

## This week in history: March 3-9

This column profiles important historical events which took place during this week, 25 years ago, 50 years ago, 75 years ago and 100 years ago.

2 March 2025

**25 years ago: John Pilger's *Killing the Children of Iraq—a price worth paying?* airs in the United Kingdom**

On March 6, 2000, Australian anti-war journalist John Pilger's documentary *Killing the Children of Iraq—a price worth paying?* aired in the United Kingdom. The film exposed both the devastating human toll inflicted on the Iraqi people by 10 years of sanctions and the hypocrisy and lies of the imperialist powers and the United Nations.

Pilger (1939-2023) visited hospitals, schools, homes and markets to interview workers, doctors, artists, parents and UN aid workers about the life-and-death struggles Iraqis faced. He put a human face on the appalling statistics proving that the US-led Gulf War and UN-imposed sanctions were devastating Iraqi society and producing mass suffering and death.

In order to sell the criminal sanctions to the public, US President Bill Clinton, British Prime Minister Tony Blair and the United Nations claimed their actions had noble intentions, wrapped around “humanitarianism” and eliminating the supposed imminent threat to world peace, Saddam Hussein—once a CIA asset—and his alleged hidden stockpiles of “weapons of mass destruction.” In fact, Scott Ritter, the chief UN weapons inspector from 1991 to 1998, said all chemical, biological and nuclear weapons production facilities and programs had been destroyed and the threat by Iraq was “zero, none.”

The brutal impact of the sanctions hit the most vulnerable and impoverished sections of society. Child mortality rose to 4,000 per month among those aged five and under. Cancer rates shattered records, due to the widespread use of chemical and radioactive weapons by the US and Britain during the Gulf War. Most of those diagnosed with cancer died due to the blockade of medicine and pervasive malnutrition. Even vaccines for yellow fever and diphtheria had been barred from entering the country.

In one scene, the documentary states that “the US and Britain have killed more people through the imposition of sanctions against Iraq than were killed by two atomic bombs dropped on Japan in World War II—including half a million children.”

The US government and its allies had no scruples murdering innocent children for geopolitical gain and the exploitation of

Iraq's resources for the further enrichment of the oligarchy. When US Secretary of State Madeline Albright was asked if 500,000 Iraqi children was a “price worth paying” to overthrow Saddam Hussein, she had replied, “We think the price is worth it.”

Pilger's film exposed the fraudulent “humanitarianism” of all the perpetrators by placing the mountain of dead Iraqis at the doorsteps of Washington, London and Brussels.

**50 years ago: Israeli response to hostage situation leaves 18 dead**

On March 5, 1975, eight militants from the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) entered the Savoy Hotel in Tel Aviv and took hostage several employees and guests of the hotel. The situation would end in a bloodbath after the Israeli government launched a reckless military assault that prioritized killing the PLO militants over the lives of the hostages.

The Savoy operation took place during a wave of escalating Palestinian militancy following the 1973 Yom Kippur War. While the war saw Egypt and Syria reclaim some territories occupied by Israel, the agreements signed to end the fighting made no provisions for the Palestinians, who remained occupied or displaced from their homeland.

The PLO had recently gained recognition by the United Nations as the official representative of the Palestinian people, but Israel, backed by US imperialism, refused negotiations, instead expanding settlements and intensifying repression in occupied territories.

The March 5 operation began with the eight PLO fighters landing by boat near Tel Aviv. The militants then stormed the luxury Savoy Hotel, taking 15 hostages, including Israeli guests and foreign tourists. In return for the safe release of the hostages the PLO demanded the release of 20 Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails.

The Israeli government, led by Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin of the Labor Party, rejected any negotiations with the PLO. Instead, Sayeret Matkal commandos were ordered to storm the hotel at

dawn on March 6. The assault triggered a chaotic firefight.

In addition to gunfire, the Israeli forces deployed explosives, igniting a blaze that engulfed the building. Survivors recounted horrifying scenes of civilians caught in crossfire or suffocated by smoke.

