

# Another reality—why don't we hear about what is happening in Iraq?

by John Pilger

*The article below first appeared in England in the weekly The New Statesman, on May 24. It is republished here with the kind permission of Mr. Pilger, whose research on sensitive issues, such as Anglo-American support for the Khmer Rouge, has brought down upon his head the fury of the intelligence establishment in his native country. Note what Mr. Pilger has to say on the threats made by the British government against the charity Oxfam, shortly before their team was to leave for Iraq in March.*

There is an epic shamelessness about the symmetry of current, imperial events. An honorary knighthood is hand delivered by the Queen to General Schwarzkopf while his victims, mostly young children, continue to die in their thousands in Iraq, in conditions described by the United Nations as "near apocalyptic."

Certainly, the general's most enduring achievements ought not to go unrecognized. On May 11, the former U.S. Attorney General, Ramsey Clark, set up an international commission of inquiry and war crimes tribunal, which will investigate what was really done in the Gulf, as opposed to the version represented by "the artifices of media images and the cant of politicians." Not surprisingly, the Ramsey Clark commission has been all but ignored by the media. As the evidence unfolds over the coming months, it may be difficult to ignore. Ramsey Clark distinguished himself as America's chief law officer under President Johnson. He is an authority on the prosecution of war crimes and believes the law is not as vague in that area as it is often presumed.

The Clark commission will concentrate on the body of international law codified in the 1977 Geneva Protocols additional to the Geneva Convention of Aug. 12, 1949, which expressly prohibits attacks on "objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, such as foodstuffs, agricultural areas . . . crops, livestock, drinking water installations and supplies and irrigation works." Article 56 states that "dams, dykes and nuclear electrical generating stations shall not be made the object of attack, even where these objects are military objectives, if such an attack may cause the release of dangerous forces and consequent severe losses among the civilian population. . . ."

In the announcement of its formation the commission noted that there is "abundant *prima facie* evidence to support

the allegation of war crimes . . . the U.S. Air Force between Jan. 16 and Feb. 27 carried out the most sophisticated and violent air assault in history against a virtually defenseless people. A deliberate policy of bombing civilians and civilian life-sustaining facilities has resulted in the destruction of the Iraqi economy and urban infrastructure." The evidence will draw on a range of sources, including the report of an investigating team commissioned by the U.N. secretary general which says that, due to the bombing, "Iraq has, for some time to come, been relegated to a pre-industrial age" and left in a "near apocalyptic state" with "even sewage treatment and purifying plants brought to a virtual standstill."

We have had only glimpses of this "near apocalyptic state," notably in the *NSS* and the *Guardian*. The suffering of the majority of the Iraqi people, like the true nature of the war, or "turkey shoot," has been suppressed. There has been only one indelible image of the war's horror: a photograph published in the *Observer* of an Iraqi petrified in death on the Basra road. According to the Clark commission, between 150,000 and 300,000 Iraqis were killed; yet we are left with just this one icon.

Why? Why have we not seen a single frame of film of the Iraqi trenches after they were cluster-bombed and napalmed? Why have we not seen the bulldozing of bodies into mass graves? This latter image is the one that those who prosecuted the war fear most.

They know it will evoke the memory of bodies bulldozed into pits in the Nazi concentration camps. Official film no doubt exists. Will it go the way of the official film of what was done to the people of Hiroshima? This record was hurriedly consigned to the Pentagon and classified "secret" for 23 years.

Were we now to view such horrors of the "famous victory," we might understand that the bodies in the pits were mostly Kurds and Shias, who were slaughtered not by Saddam Hussein as they scaled mountains, but by the "allies" as they tried to get away. We might understand that the Kurds have been a useful propaganda distraction for the U.S. and British governments, who killed most in the Gulf and with impunity. Witness John Major's "irritation" with and "blunt letter" to the U.N. about speeding up humanitarian aid to the Kurds. Thatcher's Sir Bernard would have been proud of that one. On May 4, the United Nations High Commission for

Refugees called Major's bluff by disclosing that the U.N. had been "starved" of funds for the Kurds and that the British government had given a derisory £95,000—compared with Germany's \$20 million. Britain has since modestly increased its share; and the Overseas Development Ministry has been instructed to concentrate on the "safe havens," to the detriment of the rest of Iraq.

