

US killed hundreds of Iraqi civilians in “precision” strikes

By James Conachy
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Fifty so-called “precision” strikes were carried out by the US military in Iraq between March 19 and April 18, 2003, in attempts to kill Saddam Hussein and 12 other high-ranking Iraqi leaders. The cruise missiles and laser-guided bombs used in the attacks destroyed dozens of homes and other civilian buildings, and killed and wounded hundreds, if not thousands, of Iraqi civilians.

The June 13 *New York Times* carried admissions by unnamed US military and intelligence officials that underscore the utterly criminal and murderous character of these strikes. The *Times*’s sources acknowledged that not one of these “precision” attacks hit an Iraqi political or military leader and that the US military did not have any reliable information that the intended victims were even in the targeted buildings.

A senior military officer told the *Times*: “It was all just guesswork where they [the Iraqi leaders] were.”

This admission gives the lie to the claim by the Bush administration and the American media that the US military took extraordinary precautions to avoid civilian casualties during the invasion of Iraq. In fact, buildings were deliberately targeted with scant regard for how many non-combatants would be killed or injured.

In the lead-up to the war, every planned air strike that was expected to cause more than 30 civilian casualties had to be approved in advance by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. This constraint meant little, as Rumsfeld endorsed all 50 or so such strikes and thereby signed the death warrant of more than 1,500 Iraqi civilians.

However, military officials told the *Times* that when a building was alleged to house a “high-value” Iraqi leader, not even the above-noted constraint applied. Such attacks had Pentagon authorization in advance.

In flagrant violation of international law, the US military considered itself free to carry out attacks on “high-value” targets without even seeking to verify whether its information was accurate. It recognized no requirement to take into account the likely civilian casualties, despite the fact most of the targets were houses or other buildings in residential areas.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) noted in a major report published last December that “attacks on [Iraqi] leadership likely resulted in the largest number of civilian deaths from the air war.” In the four such attacks investigated by HRW, at least 42 civilians were killed and dozens more injured. The munitions used in the attacks were among the most deadly in the US military arsenal, including deep-penetrating bombs designed to explode beneath the ground and reduce buildings to rubble.

Among the attacks investigated by HRW was the opening shot of the war, the March 19 bombing of a farmhouse southeast of Baghdad, where Saddam Hussein and his cabinet were suspected to be holding a meeting. HRW also examined the April 7 bombing of a hotel in Baghdad’s Al Mansur district, which was also, according to the US military, intended to kill Hussein. In both cases, the Iraqi president was not present.

HRW’s report charged: “The targeting of Iraqi leadership resulted in dozens of civilian casualties that the United States could have prevented if it had taken additional precautions. This phenomenon has gone largely unremarked upon by US military and civilian officials.” (See <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2003/usa1203/> for the full HRW report, “Off Target: The Conduct of the War and Civilian Casualties in Iraq.”)

Far more is involved, however, than the US military not taking sufficient precautions. The “high-value”

leadership strikes cannot be justified on the grounds of military necessity. The death of Hussein or a dozen other Iraqi political leaders would not have altered the outcome of the war. Iraq was virtually defenseless in the face of the overwhelming technical and military superiority of the US. It had virtually no air force and its limited air defenses and communications were bound to be destroyed in the first days of the conflict. Iraqi soldiers were massacred in their thousands by American jet fighters, A-10 gun-ships, ground artillery and tanks.

The efforts to kill Hussein and his inner circle amounted to assassination attempts. The reckless indifference to Iraqi civilian casualties with which they were carried out stemmed from the character of the war itself. Far from a war of “liberation,” it was a neo-colonial invasion aimed not only at overthrowing the Baathist regime, but at terrorizing the Iraqi people into submitting to American rule and the plunder of the country’s oil and other economic resources.

The attitude of the Bush administration toward the Iraqi people is expressed in the fact that at no point during or since the invasion has it attempted to estimate, let alone justify, the number of Iraqi military and civilian casualties caused by US actions. Estimates of Iraqi military deaths range from 10,000 to 45,000. The consensus among non-government observers, who attempted to compile figures from incomplete hospital records, is that between 5,000 and 10,000 Iraqi civilians were killed from March 19 to May 1, 2003. The number of wounded is estimated at more than 8,000 in Baghdad alone.

Throughout the war, the American media functioned as a propaganda agency for the US government. It censored the images of Iraqi civilian casualties from the view of the American people, while at the same time propagating the lie that every effort was being made by the US forces to avoid harming civilians. The *New York Times* itself supported the war and promoted the administration’s lies about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. It has waited six months after the Human Rights Watch report to publish its account of the terrible civilian toll resulting from US “precision” strikes—that is, after it became clear that the US invasion and occupation had produced a military and political quagmire for US imperialism.

The reality is that the Bush administration and US

military command repeatedly ordered attacks that were certain to cause large-scale civilian deaths and injuries. This, along with the planning of an unprovoked war of aggression, is an indictable war crime.

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