The operation resulted in the death of eight hostages, alongside seven PLO fighters. Three Israeli soldiers were also killed in the fighting.

The Savoy tragedy followed Israel's policy established in earlier confrontations, such as the 1974 Ma'alot massacre, where a similar raid resulted in 22 dead schoolchildren. Each crisis reinforced the Rabin government's doctrine of absolute refusal to negotiate with Palestinian militants, regardless of civilian casualties. This strategy, sanctioned by US imperialism, aimed to crush Palestinian resistance through collective punishment and psychological terror.

In addition to revealing once again the barbarity of the Zionist state, the Savoy attack demonstrated the futility of individual acts of resistance divorced from the mobilization of the international working class. The PLO's tactics reflected the desperation of an oppressed people denied basic democratic rights, including national self-determination. But Israel's response—aided by imperialist powers—demonstrated the intent of the Zionist state to kill off any attempt at Palestinian resistance, no matter the cost in human life, even of Israeli citizens.

### **75 years ago: Nearly 400,000 striking US coal miners sent back to work after month-long strike**

On March 5, 1950, United Mine Workers of America President John L. Lewis signed a pact with coal mine operators to end the month-long strike of 370,000 bituminous coal miners. Hours later, tens of thousands of the striking workers resumed work at the mines.

Lewis declared the nationwide strike of the coal miners on February 6. The previous contract between the UMWA and the mining operators had expired the previous June, with negotiations failing to reach a settlement in that time. The rank-and-file workers were propelled to fight against the insecurity of working without a contract.

The day after the stoppage began, US President Harry S. Truman invoked the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act against the strike, declaring that the UMWA could not give any aid to the miners. In addition, the move prohibited any miner from influencing another to stay out of work, otherwise they would be liable to face contempt charges.

The striking miners thus sent rank-and-file delegations to make appeals for food and financial assistance for the workers and their families. These appeals were met with support, with thousands of dollars provided to the miners, as well as several tons worth of food trucks. A number of unions also passed unanimous resolutions calling for a 24-hour nationwide general strike to aid the coal miners.

It was in this context that the coal mining corporations signed an

agreement with Lewis and the UMWA to give concessions to the workers, to prevent a broadening of workers' struggles which could quickly spiral out of the control of the unions.

The resulting agreement saw the miners gain an average increase of \$1.40 per day in wages, corresponding to a 70 percent increase. The workers also increased their welfare and pension fund from 20 to 30 cents per ton, as well as gaining a contract term of 28 months.

### **100 years ago: British bomb Pashtun tribesmen in South Waziristan**

On March 9, 1925, the Royal Air Force (RAF) began a campaign of aerial bombardment and strafing of Pashtun tribal areas in South Waziristan in the North-West Frontier Province of the British Raj, today located in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in northern Pakistan. The action would last for 57 days.

The bombardment, also known as Pink's War after Wing Commander Richard Pink who led the assault, was a follow-up to the 1921-24 Waziristan Campaign by the British and colonial Indian armies, which sought to build infrastructure to link the North-West Frontier Province to the rest of the Raj so that British imperialism could quickly suppress tribal uprisings, particularly of the Mashud tribe.

Militarily, Pink's war marked the first large-scale effort by an imperialist power to subdue a people by airpower alone. It was the first independent action of the RAF and lodged itself in military doctrine as one of the first examples of "air control."

While Pink's War forced the Mashud into negotiations, the tribe was able to strike back with force against the imperialists in 1927 and 1928. The British had been unable to conquer the tribal areas in this region, and in fact would never be able to do so. Waziristan, while a part of Pakistan today, remains semi-independent of the federal government. The region has a fluid border with Afghanistan to its north and has played a role in providing a haven for Pashtun fighters, first against the Soviet Union and then against the United States.

As one British commentator in colonial India noted, "The Mashud tribe are a people who can never even think of submitting to a foreign power."



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