"Do we even care," wrote Linda Schabedly, in the *Guardian* letters column, "about the other version of reality that exists beyond the artifices of media images and the cant of politicians?" It is a central question, to which the answer is that a great many people do care but are denied the "other version of reality," just as they were denied it during the war itself. Through the narrow focus of those supportive and protective of the state, the caring and the complex misgivings of the public are trivialized or silenced.

Maintaining this one version is essential to British policy in the region, with its sub-imperial posturing by a latter-day Lord Palmerston, who began his ministerial life at the Foreign Office by traveling to Baghdad as a "top-level salesman" of weapons to Saddam Hussein. Many people must now wonder if they can believe a government that cannot even tell the truth about the "friendly fire" deaths of nine British servicemen. Yet the Ministry of Defense used the "feelings of families" to justify much of its draconian censorship during the war. Where truth has emerged, it has come from those who are driven by humanitarian concerns, who assume no obligation to side with the state. This is especially true of certain voluntary aid organizations, like Oxfam.

Last week I wrote here about the Charity Commission's censuring of Oxfam as "too political." This has had the effect of gagging Oxfam on the human disaster in Iraq, now exacerbated by sanctions. Even before the Commission's report, Oxfam was threatened by the Department of Trade and Industry—together with other "exporting companies"—that "breaching sanctions is a serious offense" for which "the maximum penalty is up to seven years' imprisonment or an unlimited fine or both." The threat was repeated just before Oxfam's team left for Iraq in March.

It was immediately clear to the Oxfam team, on arrival in Iraq, that sanctions must be partially lifted if tens of thousands of people were to survive; contamination of water alone is decimating young children. With the Save the Children Fund, Oxfam reported that Baghdad had no uncontaminated running water, no refrigeration, no fuel, and no food processing. "The unavailability of powdered milk," says the report, "spells nutritional and health disaster for children . . . the spread of diseases such as cholera and typhoid in the present conditions is inevitable."

U.N. Resolution 661, passed on Aug. 6 last year, stated that the following items are exempt from sanctions: "supplies considered strictly for medical purposes and humanitarian food stuffs." As Dr. Eric Hoskins of the Gulf Peace Team has graphically pointed out, this resolution has been disre-

garded and "Iraqi civilians have been dying of starvation and disease in their thousands . . . because of lack of basic food and medicines . . . never before in history has a government been prohibited from purchasing and importing food and medicine for its own people."

What is clear is that the sanctions committee of the Security Council operates ineffectively, if at all; and that it is dominated by governments in no hurry to restore the framework of civilized life in Iraq. Oxfam believes sanctions at least should be eased; yet even though Oxfam has a mandate to inform and educate people about *causes*, perhaps for the first time the agency dares not speak out for fear of being labeled "political" and being ordered to reimburse large sums. The superb Oxfam book, *Punishing the Poor*, and other publications are "under review."

The Charity Commission's report is quite scandalous. Not only does it substantially rely, as I reported last week, on extremist lobby groups for much of its information—such as the American-funded, far right International Freedom Foundation—but a careful scrutiny of the language of the report raises other serious questions. For example, in the main body of the report there is this statement: "Some of the evidence to the enquiry indicates that grants have been made [by Oxfam] to clearly non-charitable bodies, including partisan political groups or for non-charitable purposes. Other evidence appears to indicate that Oxfam takes sides in political controversies within foreign countries."

Now compare those highly qualified words with this indictment by David Forrest, secretary to the Commission, in a letter to Mary Cherry, chair of Oxfam's Trust, which was released alongside the report. "Some of the evidence to the enquiry," wrote Forrest, "shows that grants have been made and other evidence makes it clear that Oxfam has taken sides in political controversies." Where are his certainties borne out in the report itself? Yet this is the spirit of a punitive indictment leveled against an organization with an impeccable record.

Oxfam has been denied natural justice. It has not seen or had the opportunity to comment on any of the commission's "evidence"; yet the organization, and by implication its work, stands condemned for it. Also, while much of the evidence is the result of a letter-writing campaign by special interest groups, Oxfam is unable to rally its millions of supporters among the public for support. That, of course, would be "too political."

So I am hereby launching such an appeal. I urge readers to write—not to me—but to the Secretary, the Charity Commission, St. Alban's House, 57-60 Haymarket, London SW1, or telephone him on 071 210 4420. Ask for the evidence and sources of the accusations against Oxfam, and do not be fobbed off. I also suggest that readers write to their MPs, and to John Major and Neil Kinnock. Oxfam needs to help of those from whom it draws its strength, just as the discarded people of Iraq urgently need Oxfam's skills and voice.