpetuate the torture and the killing and they’re still allowed to run free and live in society.”

The demonstration was one of several antiwar protests and public meetings featuring Sheehan and Dr Salam Ismael, from the Baghdad-based organisation Doctors for Iraq, during an east coast tour of Australia last week.

While the corporate media provided little publicity about Sheehan’s visit, the meetings were packed, demonstrating yet again the deep-seated opposition of broad layers of the population to the Iraq war and Australian participation in it.

“The United States had no business invading Iraq, a country that was no threat to America,” Cindy Sheehan told a 600-strong meeting at the Seymour Centre in Sydney on Tuesday night. “George Bush lied to me, he lied to my son, he lied to the country and he lied to the world.”

Sheehan began campaigning against the war after her 25-year-old son Casey was killed by an Iraqi resistance fighter in April 2004. She is a founding member of the Gold Star Families for Peace, an organisation established by American families who have lost relatives in the Iraq war and are demanding the withdrawal of US troops. She is also a national board member of the Progressive Democrats of America, a left-liberal pressure group that works within the Democratic Party and was associated with the Howard Dean nomination campaign in 2004.

Sheehan became a focus for millions of Americans opposing the war after she established a protest camp outside George W. Bush’s Texas ranch in August 2005 to demand a meeting with the US president over the death of her son. Australia is the eighth country she has visited since that vigil.

Sheehan told the meeting that the invasion of Iraq was illegal

and was given loud applause when she called for the impeachment of Bush and his prosecution, along with his co-conspirators, on war crime charges.

“In our country the military exists to make the world safe for American corporations and to assist in the spread of corporate colonialism,” she said.

“The invasion had nothing to do with fighting terrorism or WMDs but was about controlling their natural resources and stealing their oil. It was about devastating their country so our country’s corporations—Haliburton, Bechtel and Blackwater Security and Exxon and KBR—could profit. This is a war crime.

“Another war crime, along with Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib, and the other prisons in Iraq, is that my country has used chemical weapons in Iraq,” she said. “It has been proven that they used white phosphorus and napalm in Fallujah. Even more than that, using conventional weapons on civilians is a crime against humanity. Going into a country and imposing “regime change”, your system of government, is also a war crime.

“Your country supports all this action, which makes your government war criminals, like mine.

“Somebody asked me how do the people of Australia redeem themselves,” she continued, “but the people of Australia don’t have to redeem themselves. The problem is your government.”

Dr Ismael told the capacity crowd at the Seymour Centre that the invasion of Iraq was an “act of barbarism”. Using photographs and statistical charts he described the destruction of basic health service infrastructure since the 2003 invasion and called for the immediate withdrawal of the US-led occupying forces.

Ismael explained that only 45 percent of 900 basic drugs required to maintain adequate medical treatment were available in Iraq and that 40 percent of imported food and medical supplies were not inspected to determine whether they conformed to basic health standards or not. In Iraq today, over 400,000 children are malnourished.

He said that water purification and sanitation plants destroyed in March 2003 had not been repaired and that of the 18 hospitals operating in Baghdad prior to the invasion, 11 had been looted and were dysfunctional. Privatisation of medical services was extensive and basic drug prices had skyrocketed. Antibiotic prices had doubled and medical oxygen increased more than ten-fold since the invasion, he declared.

Prior to the invasion, he continued, hundreds of people from the Middle East came to Iraq for medical treatment in the country’s

health system. Today, nobody came for medical care. Rather, any Iraqis who could afford it, left the country to have medical procedures carried out elsewhere.

According to Ismael, who has worked in refugee camps and health units throughout Iraq, including in Fallujah, drug supplies were so scarce that in some hospitals surgeons had to carry out amputations using only local anaesthetics. Scores of people had died or been forced to undergo limb amputations because they had been held up on their way to hospital at occupation checkpoints.

Ismael treated casualties of the first siege of Fallujah in April 2004 and was one of the first medical observers to enter the city after a second wave of US attacks in November 2004. He provided a harrowing account of the US military's destruction of Fallujah and its murder of thousands of innocent Iraqi men, women and children.

Fallujah's main hospital was seized by the US troops a few days after the first siege. The only other city clinic was hit twice by American missiles, with medical equipment and drugs destroyed. Ismael said there were no functioning ambulances left in the city. The two ambulance vehicles sent to help evacuate the wounded had been destroyed by US missile fire.

He told the audience that Doctors for Iraq had been the first to present documentary evidence that the US military had used napalm-white phosphorus bombs against civilians.

The Western media had ignored this war crime, he said, because the information about it "came from Iraqis" who were considered "biased". It did not become an issue until later, when Italian journalists took it up.

Ismael said that large numbers of Iraqi doctors and highly qualified surgeons had left the country since the invasion, unable to cope with the impossible state of medical infrastructure and lack of basic drugs. This included more than 3,000 doctors in the past year.

Violations of medical neutrality were now commonplace, he explained, with doctors and surgeons threatened or killed for honouring their Hippocratic oath and treating all sick and wounded, irrespective of their political loyalties or religious beliefs. He said that 15 surgeons had been jailed by the US military for treating patients the US claimed were insurgents.

"I've been accused of this. My house has also been raided and my father beaten up by US military forces," Ismael said.

A brief question and answer period followed the speeches by Sheehan and Ismael.

One audience member suggested that withdrawal of the US-led military would "only make things worse".

Ismael briefly replied that the invasion was "an act of barbarism" and that "nothing can be worse for Iraqis than the current situation". The first step in repairing the destruction, he added, was the withdrawal of the occupying forces.

Sheehan said: "I get this question at almost every single Q & A but let's be clear: our government doesn't care about the people of Iraq. The coalition troops are the problem, not the solution, and there is never going to be peace or rebuilding the country of Iraq with our troops and the independent contractors there.

"This area was once the cradle of civilisation. They have doctors, engineers, scientists and other highly trained people. They

don't need Americans to solve their problems and to say that they do is arrogant and racist."

During her speech Sheehan did not mention Democratic Party support for the Iraq war or its backing for the Bush administration's police state measures. The following exchange, however, won sustained applause from the Sydney audience.

A local member of Democrats Abroad was given the floor to urge expatriate Americans to register for the forthcoming Senate and Congressional elections.

Sheehan responded: Have you been watching the news? It's easy to vote but that doesn't mean that your vote will be counted.

Democrats Abroad: But if we don't register and get out there and vote, then we can't make a change.

Sheehan: I'm not saying you shouldn't register but what have the Democrats done for us? In the United States there is only one party and it's called the war party. When it comes to war, both parties agree, and the same people who line their pockets and profit from war keep on doing it.

I'm not saying don't vote, that's our right and our responsibility as Americans, but we can't wait until November. People are dying in the hundreds every day in Iraq.... We can't count on our politicians to do the right thing—these people have a track record. Real changes only happen when it comes from the bottom up.



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