The bitter price of militarism: US casualties mount in Iraq and Afghanistan

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A sniper shot a US military policeman yesterday morning in Baghdad. The soldier died from his wounds shortly afterward. His name, his age and his hometown have not yet been released. His death, like those of so many American soldiers, was not considered newsworthy enough to warrant a story in the US media.

The killing of a young marine in western Iraq on Sunday was reported, however. His death pushed the October US death toll in Iraq to 100—the first time that fatalities have reached triple figures since January 2005 and by far the highest figure this year.

Analysts have attributed the spike in fatalities to increased attacks by Sunni resistance fighters, coinciding with the Muslim festival of Ramadan, and escalating clashes between American troops and Shiite militiamen in Baghdad. But as the *New York Times* reporter who was given the grim assignment of attending funerals at Arlington National Cemetery poignantly noted: "Such explanations were little comfort to a 6-year-old girl weeping at the grave of her father, a mother clutching the flag from her son's coffin, or a widow walking slowly through the rain behind her husband's honour guard."

The illegal and neo-colonial invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq have cost the lives of hundreds of thousands of Afghan and Iraqi people and devastated both countries. The American people, and the working class in particular, are also paying a terrible price for the war crimes of the Bush administration. The false claims that the US had to send troops to Central Asia and the Middle East to fight a "war on terrorism" and prevent "weapons of mass destruction" has cost far more American lives than the events of September 11, 2001.

A total of 3,157 American soldiers had been killed in the two theatres as of October 31—343 in Afghanistan and 2,814 in Iraq. The dead are from cities and towns across the United States. California has lost 287; Texas 247; Pennsylvania 136; New York 132; Ohio 126; Florida 120; Illinois 109 and Michigan 99. Every state and territory has lost citizens, including dozens of young men from Puerto Rico, Guam, American Samoa, the US-controlled Micronesian islands and the Mariana Islands.

These deaths are a tragic waste. They were not sent overseas for any noble or just cause, but to occupy and repress the Afghan and Iraqi people. Their lives have been thrown away by the American ruling class in the criminal pursuit of world power and control of oil resources.

More than one third of them—1,031—were blown apart by unseen bombs or "improvised explosive devices", which are one of the few ways that Iraqi fighters can strike back at the occupation forces. A total of 612 were killed in what are classified as "non-hostile incidents" such as plane crashes, vehicle accidents, "friendly fire", heat stroke, pneumonia and, in dozens of cases, suicide.

The grief of more than 3,000 families over the loss of their loved ones is only one aspect of the impact of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The conflicts have also left tens of thousands soldiers maimed, sick or psychologically disturbed.

According to the statistics released by the Defence Department, the US military had suffered a total of 50,508 non-fatal casualties in Afghanistan and Iraq as of September 30. That is, for every soldier who dies, at least 16 others are wounded or fall ill. These figures do not include those who succumb to mental illnesses, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), after they return to the US.

Up to September 30, a total of 21,649 US troops had been wounded in combat. October will most likely add

more than a thousand to the tally. More than 10,000 have suffered wounds so severe they were unable to return to duty within 72 hours. Thousands have horrifying injuries.

Advances in medical science and transport, combined with the close proximity of hospitals to the urban fighting in Iraq, have enabled the ratio of wounded-in-action to killed-in-action to be slashed from three to one in wars such as Vietnam to seven to one in the current conflicts. While the US death toll is frequently cited, what has happened to the wounded is rarely publicised.

The German magazine *Der Speigel* reported this month that more than 3,000 American soldiers have returned from Afghanistan and Iraq with brain damage. "In half of these cases, the trauma will lastingly affect their capacity to think, their memory, their mood, their behaviour and their ability to work. Many of the victims are hardly adults, barely even 20. And many of them will require special treatment for the next five, six or seven decades."

As well as brain injuries, hundreds suffered third-degree burns to large parts of their body; had arms or legs blown off and have been blinded and/or lost their hearing. *Der Speigel* noted that a joint study by Harvard and Columbia universities estimated that the long-term cost of caring just for the most severely wounded would be at least $35 billion. Four specialised "polytrauma rehabilitation centres" have been opened to provide the protracted rehabilitation required.

While barely reported, a total of 28,859 American soldiers—more than two divisions—have suffered injuries in "non-hostile incidents" or contracted medical conditions in Afghanistan and Iraq that required medical air evacuation.

These evacuations covered everything from orthopedic surgery and psychiatric disorders to pregnancy. In the case of a group of New York national guardsmen who were evacuated in July 2003, tests conclusively proved they had suffered massive exposure to depleted uranium (DU) during their tour of duty.

On August 26 this year, Associated Press reported on the condition of one of the men, 52-year-old Herbert Reed: "Since he left a bombed-out train depot in Iraq, his gums bleed. There is more blood in his urine, and still more in his stool. Bright light hurts his eyes. A tumour has been removed from his thyroid. Rashes erupt everywhere, itching so badly they seem to live inside his skin. Migraines cleave his skull. His joints ache, grating like door hinges in need of oil."

Well over 100,000 veterans of the 1991 Gulf War have been plagued by similar symptoms. The US military admitted in 1998 that at least 436,000 American troops entered areas during the conflict that were contaminated to some extent by DU radioactive dust.

At least 101,000 veterans of the current Afghanistan and Iraq wars have already registered with Veterans Affairs for medical assistance. Many are doing so for psychological reasons. As of June 2006, 34,000 veterans had sought treatment for PTSD, experiencing debilitating symptoms such as nightmares, flashbacks, "survivor's guilt," depression and anxiety. Thousands are plagued by memories of the brutal violence against civilians they witnessed, or worse, were ordered to carry out.

The Veterans Affairs (VA) medical system has been plunged into crisis. A recent congressional survey of 60 VA clinics found that 40 percent have sent veterans who need individual therapy into group counselling. More staff are needed in 30 percent of the clinics and 25 percent had denied services to needy veterans or placed them on waiting lists. Some 20 percent reported they did not have the specialised staff needed to treat PTSD. The Government Accountability Office found that VA underestimated its budget to care for veterans by more than $5 billion in 2005, exposing the utter hypocrisy of the Bush administration's claims to "support the troops".

Tens of thousands of returned soldiers and their families will suffer due to the Afghanistan and Iraq wars for the rest of their lives. Along with the Afghan and Iraqi people, they are victims of militarism. The immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US troops from both countries is the necessary precondition for putting an end to the ongoing slaughter.