

UN report: More than 34,000 Iraqi civilian deaths in 2006

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The United Nations reported Tuesday that 34,452 Iraqi civilians died in 2006 as a result of bombings, extra-judicial executions and other forms of violence.

Iraq's population is 27 million. If violent deaths occurred at the same rate in the US, with a population of 300 million, the toll would surpass 370,000. This would be equivalent in terms of numbers to the annihilation of an entire city the size of Cincinnati, Ohio.

The UN report, which acknowledges that its tally underestimates the actual number of Iraqis killed last year, paints a horrific picture of a society wracked by military and sectarian violence and a collapse in the basic conditions of life. It is a social catastrophe with few parallels in modern history, and a direct consequence of the US invasion and occupation of the country.

The UN Assistance Mission for Iraq compiled the study by hand-counting individual deaths for the entire year, using reports from hospitals, morgues and other municipal authorities across Iraq. The first attempt at such a body count, the figure obtained was nearly three times higher than an estimate for the year compiled by the Associated Press from Iraqi ministry tallies. The AP figure was 12,347.

The US government refuses to release any figures on Iraqi civilian casualties. This expression of indifference and contempt for Iraqi life is mirrored by the attitude of the US-backed government in Baghdad.

An Iraqi government spokesman described the UN count as "exaggerated" and told the *New York Times* that the report had been compiled from "incorrect sources." The spokesman went on to say, according to the *Times*, that the government did not "have a system in place for compiling a comprehensive figure" on the violent deaths of its own people.

The UN's 34,000-plus figure, while itself staggering, is vastly lower than the results of a nationwide household survey conducted in Iraq by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. That study, released last October, estimated that more than 650,000 Iraqis, or 7 percent of the prewar population, died between the onset of the US invasion in March of 2003 and July of 2006 as a result of the war and occupation. Based on that study's estimates, 200,000 more Iraqis are dying each year than would have died if the invasion had not taken place.

The day the UN issued its report was one of the deadliest in two months, with another 142 Iraqis killed or found dead, the result of bomb attacks on buses outside Al-Mustansiriya University and other targeted killings.

The report came less than a week after George Bush's January 11 announcement of a major escalation of the war, involving the dispatch of 21,500 additional American combat troops. Bush made clear in his televised address that there would be even greater bloodshed, affecting American troops as well as Iraqis, in the weeks and months ahead.

This escalation of military violence is cynically portrayed by the administration as well as the media as an effort to protect the Iraqi people from the widening spiral of Sunni-Shiite sectarian violence and ethnic cleansing. In fact, a large majority of Iraqis killed and wounded since the invasion have died as a result of US military attacks, and the eruption of sectarian violence is itself a result of the US occupation, which deliberately inflamed sectarian passions and installed a Shiite fundamentalist government in line with the standard colonialist policy of divide and rule.

The new effort to "secure the population" of Iraq marks an intensification of military violence and terror

aimed at drowning the Iraqi resistance to foreign occupation in blood.

For their part, Congressional Democrats have made clear that they will not act to block Bush's "surge" plan by cutting off funds for the escalation, let alone taking action to end the war as a whole and withdraw American troops from the country.

The United Nations report paints a chilling portrait of conditions in the occupied country, where an average of 94 people were killed or found dead every day in 2006.

About half the deaths occurred in the capital, the majority having died from gunshot wounds in execution-style killings.

Among the findings of the UN report cited in the *Times* account are the following:

* "The number of deaths, at least at the Baghdad morgue, is running at double their number in 2005."

* "The violence has expanded to the point of leaving hospitals and morgues overflowing with bodies. The report described the discovery of several recent mass graves."

* "The kidnappings have completely redrawn the composition of neighborhoods. Sinek, a wholesale market in the heart of Baghdad, once thoroughly mixed, is slowly emptying of Sunnis."

"The result described by the report," the newspaper concluded, "is a society in collapse."

By the UN study's estimates, from January through December of last year 34,452 civilians died violently and 36,685 were wounded. The wounded included 2,222 women and 777 children.

Since February 2006, another 470,094 people have been internally displaced—becoming refugees in their own county. The highest number of displaced Iraqis was in Anbar province, where 10,105 families had fled.

Anbar, a largely Sunni region, is a center of resistance to the US occupation. The massive displacement of civilians there cannot be attributed to sectarian violence. It is the direct result of American bombs, missiles and machine guns, US military attacks on civilian populations and the wholesale arrest and torture of alleged insurgents.

In Baghdad, unidentified bodies killed execution-style are found daily in large numbers. Frightened relatives of the victims are often reluctant to claim the bodies from the six Medico-Legal Institutes around the country for fear of reprisals, many believing that the

presiding police officers could be responsible for the killings.

The report describes a pervading atmosphere of terror throughout the country: "No religious and ethnic groups, including women and children, have been spared from the widespread cycle of violence which creates panic and disrupts the daily life of many Iraqi families, prompting parents to stop sending their children to school and severely limiting normal movement around the capital and outside."

A particularly appalling aspect of life in Iraq as described in the report is the condition of women, particularly in the northern provinces, who are increasingly forced to conform to strict, arbitrarily imposed moral codes of behavior rarely enforced before the US invasion.

The UN report notes that 239 women had burned themselves in the first eight months of 2006. Though most of these cases have been investigated as "accidents" or "attempted suicides," the majority of them are most likely attempted "honor killings." The report states, "Most victims of suspected honor crimes suffer horrific injuries which are unlikely to have been accidentally caused whilst cooking of refueling oil heaters."

Widows of Iraqi violence struggle to provide for the families under conditions where jobs are scarce and projects to provide jobs for women were abandoned when international NGOs fled en masse at the end of 2005 because of the sectarian violence.

Children are also increasingly vulnerable, with many having lost multiple family members. Some desperate parents engage in trafficking of their children outside Iraq to work as sex slaves or child laborers, or offer them for unlawful adoption.



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