

The Progress Of Disaster

By Christian Parenti

In These Times

The air in Baghdad is potent stuff. Plastic-rich garbage heaps burn in empty lots. Massive diesel generators run round the clock. More than a million vehicles-old cars, trucks and fuel-guzzling US tanks-creep through the streets belching fumes. On the horizon, beyond the looted and bombed out office blocks, looming above the low-rise residential sprawl, is a giant smokestack; its massive black plume hangs over the city constantly. Add to this haze the soot of building fires, the stench of sewage, and the ubiquitous dust from countless rubble heaps; then cap and seal the mixture with the 115-degree hostility of a desert sun.

But forget the poisonous air. The really pressing issue in Baghdad is escalating chaos. The 6 million people living here want electricity, water, telecommunications and security. As of yet they have none of these in sufficient supply. On the ground it seems that this American adventure is spinning out of control. Most Iraqis want peace, but a terrorist war of resistance requires only a small and determined minority.

Here the criminal is king. Saddam emptied the prisons and the United States disbanded the police, while 60 percent of people are unemployed. As a result, carjacking, robbery, looting, and murder are rife. Marauding men in "misery gangs" kidnap and rape women and girls at will. Some of these victims are dumped back on the streets only to be executed by their "disgraced" male relatives in what are called "honor killings."

Many women and girls stay locked inside their homes for weeks at a time. And increasingly those who do venture out wear veils, as the misogynist threats and ravings of the more fundamentalist Shia and Sunni clerics have warned that women who do not wear the hijab should not be protected.

According to the city morgue, there were 470 fatal shootings in July, up from 10 the year before. Not surprisingly, most people in Baghdad are armed and edgy. Under such conditions community solidarity takes on strange forms. Irish peace activist Michael Birmingham, who works with Voices in the Wilderness, witnessed the new vigilantism first hand.

Three carjackers took a vehicle in midday. In response, the crowd on the streets started throwing stones while shopkeepers started firing AK-47s. Before long the crowd had dragged one of the carjackers out onto the street and started beating him. "They were jumping on his head and his chest. I don't think he made it," explains Birmingham in a deadpan Dublin brogue.

As for the American troops-whom Iraqis call the *kuwat alihtilal*, or forces of occupation -- they are stretched too thin to deal effectively with such crimes. And they have little understanding of Iraqi culture or politics. They are adrift in a sea of unintelligible Arabic, where even the street names are a mystery. At crime scenes they can just as easily arrest the victims as the perpetrators. Their small convoys are under constant assault.

Officially there are, on average, 13 attacks on Coalition Forces in Baghdad every day. Since May 1, when the war "ended," more than 404 US soldiers have been permanently removed from action due to wounds, while more than 60 have been killed in attacks.

I relay these numbers to a grunt in the field, a young GI with the first armored division. He has no clear picture of how the counter-insurgency war is going other than that someone shot at the gate he is guarding a while back and missed. But he's sure of one thing. "Whatever they tell you is a lie. It is bullshit. They're camouflaging."

Even journalists are getting killed. A Reuters photographer, Mazen Dana, was recently taken out by US troops. Before that, a young British free-lancer named Richard Wild was murdered by an assassin who probably thought his victim was a soldier. Three GIs had died the same way: at close range, in the neck, from behind, with a pistol.

May Ying Walsh—a stellar American reporter who now works for Al Jazeera—was almost killed, as she recounts with an air of blank serenity. "I was interviewing some soldiers and a grenade fell right in between us, like a ripe piece of fruit. Everyone ran, but I just froze. The grenade rolled under a Humvee and when it blew, somehow, the shrapnel missed me. I think I was behind the tire or something." Her film crew and two GIs were not so lucky; all of them were wounded, one of them very badly.

Baghdad also suffers from the less dramatic structural violence of epidemic poverty. War, sanctions, and Saddam's greed have left a large destitute class with no work, medicine, or schooling. Exploring the rubble of some government ministry, two colleagues and I meet Ibrahim Kadum, who lost his foot in the Iran-Iraq war, then he lost his home and now squats in these ruins with his wife, nine children, and a shaggy and bleating ewe.

