

British government scientists vouched for validity of study estimating 655,000 war deaths in Iraq

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British government scientists endorsed the validity of a study released last October that estimated 655,000 Iraqis have been killed as the result of the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq, the BBC reported March 26.

Despite the advice of its own scientists, however, the government of British Prime Minister Tony Blair, along with US President Bush and Australian Prime Minister John Howard, brushed aside the study, conducted by Johns Hopkins University's Bloomberg School of Public Health and published in the British medical journal the *Lancet*, calling its methodology "flawed" and its results "suspect." The media in both the US and Britain buried the report.

According to documents obtained by the BBC World Service's "Newshour" program under a freedom of information request, senior officials and scientists had advised the Blair government against publicly criticizing the findings, saying that the methodology was "a tried and tested way of measuring mortality in conflict zones."

The BBC report confirms the validity of the Johns Hopkins study and underscores the monumental scale of US and British war crimes in Iraq. It also highlights the dishonesty and complicity of the media in these crimes.

The Johns Hopkins study, published October 11, 2006, compared mortality rates before and after the US-led invasion by conducting thousands of interviews in Iraq. The survey was an enormous undertaking, with a sample size of over 12,800 individuals in 1,849 households in 47 randomly chosen areas throughout the country. With 95 percent statistical certainty, researchers concluded that the number of war dead was

between 392,979 and 942,636, with the highest statistical likelihood around 655,000.

In 92 percent of the interviews, respondents furnished death certificates for the researchers. They concluded that, in three years, 2.5 percent of the Iraqi population had been killed in the war—an average of more than 500 a day. Most of the deaths were from gunfire. If the rate of Iraqi deaths were extrapolated to the US population, the toll of American fatalities would be 7.5 million—nearly equal to the population of New York City.

At a press conference the same day the study was published, President Bush told reporters, "I don't consider it a credible report . . . Neither does General Casey, neither do Iraqi officials." The Iraqi Health Ministry's mortality estimate is one-tenth the Johns Hopkins estimate. Without providing an explanation, alternative estimate, or even demonstrating that he had read the study, Bush described the methodology as "pretty well discredited."

Australian Prime Minister Howard declared, "I don't believe that Johns Hopkins research. I don't. It's not plausible. It's not based on anything other than a house-to-house survey."

Likewise, a spokesman for Tony Blair told the press, "The problem is they're using an extrapolation technique from a relatively small sample from an area of Iraq which isn't representative of the country as a whole. We have questioned that technique right from the beginning and we continue to do so."

The British government issued a statement following Monday's BBC report in which it reiterated the same "uncertainty:" "The methodology has been used in other conflict situations, notably the Democratic

Republic of Congo. However, the *Lancet* figures are much higher than statistics from other sources, which only goes to show how estimates can vary enormously according to the method of collection."

Among the documents obtained by the BBC was a memo by the chief scientific adviser at the British Ministry of Defense, Roy Anderson, written just two days after the Johns Hopkins study was published. The memo said, "The study design is robust and employs methods that are regarded as close to 'best practice' in this area, given the difficulties of data collection and verification in the present circumstances in Iraq."

Responding to Anderson's memo, a British government official wrote, "Are we really sure the report is likely to be right? That is certainly what the brief implies."

Another official responded to Anderson's statement: "We do not accept the figures quoted in the *Lancet* survey as accurate." Yet in the same email, the official stated, "However, the survey methodology used here cannot be rubbished, it is a tried and tested way of measuring mortality in conflict zones."

Clearly, the reason the Blair government did not accept the estimates had nothing to do with the science, and everything to do with the political and legal implications of a death toll on the scale of genocide for which the US-led coalition is responsible.

There has been virtually no US media coverage of the BBC's damning report. A day after the story broke in Britain, the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, CNN, MSNBC, the four major broadcast networks and other outlets failed to mention the report. Only the *Washington Times* online picked up the story, reposting a United Press International brief of less than two hundred words.

The mainstream press has played an integral role in suppressing politically damaging information from the build-up to the Iraq invasion up to the present. With its latest blackout, the US media yet again affirms its complicity in the mass killing and social devastation carried out by American imperialism in Iraq.

Last October, when the Johns Hopkins study was released, the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* buried the story in their back pages and made no editorial comment. When confronted by reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* about his newspaper's handling of the subject during a talk on security and

press freedom at the University of Michigan in October, *New York Times* editor Bill Keller shrugged off the suppression of the story, saying, "We didn't splash it on the front page."

On October 18, 2006, the *Wall Street Journal* ran the despicably entitled opinion piece, "655,000 War Dead? A Bogus Study on Iraq Casualties." It was written by Steven Moore, who had worked under Paul Bremer and the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq. Declaring that "the Johns Hopkins tally is wildly at odds with any numbers I have seen in that country," Moore suggested that the study was ideologically biased.

As the blackout on Monday's BBC report makes clear, the media continues to keep people in the dark about the scale of the carnage in Iraq and shield those who are responsible.



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