

Iraq and Darfur: the politics of war crimes

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9 February 2007

The international response to two cases of mass killing—the civil war in the Darfur region of Sudan and the US-led occupation of Iraq—demonstrate the sheer hypocrisy of the claims by the major capitalist powers and the United Nations to defend human rights and uphold international law.

In March 2003, the Bush administration, supported by the Blair government in Britain and the Howard government in Australia, violated the Geneva Convention and launched an unprovoked war of aggression. Every pretext for the invasion was crude propaganda and deliberate lies—from the claims that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction to the allegations that the regime of Saddam Hussein supported international terrorism.

Thousands of Iraqis died from the “shock-and-awe” tactics carried out by the invaders. The US-led forces have since attempted to crush the legitimate resistance of the Iraqi people with indiscriminate bombings, mass detentions and torture at prisons like Abu Ghraib, and massacres in cities such as Fallujah, Najaf and Tal Afar. The economic, cultural and social infrastructure of Iraq has been devastated and the population impoverished.

US policies encouraged sectarian and communalist divisions and are directly responsible for a bloody civil war wracking parts of the country. The US-created Iraqi military and police forces overwhelmingly consist of Shiite Muslims and ethnic Kurds, who are conducting a reign of terror against Sunni Arab communities that sympathise with the anti-occupation insurgency.

There is no precise count of how many Iraqis have died due to the criminal actions of the Bush administration and its allies. The US military has deliberately not kept a record. A scientifically-based estimate is in the public domain however.

In October 2006, the *Lancet* medical journal published the results of Johns Hopkins University’s comprehensive survey into the number of deaths caused by the US invasion and occupation of Iraq. A total of 1,849 households—close to 12,000 people—were interviewed as to the fatalities in their family, and the cause of death, from 14 months prior to the invasion through to the time they were questioned. Death certificates were provided in the majority of cases.

The sample was taken across Iraq. The conclusion was that the crude mortality rate in Iraq had soared from 5.5 per 1,000, before March 2003, to 7.5, then to 10.9, and to a staggering

19.8 between June 2005 and June 2006.

Extrapolated to the entire population, Johns Hopkins estimated that 393,000 to 943,000 additional deaths had taken place under US occupation, with the median estimate being 655,000 deaths. The vast majority died as a result of violence, including gun shots, car bombs and other explosive devices, and air strikes. Gunshot wounds caused 56 percent of violent deaths and US or allied forces were directly involved in an estimated 31 percent.

The impact of the war has been far greater than even the horrifying number of deaths indicated by the university’s work. The number of persons physically and psychologically injured has not yet been assessed. UN agencies conservatively estimate that close to two million Iraqis have fled the country and a further 1.7 million are considered internally displaced persons. In other words, the illegal invasion and brutal occupation of Iraq can credibly be held responsible for the death, injury or displacement of well over 20 percent of the country’s population.

The response to the Johns Hopkins study, however, was silence in the chambers of the United Nations, which has repeatedly extended a “mandate” to the US occupation to continue its repression of the Iraqi people. The European ruling elite, which had postured as opponents of the Iraq war in 2003, also remained mute. The US media, including so-called liberal newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, buried the report.

President George Bush’s dismissal of the report as “not credible” was not publicly challenged. His close ally Prime Minister John Howard ignorantly declared on Australian television: “I don’t believe that Johns Hopkins research. It’s not plausible. It’s not based on anything other than a house-to-house survey.” He was not opposed in the media.

In fact, the methodology used by the Johns Hopkins researchers is the basis for a claim universally accepted by the UN, the EU and the Bush, Blair and Howard governments that between 200,000 and 400,000 people have been killed in the conflict raging in the Darfur region of Sudan.

Surveys are the source of the estimated number of deaths caused by the collective punishment of civilians in Darfur by Sudanese troops and a pro-government militia known as the Janjaweed. The aim of the killings has been to suppress an uprising among the region’s ethnic African population that

broke out in March 2003 against the Arab-dominated regime of President Omar Hassan al-Bashir. In the course of four years of fighting, an estimated 2,000 ethnic African villages have been destroyed by the Janjaweed or government forces.