Kadum, who can't work, says he lives off the meager wages of his children, some of whom do odd jobs in a local market. Mostly he survives on World Food Program donations of flour, legumes, oil, salt, sugar, and tea. These allotments feed 27 million and are a direct continuation of the oil-for-food program of Saddam's era, which is scheduled to end in November. The scale and form of any new system is as yet unclear. As we talk, a bleary-eyed child approaches with a very realistic toy pistol and levels it at my colleague's head.

At the Palestine Hotel, now a huge fortified camp where highly-paid TV journalists are guarded by the razor wire and tanks of the US Army, one can find yet more forms of the war's violence and desperation.

A young woman, through a translator, explains the details of her work. She sells herself to American soldiers for \$15 a session. She's seventeen, wants to go to college and leave Iraq.

"Do you use protection with the soldiers?"

She blushes and pauses. "She says she takes the pills," explains our translator Ahmed. Does she know about AIDS? "No condoms?" I ask. She blushes even more deeply and answers directly in English. "Sometimes."

In the center of this sprawling war zone is a clean and air-conditioned oasis, the Coalition Provisional Authority headquarters. Situated in one of Saddam

Hussein's old palaces-a huge complex of high-modernist trophy architecture-the CPA is where L. Paul Bremer III and his army of freshly minted MBAs brainstorm on vital topics like competitive bidding and privatization. Somewhere else in this fortress sits the Coalition's hand-picked Interim Governing Council of Iraq.

Every afternoon at 3:00, the CPA's spin-doctors address the press in a large auditorium. In Vietnam style, we call these confabs "the follies." The ritual begins with a slew of statistics about the "good progress" being made. But the numbers are often mumbled like a Latin mass, and one begins to feel that the driving force here is faith, not reason or planning.

"In the last 24 hours, coalition forces have detained 149 individuals, conducted over 1,000 patrols and 20 raids." The pale and pudgy Col. Shields is presiding today. "We have confiscated 110 diesel-smuggling tanker trucks, and destroyed more than 20 IEDs [improvised explosive devices]. Coalition forces completed four civic action projects in the Basra area and. . ." On and on it goes until the colonel gets stuck on the word adjudicated.

"Several of these cases will be . . . edjuda-rated, that is educated, I mean . . ."

Ask Shields how many Iraqis have been killed by US troops and, despite his reams of stats, he doesn't know. How many women raped by gangs? No number. How many US soldiers committing suicide? Any troops busted for looting? Can't say.

Then from the auditorium-a loud snore followed by snickering laughter. The LA Times man, just in from Jordan, has passed out cold. He didn't nap last night during the dangerous 13-hour drive in and obviously the combination of Shield nattering on and the wonderful air-conditioning have had a powerful soporific effect.

Smoke is rising from Karrada Street, an electronics district popular with US troops. An American humvee has just pulled up on the median and been blown to pieces by a remote activated mine.

The sidewalks are packed with refrigerators and air conditioning boxes. In the street sit a military transport truck and another humvee, beyond that are remains of the burning humvee. A few US soldiers are crouched behind the truck.

There are two wounded GI's on the ground and now a medivac helicopter circles just overhead. But there's no way the chopper can land because of overhead wires. An on-and-off firefight ensues for the next two hours until Bradley Fighting Vehicles start pounding the targeted building with 25-millimeter cannon shells. Whoever was inside has either left out the back or they are now definitely dead.

Two Iraqi civilians lie dead and one or two are wounded. A cigarette stand has been knocked down, its packs of smokes strewn on the street. An Iraqi shopkeeper leans on a wall and sobs as his store goes up in flames.

The GIs next to us among the refrigerators seem neither scared nor brave, just weary and numb. They are no longer driving the situation but rather riding it. And from this vantage point, crouching among the smashed merchandise and empty shell casings, one can feel the war taking on its own momentum.

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