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Robert Fisk: Wailing children, the wounded, the dead: victims of the day cluster bombs rained on Babylon

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The wounds are vicious and deep, a rash of scarlet spots on the back and thighs or face, the shards of shrapnel from the cluster bombs buried an inch or more in the flesh. The wards of the Hillah teaching hospital are proof that something illegal – something quite outside the Geneva Conventions – occurred in the villages around the city once known as Babylon.

The wailing children, the young women with breast and leg wounds, the 10 patients upon whom doctors had to perform brain surgery to remove metal from their heads, talk of the days and nights when the explosives fell "like grapes" from the sky. Cluster bombs, the doctors say – and the detritus of the air raids around the hamlets of Nadr and Djifil and Akramin and Mahawil and Mohandesin and Hail Askeri shows that they are right.

Were they American or British aircraft that showered these villages with one of the most lethal weapons of modern warfare? The 61 dead who have passed through the Hillah hospital since Saturday night cannot tell us. Nor can the survivors who, in many cases, were sitting in their homes when the white canisters opened high above their village, spilling thousands of bomblets into the sky, exploding in the air, soaring through windows and doorways to burst indoors or bouncing off the roofs of the concrete huts to blow up later in the roadways.

Rahed Hakem remembers that it was 10.30am on Sunday when she was sitting in her home in Nadr, that she heard "the voice of explosions" and looked out of the door to see "the sky raining fire". She said the bomblets were a black-grey colour. Mohamed Moussa described the clusters of "little boxes" that fell out of the sky in the same village and thought they were silver-coloured. They fell like "small grapefruit," he said. "If it hadn't exploded and you touched it, it went off immediately," he said. "They exploded in the air and on the ground and we still have some in our home, unexploded."

Karima Mizler thought the bomblets had some kind of wires attached to them – perhaps the metal "butterfly" that contains sets of the tiny cluster bombs and springs open to release them in showers.

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Some victims died at once, mostly women and children, some of whose blackened, decomposing remains lay in the tiny charnel house mortuary at the back of the Hillah hospital. The teaching college received more than 200 wounded since Saturday night – the 61 dead are only those who were brought to the hospital or who died during or after surgery, and many others are believed to have been buried in their home villages – and, of these, doctors say about 80 per cent were civilians.

Soldiers there certainly were, at least 40 if these statistics are to be believed, and amid the foul clothing of the dead outside the mortuary door I found a khaki military belt and a combat jacket. But village men can also be soldiers and both they and their wives and daughters insisted there were no military installations around their homes. True or false? Who is to know if a tank or a missile launcher was positioned in a nearby field – as they were along the highway north to Baghdad? But the Geneva Conventions demand protection for civilians even if they are intermingled with military personnel, and the use of cluster bombs in these villages – even if aimed at military targets – thus crosses the boundaries of international law.

So it was that 27-year old Asil Yamin came to receive those awful round wounds in her back. And so five-year-old Zaman Abbais was hit in the legs and 48-year-old Samira Abdul-Hamza in the eyes, chest and legs. Her son Haidar, a 32-year-old soldier, said the containers which fell to the ground were white with some red and green sometimes painted on them. "It is like a grenade and they came into the houses," he said. "Some stayed on the land, others exploded."

Heartbreaking is the only word to describe 10-year-old Maryam Nasr and her five-year-old sister Hoda. Maryam has a patch over her right eye where a piece of bomblet embedded itself. She also had wounds to the stomach and thighs. I didn't realise that Hoda, standing by her sister's bed, was wounded until her mother carefully lifted the little girl's scarf and long hair to show a deep puncture in the right side of her head, just above her ear, congealed blood sticking to her hair but the wound still gently bleeding. Their mother described how she had been inside her home and heard an explosion and found her daughters lying in their own blood near the door. The little girls alternately smiled and hid when I took their pictures. In other wards, the hideously wounded would try to laugh, to show their bravery. It was a humbling experience.

The Iraqi authorities, of course, were all too ready to allow us journalists access to these patients. But there was no way these children and often uneducated parents could manufacture their stories of tragedy and pain. Nor could the Iraqis have faked the scene in Nadr village where the remains of the tiny bomblets littered the ground beside the scorch marks. A crew from Sky Television even managed to bring a set of bomblet shrapnel back to Baghdad from Nadr with them, the wicked little metal balls that are intended to puncture the human body still locked into their frame like cough sweets in a metal sheath, They were of a black colour which glinted silver when held against the light.

Again, were the aircraft that dropped these terrible weapons American or British? The deputy administrator of the hospital and one of his doctors told a confused tale of military action around the city in recent days, of Apache helicopters that would disgorge special forces on the road to Karbala; one of their operations – if the hospital personnel are to be believed – went spectacularly wrong one night recently when militiamen forced them to retreat. Shortly afterwards, the cluster bomb raids began, although the villages that were targeted appear to have been on the other side of Hillah to the reported abortive American attack.

One thing was clear: there is no "front line" in the fighting around Babylon, that US forces strike into land around the Tigris river by air and then withdraw and Iraqi forces do much the same in the other direction. Only the Americans and British, of course, have air superiority – indeed there is no evidence a single Iraqi aircraft has taken off since the start of the invasion – so even the US and British officers back at Qatar headquarters can hardly claim the cluster bombs were dropped by Iraq.

The most recent raid occurred on Tuesday when 11 civilians were killed – two of

them women and three of them children – in a village called Hindiyeh. A man sent to collect the corpses reported to the hospital the only living thing he found in the area was a hen. Iraqi bomb disposal officers were ordered into the villages yesterday afternoon to clear the unexploded ordnance.

Needless to say, it is not the first time cluster bombs have been used against civilians. During Israel's 1982 siege of west Beirut, its air force dropped cluster bomblets manufactured for the US Navy across several areas, especially in the Fakhani and Ouzai districts, causing civilians ferocious and deep wounds identical to those I saw in Hillah yesterday. Angry at the misuse of their weapons, which are designed for use against exclusively military targets, the Reagan administration withheld a shipment of fighter-bombers for Israel – then relented a few weeks later and sent the aircraft anyway.

It is not easy to listen to Iraqi officials condemning the use of illegal weapons when the Iraqi air force has itself dropped poison gas on the Iranian army and on pro-Iranian Kurdish villages during the 1980-88 war against Iran. Outraged claims from Iraqi officials at the abuse of human rights sound like a bell with a very hollow ring. But something terrible happened around Hillah this week, something unforgivable and something contrary to international law. One hesitates, as I say, to talk of human rights in this land of torture but if the Americans and British don't watch out, they are likely to find themselves condemned for what they have always – and rightly – accused Iraq of: war crimes.

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