

How many more deaths before they leave Iraq?

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WHILE we reel from the number of unreasonable deaths perpetrated in southern Thailand, the world is as shocked by the number of unwarranted deaths of Iraqis.

According to figures released last week the number of deaths has increased almost 10-fold from the previously estimated 17,000. The largest death toll registered was in Falluja, accounting for two-thirds of the violent deaths in Iraq.

Some 100,000 Iraqi civilians have died since the illegal invasion, mostly as a result of air strikes by invading forces, according to what seems to be the first scientifically reliable study of the death toll from Iraqi and US public health experts.

Worse still, the study suggests that most of those killed were innocent women and children.

The researchers believe that lying about deaths is unlikely and, if anything, "it is possible that deaths were not reported" because families might have wanted to conceal them.

Pre-emptive strikes that promise a quick and focused action are still being carried out despite the Iraq war being declared "mission accomplished" months ago.

The authoritative medical journal *Lancet* published on its website the result of the study carried out in 33 randomly-chosen neighbourhoods of Iraq, representative of the entire population.

It shows that violence is now the leading cause of death in Iraq, in addition to those normally expected from natural causes, illness and accidents; compared with before the invasion where most people died of heart diseases and other chronic illnesses. The risk of violent death is now 58 times higher than it was before the invasion.

The overall risk of death was 1.5 times higher after the invasion than before.

The research led by Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore involved interviews with 988 households in mid-September. The Iraqis were asked about births and deaths in the 14.6 months before the March 2003 invasion, and in the 17.8 months afterwards.

They found infant mortality had increased from 29 to 57 deaths per 1,000 live births, which is consistent with the pattern in wars, and women unable or unwilling to get to hospital to deliver their babies.

The other increase was in violent deaths, which were reported in 15 of the 33 clusters studied and which were mostly attributed to air strikes by helicopter gunships, rockets or other forms of aerial weaponry. So much for precision bombing.

Indeed, the study specifically "demands a re-evaluation of the consequences of weaponry now used by coalition forces in populated areas".

The figures are, of course, nothing new because many such attacks on civilians — involving women, children, or family gatherings and weddings — have been well documented.

But the invaders described these as isolated incidents and got away with the murders just by issuing apologies and promises of investigation.

The study criticised the failure of the invading forces to attempt to assess for themselves the scale of civilian casualties, quoting a high-ranking officer that "we don't do body counts".

This relates only to the enemies, of course, and not the number of body bags that were sneaked into the US, which is also on the rise.

In the final analysis, whatever the numbers and no matter who, the urgent question that needs to be answered, of course, is, how many more thousands of Iraqis and Americans will have to die before the so-called quick and focused invasion can be called off.

Or equally important, how many deaths does it take before one is charged with being a war criminal?

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