As in Iraq, no precise death count exists. In late 2004, however, the now defunct US-based Coalition for International Justice (CIG) used the accepted scientific method of arriving at an approximate estimate: it surveyed 1,136 refugees on the Chad-Sudan border as to how many of their family members had died violent deaths or were missing. By extrapolating they arrived at a mortality rate for the entire population of Darfur. The CIG issued a report in April 2005 estimating that up to 140,000 people had been killed in the civil war.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) also surveyed 17,000 refugees in early 2005 as to how many of their family had died from malnutrition or disease. Using the same method, WHO arrived at an estimate of 70,000 deaths during 2004, with 10,000 additional deaths anticipated each month.

Combining these two studies together, politicians and journalists around the world regularly report that between 200,000 and 400,000 people have been killed in Darfur. At least another two million people have been forced to flee their homes by militia terror and the destruction of homes and crops.

In this case, the deaths have produced international expressions of moral outrage and calls for justice. On September 9, 2004, President Bush, echoing the sentiments of a Congressional resolution, labelled the atrocities in Darfur as “genocide”. He declared: “We have concluded that genocide has taken place in Darfur. We urge the international community to work with us to prevent and suppress acts of genocide. We call on the United Nations to undertake a full investigation of the genocide and other crimes in Darfur.”

The European parliament joined with the Bush administration and stated in September 2004 that the actions of the Sudanese government were “tantamount to genocide”.

John Kerry and senators Joseph Lieberman, Barak Obama and Hillary Clinton are among the high-profile Democrats in the US to declare that “genocide” is taking place in Darfur and call for greater US action against the Bashir government.

Within the UN, there have been not only Darfur aid conferences, a military intervention by an African Union peace-keeping force and calls for harsh sanctions against Sudan, but also the commissioning of war crimes investigations.

On March 31, 2005, the UN Security Council instructed the International Criminal Court (ICC) in the Hague under Resolution 1593 to investigate alleged war crimes in Darfur. The court’s chief prosecutor Luis Moreno-Ocampo announced in December that he would table initial charges this month. The ICC statement declared: “The evidence in this emerging first case points to specific individuals who appear to bear the greatest responsibility for war crimes and crimes against humanity including persecution, torture, murder, and rape....”

Hinting that Sudanese officials at the highest level may be

indicted, the ICC stated: “Perhaps most significant, the evidence reveals the underlying operational system that enabled the commission of these massive crimes.” At an emergency meeting on the situation in Darfur convened by the UN Human Rights Council on December 12, retiring UN secretary general Kofi Annan declared: “It is urgent that we take action to prevent further violations, including by bringing to account those responsible for the numerous crimes that have already been committed.”

The contrast between the two cases could not be sharper. The underlying reason can be summed up with the one word that explains a great deal of contemporary politics: oil.

US imperialism invaded Iraq primarily to seize control of its energy resources. The Democrats supported this agenda to the hilt. Not wanting to challenge the US, the other major powers, including Britain, France, Germany, Japan, Russia and China, either joined in or remained silent over the war crimes against the Iraqi people. The UN stepped in and gave its blessing to this illegal war of aggression.

Sudan is also an oil-rich and strategically located state. However, the rising power that has secured the greatest influence in the country is China. Beijing’s attempts to develop political and economic influence in Africa is viewed as a threat in both the US and Europe. The moral outrage over Darfur is a convenient means for undermining Chinese influence and providing the US and its allies with a pretext if a broader military intervention is deemed necessary.

The United Nations is simply the clearing house for these imperialist intrigues. Its top officials are little more than mouthpieces for the major powers, providing sanctimonious expressions of disquiet about the desperate situation of the people of Darfur, while maintaining a studied silence on US crimes in Iraq. The very last concern of the representatives of the UN and the major imperialist powers is the plight of millions of ordinary working people in Darfur, Iraq and anywhere else in the world.

Note: The current February 2007 issue of Johns Hopkins magazine contains a detailed defense of the study and its methodology. See: “The Number”, by Dale Keiger, <http://www.jhu.edu/~jhumag/0207web/number.html>



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