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COUNTING THE IRAQI DEAD

In 2004, The Lancet published an authoritative survey of mortality in Iraq (see Spokesman 84), which generated great controversy. The Lancet has now published follow-up work by three authors of the original survey, Professors Gilbert Burnham and Riyadh Lafta and Doctor Les Roberts, together with Dr. Shannon Doocy. In this short excerpt, they discuss their latest findings, which have not been credibly challenged.

‘We estimate that, as a consequence of the coalition invasion of March 18, 2003, about 655,000 Iraqis have died above the number that would be expected in a non-conflict situation, which is equivalent to about 2.5% of the population in the study area. About 601,000 of these excess deaths were due to violent causes. Our estimate of the post-invasion crude mortality rate represents a doubling of the baseline mortality rate, which, by the Sphere standards, constitutes a humanitarian emergency.

Our estimate of the pre-invasion crude or all-cause mortality rate is in close agreement with other sources. The post-invasion crude mortality rate increased significantly from pre-invasion figures, and showed a rising trend. The increasing number of violent deaths follows trends of bodies counted by mortuaries, as well as those reported in the media and by the Iraq Body Count.

Application of the mortality rates reported here to the period of the 2004 survey gives an estimate of 112,000 (69,000–155,000) excess deaths in Iraq in that period. Thus, the data presented here validates our 2004 study, which conservatively estimated an excess mortality of nearly 100,000 as of September, 2004.’

CENTRAL ASIA: A NUCLEAR-WEAPONS-FREE ZONE

The foreign ministers of the five Central Asian States — Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan — signed a treaty establishing a Central Asian Nuclear Weapon Free Zone (CANWFZ) on 8 September 2006. The signing of the treaty went forward despite objections by the United States, the United Kingdom and France. The new zone joins four others covering Latin America and the Caribbean, the South Pacific, South-east Asia, and Africa. Some of these Central

Asian states previously had nuclear weapons on their territory as well as sites for nuclear tests. Nuclear-armed powers in the region include Russia, China, Pakistan, and India. At the signing ceremony, Kazakh Foreign Minister Kasymomart Tokayev underlined the symbolic significance of the new zone, stating: 'The countries of our region declared a firm commitment to the principles of disarmament and non-proliferation. This is our contribution to ensuring global security.'

CLUSTER BOMBS IN KOSOVO

The British Government has argued at the European Court of Human Rights that it should not be held accountable for human rights breaches by British troops in the course of military operations abroad. The Grand Chamber of 17 Strasbourg judges has to decide whether the European Convention on Human Rights applies to the military operations of European troops abroad.

Britain and five other European countries have intervened in a case brought against France for failing to safeguard the lives of two Kosovan boys by ensuring that cluster bombs dropped by Nato forces were cleared up. One boy was killed and his brother was blinded and disfigured. The seven governments argue that no international operations of this kind could ever be mounted in the future if the participating states were told that they would be held accountable before the European Court for any violations of human rights they committed in the course of their military operations.

The Strasbourg case is being brought on behalf of Gadaf Behrami and his brother, Bekir, who were playing with other boys in the hills in the Sipolje area of Mitrovica, Kosovo, in March 2000, when they came across a number of undetonated cluster bombs left behind after the Nato bombardment in 1999. The Behrami family had been in Switzerland for nine years as refugees and had returned to Kosovo only the year before, thinking their homeland was now safe.

One of the boys threw a cluster bomb into the air. It detonated and killed 11-year-old Gadaf and seriously injured Bekir, then aged nine. At the time Mitrovica was within the sector of Kosovo for which a multinational brigade led by France was responsible. It was one of four brigades making up the international security force (Kfor) presence in Kosovo, mandated by a UN security council resolution.

Lawyers for the Behrami family say that despite the French Kfor troops' express mandate to ensure a safe and secure environment for returning refugees, they failed to take any steps to remove the Nato cluster bombs which they knew were in a particular location in the hills near Mitrovica. Although they were aware of the risk to local children, they took no steps to inform the local families of the dangers, fence off or mark the area, or dispose of the unexploded ordnance.

Unmik, the UN operation administering Kosovo, introduced the European Convention on Human Rights into Kosovan law, and expressly stated that the military and the civilian presence would be bound by its standards.

Source: Claire Dyer, The Guardian, 13 November 2006

IRAN: FIXING FACTS AROUND THE POLICY?

‘UN inspectors have protested to the US government and a Congressional committee about a report on Iran’s nuclear work, calling parts of it “outrageous and dishonest”, according to a letter obtained by Reuters in September 2006.

Sent to the head of the House of Representatives’ Select Committee on Intelligence by a senior aide to the Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Mohamed ElBaradei, the letter said a committee report dated 23 August contained serious distortions of IAEA findings on Iran’s activity.

The letter said the errors suggested Iran’s nuclear fuel programme was much more advanced than a series of IAEA reports and Washington’s own intelligence assessments have determined. It said the report falsely described Iran to have enriched uranium at its pilot centrifuge plant to weapons-grade level in April, whereas IAEA inspectors had made clear Iran had enriched only to a low level usable for nuclear power reactor fuel. “Furthermore, the IAEA Secretariat takes strong exception to the incorrect and misleading assertion” that the IAEA opted to remove a senior safeguards inspector for supposedly concluding the purpose of Iran’s programme was to build weapons, it said. The letter said the congressional report contained “an outrageous and dishonest suggestion” that the inspector was dumped for having not adhered to an alleged IAEA policy barring its “officials from telling the whole truth” about Iran. IAEA spokeswoman Melissa Fleming said: “We felt obliged to put the record straight with regard to the facts on what we have reported on Iran. It’s a matter of the integrity of the IAEA.”

Source: Mark Heinrich, Reuters, 14 September 2006