

Interview with WikiLeaks spokesman Kristinn Hrafnsson

“The Iraq documents give a picture of the war that has been hidden until now”

Jerry White
2 November 2010

On October 22, the web-based whistle-blower organization WikiLeaks released nearly 400,000 internal US military reports that provide damning evidence of war crimes committed by the US government against the people of Iraq.

The “Iraq War Logs”—the largest leak of classified military material in history—consist of Significant Action or SIGACT reports filed by US Army soldiers between January 2004 and December 2009, which WikiLeaks notes, “detail events as seen and heard by the US military troops on the ground in Iraq and are the first real glimpse into the secret history of the war that the United States government has been privy to throughout.”

Among the major revelations contained in the documents are reports of at least 15,000 previously undisclosed civilian deaths and the killing by US forces of 834 people at military checkpoints, including at least 681 civilians and 30 children. They also detail US complicity in the torture of prisoners by the Iraqi stooge army and police. (See: “The WikiLeaks documents and the rape of Iraq”)

For its release of these documents—and previous material related to the Afghan War, along with a video showing the murder of Iraqi civilians by a US Apache helicopter crew in 2007—WikiLeaks and its founder Julian Assange have come under vicious attack by the US military, the Obama administration and the news media, led by the *New York Times*. An article by right-wing journalist Jonah Goldberg published in the *Chicago Tribune* over the weekend was headlined, “Why is Assange still alive?”

Last week the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Kristinn Hrafnsson, a spokesperson for WikiLeaks, about the release of the Iraq War Logs and the response by the US government and news media.

Hrafnsson, a free lance journalist in Iceland, first became involved with WikiLeaks in 2009 as the web site published incriminating documents—suppressed by the courts—about events leading up to the collapse of one of the country’s leading financial institutions, the Kaupthing Bank.

After joining WikiLeaks, Hrafnsson was involved in the fact-finding investigation about the Apache helicopter attack in 2007 that killed two Reuters journalists in Baghdad. “I traveled

with a cameraman to Baghdad prior to the release of the video to gather additional material. We were able to see what happened to the minivan and we interviewed those affected by the attack, including the two young children in the minivan that was shot to pieces and who lost their father in the incident. We also met the widow. It was a journalistic investigation mission around that release.”

Asked about the significance of the newly released documents on the Iraq War, he said, “In their totality they are a full picture of war from the viewpoint of the US military of what has been experienced by the Iraqis. These are the news stories that have been hidden until now. There are indications of wrongdoing and possible war crimes and it is of tremendous importance for the general public to have this information and for these documents to be in the public domain so these allegations can be investigated. This is something that academics will come back to analyze.”

Hrafnsson said among the most damning material was how US servicemen refused to intervene to stop the torture of Iraqis by the Iraqi military and police forces. US soldiers reported more than 1,300 claims of torture between 2005 and 2009, including beatings, burnings, electric shocks, sodomy and rape, along with cases detainees being murdered. US soldiers were ordered not to investigate prisoner torture because these incidents did not involve American troops.

Hrafnsson said, “I agree with the statements made by many in the last few days, including the call by the High Commissioner of the UN and other international organizations, that this information should be investigated fully and those responsible be held accountable. It is premature in terms of some of the allegations to say who is responsible, but it should go up the chain of command.”

Hrafnsson said WikiLeaks hoped its exposures would force governments, including the US government, to halt such practices. “One would hope that holding the governments accountable would have the consequence of hindering any future wrongdoing. That is the general principle and is the only way to make democracy healthy in any country. Secrecy breeds corruption and possible wrongdoing,” he told the WWS.

In fact, the releases have provoked nothing but condemnation, threats and provocations from the US government. Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morrell condemned the leak of Iraq War documents, saying there were a gift to “terrorist organizations” and “put at risk the lives of our troops.” The comments were echoed by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and other administration officials.

Hrafnsson answered US charges that the leaks were endangering lives. “These claims are totally unsubstantiated. We had the same outcry in relation to the Afghan War Diaries release a few months ago. It goes without saying this is coming from the Pentagon.

“Two weeks ago the media in the states got hold of the statements by Defense Secretary Gates before the Senate on August 16 when he had to admit that the Afghan Diaries did not compromise any US forces in Afghanistan. Even so, they make these claims but have failed to present one or two examples to prove it.”

Asked about the response of the US media, Hrafnsson said, “I was a bit surprised. The media coverage in the US is different from the coverage in most western countries. Telling the true story has brought forth criticisms; we even saw that in relation to our media partner in the US, the *New York Times*.

“Coverage in the *Times* is notably different from the coverage of the other media partners who had access to the material. Anybody who looks at the front page of the newspapers can compare them.”

Asked what he thought accounted for this difference, Hrafnsson said, “I can only speculate because I am not familiar with media environment in the states. One must wonder if this has to do with the change in the position of the major media companies and government’s opposition to the exposure of critical issues.”

Hrafnsson said he recently met Daniel Ellsberg, the former military analyst who in 1971 released the Pentagon Papers, the top-secret study that exposed the systematic lying by successive US administrations involved in the launching and expansion of the war in Vietnam.

“I met Daniel Ellsberg when he came to our press conference in London. When you reflect back on the 1970s and how the *New York Times* and all the other newspapers were unafraid to stand up to the Nixon administration at the time, and there was a strong alliance between journalists with the general public, this is not taking place any more, not at the same level as 40 years ago. The media is getting much too close to the military industry. They are not following the changing moods of the general public who are increasingly opposed to the wars.”

In fact the *Times* has functioned as an unabashed tool of the military and intelligence apparatus smearing Assange and treating WikiLeaks—which has exposed US war crimes—as a semi-criminal organization.

At the WikiLeaks press conference in London on October 23, Ellsberg said the WikiLeaks founder had been “pursued across

three continents” by Western intelligence services. He compared the Obama administration’s threat to prosecute Assange to his own treatment at the hands of President Richard M. Nixon. The Republican president sought to prosecute Ellsberg for treason under the Espionage Act of 1917.

Ellsberg said the administration’s persecution of whistleblowers—including Private Bradley Manning, the former military intelligence analyst whom the military is accusing of providing the documents on Afghanistan and Iraq to WikiLeaks—was putting the US on track to establish a repressive legal framework similar to the Official Secrets Act in Britain.

Referring to Apache attack video that the imprisoned Private Manning is accused of leaking, Hrafnsson said, “I worked closely on preparing that. All I can say is if he got this sort of material out he is a hero and ought to be released. We have contributed a substantial amount to his defense.”

Asked if WikiLeaks was facing attacks on its web site, Hrafnsson said, “No, we are not getting electronic attacks at this time. However, there are indications that we can expect all kinds of disruptions.” He said the US government had threatened companies contracted by WikiLeaks to collect public donations, which the organization depends on.

Last month, WikiLeaks said its funding has been blocked and it had been targeted for financial warfare by the US government. The *Guardian* reported that Moneybookers, an Internet payment company registered in the United Kingdom that collects WikiLeaks donations, e-mailed WikiLeaks to say that it had shut down its account because it had been placed on official US and Australian government watch lists.

Hrafnsson thanked the *World Socialist Web Site* and other organizations for defending WikiLeaks from such attacks. “We welcome support. It’s very good to have that.”

Asked if WikiLeaks would be releasing more material related to the US wars, Hrafnsson said his organization had held back thousands of Afghan War Diaries documents for redaction. “We will release those documents soon and we have other material.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact