

# UN report documents huge October death toll in Iraq

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The human rights report released on Wednesday by the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) describes a nation that has been plunged into barbarism since the US-led invasion in March 2003. The Bush administration's illegal war for oil and world power, cynically code-named "Operation Iraqi Freedom," has turned Iraq into a slaughterhouse and mass graveyard.

The US military is using indiscriminate air strikes, snipers, blockades of entire cities and districts, and mass detentions to collectively punish the Iraqi people for the ongoing anti-occupation resistance. US policies have fomented a murderous civil war between the Sunni Arab establishment that formed the base of Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime and the Shiite fundamentalist and Kurdish nationalist organisations that were placed in power by the US occupation. Amid a level of violence that is barely conceivable to those not enduring it, economic activity has collapsed, essential infrastructure is dysfunctional and genuine democratic and legal institutions are non-existent.

The situation has never been worse for the Iraqi people. The Iraqi Ministry of Health reported that the official number of civilians violently killed in October—3,709 men, women and children—was the highest of any month since the March 2003 invasion. During September and October combined, there were 7,054 violent deaths. Another 7,425 people were wounded.

The greatest carnage is taking place in Baghdad. In a city of approximately five million, close to 5,000 people officially suffered a violent death during the two-month period. Most, according to UNAMI, bore signs of torture and had been shot. Baghdad's official annual murder rate exceeds 160 per 100,000. The average in Detroit city, which has one of the highest homicide levels in the US, is less than 20 per 100,000.

Even these statistics are considered to be a vast underestimation. Thousands of people have

disappeared—disposed of in rubbish dumps, rivers or unmarked graves—or been buried by their families without notifying the occupation forces or a US puppet government they fear and despise. UNAMI cited the study by the "independent and authoritative" *Lancet* journal, which estimated that over 600,000 Iraqis have suffered a violent death since March 2003. Without openly endorsing it, the UN group left little doubt it is a credible figure. Based on the ratio of deaths to injuries, one must assume that many more have been injured in the killing fields of Iraq.

Militias formed by the rival religious and ethnic factions "operate with almost total impunity" as they terrorise the population and fight for control over patches of territory. Majority Sunni or Shiite suburbs and towns are being "cleansed" of the rival faction. "Many of the death squads and rival militias", UNAMI noted, "have direct links with or are supported by influential political parties belonging to the [Iraqi] government and are not hiding their affiliation".

Christians, Palestinian refugees and ethnic minorities are suffering widespread sectarian persecution. The rights of women have been shattered. Sharia law has been imposed over much of the country by Shiite and Sunni extremists alike, forcing women to conform to fundamentalist dress and moral codes, or risk death or hideous mutilation. Poverty is forcing thousands, particularly widows and university students, into prostitution or "enjoyment" marriages that are dissolved after a brief time.

Many schools are not opening and girls are being kept home due to the sectarian carnage. According to statistics cited by UNAMI from the Iraqi ministry of education, more than 300 teachers and ministry employees have been murdered this year alone and 1,158 wounded. Over 150 university academics have been assassinated since the US invasion and hundreds more have left the country.

Journalists and media workers live in constant fear of murder. Eighteen have been killed in the past two months. In September, the US puppet government shut down the TV station Al Arabiya to prevent its critical reportage of the occupation. Al Jazeera, the most prominent Arab station, has been banned since September 2004.

Attempting to summarise the state of human rights in Iraq, UNAMI wrote: “The civilian population of Iraq continues to be the victim of terrorist acts, roadside bombs, drive-by shootings, [US-led] military operations, police abuse, kidnappings, common crimes, and cross fire between rival gangs or police and insurgents. The security environment, marked by sectarian intolerance and prejudice, further erodes the freedom to worship or manifest one’s religion or to express thoughts. Growing unemployment, poverty, discrimination and diminishing access to basic services undermine socio-economic rights.”

As a consequence of the violence, the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) estimates that over 400,000 Iraqis have been internally displaced since February this year. Another 1.6 million Iraqis have fled the country since 2003, with up to 600,000 in Jordan, 600,000 in Syria, 100,000 in Saudi Arabia and over 400,000 elsewhere. Combined, the number of displaced represents some 8 percent of Iraq’s pre-war population of 26 million.

The governments and media in the US, Britain and Australia—the three imperialist states which bear full responsibility for the invasion and everything that has taken place in Iraq since March 2003—have had no hesitation in describing the estimated 450,000 deaths in the Darfur region of Sudan during a three-year civil war as “genocide”. The illegal war of aggression against Iraq, which has 14 million less people than Sudan, has caused far more death and displacement. To the extent this fact is ever openly discussed, it is only to use the nightmare facing the Iraqi people to cynically declare that foreign troops cannot leave or the situation will get worse.

The invasion and occupation of Iraq is a crime of historic dimensions; an atrocity that parallels the most horrifying events of the twentieth century. For the 300 million people living in United States to endure anything approaching the devastation that has been inflicted on the Iraq’s population, they would have to suffer 7.5 million dead and 8 to 10 million wounded. Some 30 million would be driven from their homes and 80 million workers deprived of their livelihoods. If the carnage in Baghdad were replicated in Los Angeles, close to 1,000 people would be brutally murdered each week.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the German Marxist Rosa Luxemburg declared that the struggle for markets, resources and spheres of influence between rival capitalist nation-states posed humanity with the alternatives of socialism or barbarism. Iraq is an example of the latter. It is an example of what American imperialism is prepared to do in Iran, Syria, North Korea, Cuba, Venezuela and any other country where the governments are declared insufficiently compliant to US corporate and strategic interests.

The United Nations is not a mechanism that can, or will, stand in the way of US militarism. To clear the way for their own militarist policies, the other powers in the Security Council sanctioned the false claims that Iraq possessed “weapons of mass destruction” and, in April 2003, endorsed the invasion post-facto by stripping Iraq of its sovereignty and handing it over to the Bush administration.

The UNAMI report highlights the UN’s impotency. Despite revealing the extent of the carnage being caused by the US invasion, it makes no call for the withdrawal of the occupation forces and pledges to work with an Iraqi government that is nothing more than a US puppet.

The Bush administration, the Blair government and the Howard government in Australia are indictable for crimes against humanity. It is the political responsibility of the international working class—particularly in the US, Britain and Australia—to demand that they are brought to trial, and fight for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all foreign troops from Iraq. In doing so, working people will strengthen the necessary struggle that must develop in the Iraqi working class for a unified socialist movement against both the occupation and the sectarian forces it has spawned and encouraged.

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