

Killed by missiles from an American jet

'It was an outrage, an obscenity'

It was an outrage, an obscenity. The severed hand on the metal door, the swamp of blood and mud across the road, the human brains inside a garage, the incinerated, skeletal remains of an Iraqi mother and her three small children in their still-smouldering car. Two missiles from an American jet killed them all – by my estimate, more than 20 Iraqi civilians, torn to pieces before they could be ‘liberated’ by the nation that destroyed their lives. Who dares, I ask myself, to call this ‘collateral damage’? Abu Taleb Street was packed with pedestrians and motorists when the American pilot approached through the dense sandstorm that covered northern Baghdad in a cloak of red and yellow dust and rain yesterday morning.

It’s a dirt-poor neighbourhood, of mostly Shia Muslims, the same people whom Messrs Bush and Blair still fondly hope will rise up against President Saddam Hussein, a place of oil-sodden car-repair shops, overcrowded apartments and cheap cafés. Everyone I spoke to heard the plane. One man, so shocked by the headless corpses he had just seen, could say only two words. “Roar, flash,” he kept saying and then closed his eyes so tight that the muscles rippled between them.

How should one record so terrible an event? Perhaps a medical report would be more appropriate. But the final death toll is expected to be near to 30 and Iraqis are now witnessing these awful things each day; so there is no reason why the truth, all the truth, of what they see should not be told.

For another question occurred to me as I walked through this place of massacre yesterday. If this is what we are seeing in Baghdad, what is happening in Basra and Nasiriyah and Kerbala? How many civilians are dying there too, anonymously, indeed unrecorded, because there are no reporters to be witness to their suffering?

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Abu Hassan and Malek Hammoud were preparing lunch for customers at the Nasser restaurant on the north side of Abu Taleb Street. The missile that killed them landed next to the westbound carriageway, its blast tearing away the front of the café and cutting the two men – the first 48, the second only 18 – to pieces. A fellow worker led me through the rubble. “This is all that is left of them now,” he said, holding out before me an oven pan dripping with blood.

At least 15 cars burst into flames, burning many of their occupants to death. Several men tore desperately at the doors of another flame-shrouded car in the centre of the street that had been flipped upside down by the same missile. They were forced to watch helplessly as the woman and her three children inside were cremated alive in front of them. The second missile hit neatly on the eastbound carriageway, sending shards of metal into three men standing outside a concrete apartment block with the words, “This is God’s possession” written in marble on the outside wall.

The building’s manager, Hishem Danoon, ran to the doorway as soon as he heard the massive explosion. “I found Ta’ar in pieces over there,” he told me. His head was blown off. “That’s his hand.” A group of young men and a woman took me into the street and there, a scene from any horror film, was Ta’ar’s hand, cut off at the wrist, his four fingers and thumb grasping a piece of iron roofing. His young colleague, Sermed, died the same instant. His brains lay piled a few feet away, a pale red and grey mess behind a burnt car. Both men worked for Danoon. So did a doorman who was also killed.

As each survivor talked, the dead regained their identities. There was the electrical shop-owner killed behind his counter by the same missile that cut down Ta’ar and Sermed and the doorman, and the young girl standing on the central reservation, trying to cross the road, and the truck driver who was only feet from the point of impact and the beggar who regularly called to see Mr Danoon for bread and who was just leaving when the missiles came screaming through the sandstorm to destroy him.

In Qatar, the Anglo-American forces – let’s forget this nonsense about “coalition” – announced an inquiry. The Iraqi government, who are the only ones to benefit from the propaganda value of such a bloodbath, naturally denounced the slaughter, which they initially put at 14 dead. So what was the real target? Some Iraqis said there was a military encampment less than a mile from the street, though I couldn’t find it. Others talked about a local fire brigade headquarters, but the fire brigade can hardly be described as a military target.

Certainly, there had been an attack less than an hour earlier on a military camp further north. I was driving past the base when two rockets exploded and I saw Iraqi soldiers running for their lives out of the gates and along the side of the highway. Then I heard two more explosions; these were the missiles that hit Abu Taleb Street.

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Of course, the pilot who killed the innocent yesterday could not see his victims. Pilots fire through computer-aligned co-ordinates, and the sandstorm would have hidden the street from his vision. But when one of Malek Hammoud's friends asked me how the Americans could so blithely kill those they claimed to want to liberate, he didn't want to learn about the science of avionics or weapons delivery systems.

And why should he? For this is happening almost every day in Baghdad. Three days ago, an entire family of nine was wiped out in their home near the centre of the city. A busload of civilian passengers were reportedly killed on a road south of Baghdad two days ago. Only yesterday were Iraqis learning the identity of five civilian passengers slaughtered on a Syrian bus that was attacked by American aircraft close to the Iraqi border at the weekend.

The truth is that nowhere is safe in Baghdad, and as the Americans and British close their siege in the next few days or hours, that simple message will become ever more real and ever more bloody.

We may put on the hairshirt of morality in explaining why these people should die. They died because of 11 September, we may say, because of President Saddam's "weapons of mass destruction", because of human rights abuses, because of our desperate desire to "liberate" them all. Let us not confuse the issue with oil. Either way, I'll bet we are told President Saddam is ultimately responsible for their deaths. We shan't mention the pilot, of course. ♦