

The Iraq orphanage story: US troops “rescue” 24 as thousands remain in the streets

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Last Monday saw US occupation forces in Iraq launch a massive offensive involving some 10,000 troops against centers of resistance outside of Baghdad. It also saw a car bombing in the center of the capital that claimed scores of lives and left hundreds wounded.

Yet eclipsing these events in much of the US mass media was the story of US troops “rescuing” some two dozen disabled orphans from the squalid conditions of the Iraqi government-run Al-Hanan orphanage in the northwest of the capital.

The photographs—released by the Pentagon—that accompanied the story, which was first broadcast by CBS News, are indeed horrific. They show the children, all boys aged 3 to 15, kept naked and lying on the floor, tethered to the legs of their unused cribs and some covered in their own feces. The boys are clearly emaciated and some have open sores.

A statement issued by the US military described the children as “starving” and said that after they were untied, they were “too weak to stand.”

“I saw children that you could see literally every bone in their body, that were so skinny they had no energy to move whatsoever, no expression on their face,” Staff Sgt. Michael Beale told CBS.

“The kids were tied up, naked and covered in their own waste—feces—and there were three people that were cooking themselves food, but nothing for the kids,” said Lt. Stephen Duperre.

The soldiers also reported finding a stockroom stacked with food and new clothing still in plastic wrapping.

A Captain described himself as so angered by the conditions that he had to restrain himself from assaulting the orphanage’s caretaker, while soldiers reported that members of a local neighborhood council wept when they saw the condition of the children.

“I was absolutely disgusted,” one paratrooper wrote in an email to the *Fayetteville Observer*. “It really made me sick to think how someone could treat another human being, let alone a child, in this manner.”

One curious aspect of the story that received little attention in the media coverage was the fact that the discovery of the orphanage was not exactly breaking news. It had taken place 10 days earlier, on June 10.

Clearly, the Pentagon, with the full collaboration of CBS News and other media outlets, decided to pitch the “rescue” as a good news story, portraying American soldiers saving Iraqi children from depraved conditions. What could be better to symbolize the self-proclaimed ideals of “Operation Iraqi Freedom?”

This was spelled out clearly by Brig. Gen. Vincent Brooks, a senior military spokesman, who declared, “We’re very grateful that this story unfolded the way that it did, that none of these 24 boys lost their lives. This is a story of partnership, courageous action and compassion overcoming deplorable negligence.”

Like any such story of partnership, courage and compassion pre-packaged by the Pentagon and dutifully broadcast by the corporate-controlled media, the tale of the Iraqi orphanage rescue deserves closer inspection. A number of questions are raised.

Why, for instance, did the US military wait 10 days before releasing the photographs and providing its account to the media? The artful timing of the story to coincide with one of the biggest military offensives conducted by the US occupation force since the start of the war suggests that the Pentagon’s aim was to distract public opinion from the inevitable surge in casualties, among Iraqi civilians and US soldiers alike.

Moreover, the “rescue” of 24 orphans must be placed in its proper context. Undoubtedly, the latest offensive, dubbed Operation Arrowhead Ripper, has already created many times more orphans than the number supposedly saved by US paratroopers in Baghdad.

Indeed, the number of orphans in Iraq has skyrocketed since the war began. While no one has provided a reliable estimate of the numbers, they are so great as to far outstrip the capacity of Iraq’s 23 orphanages—eight of them in the capital—to provide aid. As a result, the streets of Baghdad and other major cities have become the only home for thousands of children who beg or attempt to sell small items at traffic lights. They are prey to violence, exploitation and sexual assault. All of this is a phenomenon that was unknown before the US invasion.

“Since last year, we have observed a huge increase in the number of children on the streets, and the number of orphans resulting from sectarian violence has also increased,” Salah Faris, a social and economic analyst at Baghdad University told

the United Nations news agency, IRIN. “This is disastrous for the future of Iraq because those children are not getting an education and are exposed to drugs, prostitution and sexual harassment.”

According to the United Nations Children’s Fund children make up fully half of the estimated 4 million Iraqis who have been driven from their homes—either forced into exile or internally displaced—since the war began.

“Violence is creating widows and orphans on a daily basis, many of whom are left to struggle for survival,” UNICEF said in a recent statement. “Iraq’s children, already casualties of a quarter of a century of conflict and deprivation, are being caught up in a rapidly worsening humanitarian tragedy.”

Claire Hajaj of UNICEF told the media that based on recent UN casualty estimates “you would be looking at tens of thousands of children losing a parent due to the violence in 2006 alone,” with new orphans being created at an even more rapid rate since the beginning of the current year.

So, while 24 orphans were rescued on June 10, the violence that has wracked the country as a result of the US invasion and occupation has likely produced more than a thousand new orphans since then.

Then there is General Brook’s claim that the orphanage story was one of “partnership” between the US occupation forces and the Iraqi regime. This was called sharply into question Wednesday in statements to the press by Iraq’s Labor and Social Affairs Minister Mahmoud Mohammed Al Radhi, whose ministry is responsible for the country’s orphanages.

“The Labor Ministry in all its officials and employees are responsible only to the Iraqi government, not to US forces,” he told a press conference, adding, “The manner in which US forces dealt with this incident requires deep analysis.”

He called the Pentagon’s decision to publicize the incident and release photographs to the media “an insult to those children” and accused the US military of using “tricks ... to manipulate and distort facts and show the Americans as the humanitarian party. That could not be further from the truth.”

The director of the orphanage, Dhiaa’ Abdul Amir, appeared with the minister at the press conference, insisting that he had fled out of fear of the US troops. He also denied any abuse of the children and claimed that they were healthy.

While the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki initially ordered an investigation of the incident and called for the orphanage’s employees to be arrested, the appearance of the center’s director at the press conference strongly suggested that no such punishment is to be meted out. Indeed, Minister Radhi called for the investigation to focus on what he termed the abusive actions of the American soldiers.

In particular, he accused the US troops of staging one photograph, in which a group of naked boys are piled together on a bed. The charge, given the images of naked prisoners piled one on top of each other that emerged from the infamous Abu Ghraib prison, is clearly aimed at provoking public outrage

against the occupation forces, rather than the government itself.

“Are they really concerned about how well the children are treated in that shelter, or is it just propaganda for their alleged kindness?” Radhi said to reporters.

In the end, there is no reason to question the sincerity of the disgust felt by the American soldiers who stumbled upon 24 helpless and malnourished children confined in deplorable conditions at the Al-Hanan orphanage.

Nor can one doubt the impact of such an experience upon soldiers who have been in combat in Iraq, many of whom are deeply traumatized as a result witnessing children killed and maimed in US military operations or as a result of the overwhelming violence unleashed by the American invasion and occupation.

The excuses provided by the government minister for the conditions at the orphanage are none too convincing. These conditions, expressing a combination of gross negligence, corruption, powerlessness and brutality, are entirely reflective of the regime that Washington has helped to install behind the walls of the fortified Green Zone.

Yet, whatever the sentiments of the individual soldiers or the character of the regime, the accusations made by the Iraqi minister, at least in some crucial respects, ring true.

The decision to publicize the incident at the orphanage was indeed a propaganda exercise, which was driven not by any concern for the fate of 24 orphans, much less that of the tens of thousands more like them who are left to fend for themselves. Rather its aim was to bolster the image of an entirely discredited and criminal occupation, while supporting the attempts by Democrats and Republicans alike in Washington to lay the blame for the catastrophe in Iraq on the puppet regime in Baghdad, rather than on the US war itself.



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