

Blood and bandages for the innocent

Bomb fragments reveal their own story

The piece of metal is only a foot high, but the numbers on it hold the clue to the latest atrocity in Baghdad. At least 62 civilians had died by yesterday afternoon, and the coding on that hunk of metal contains the identity of the culprit. The Americans and British were doing their best yesterday to suggest that an Iraqi anti-aircraft missile destroyed those dozens of lives, adding that they were “still investigating” the carnage. But the coding is in Western style, not in Arabic. And many of the survivors heard the plane.

In the Al-Noor hospital yesterday morning, there were appalling scenes of pain and suffering. A two-year-old girl, Saida Jaffar, swaddled in bandages, a tube into her nose, another into her stomach. All I could see of her was her forehead, two small eyes and a chin. Beside her, blood and flies covered a heap of old bandages and swabs. Not far away, lying on a dirty bed, was three-year-old Mohamed Amaid, his face, stomach, hands and feet all tied tightly in bandages. A great black mass of congealed blood lay at the bottom of his bed.

This is a hospital without computers, with only the most primitive of X-ray machines. But the missile was guided by computers and that vital shard of fuselage was computer-coded. It can be easily verified and checked by the Americans – if they choose to do so. It reads: 30003-704ASB 7492. The letter “B” is scratched and could be an “H”. This is believed to be the serial number. It is followed by a further code which arms manufacturers usually refer to as the weapon’s “Lot” number. It reads: MFR 96214 09.

The piece of metal bearing the codings was retrieved only minutes after the missile exploded on Friday evening, by an old man whose home is only 100 yards from the 6ft

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crater. Even the Iraqi authorities do not know that it exists. The missile sprayed hunks of metal through the crowds – mainly women and children – and through the cheap brick walls of local homes, amputating limbs and heads. Three brothers, the eldest 21 and the youngest 12, for example, were cut down inside the living room of their brick hut on the main road opposite the market. Two doors away, two sisters were killed in an identical manner. “We have never seen anything like these wounds before,” Dr Ahmed, an anaesthetist at the Al-Noor hospital told me later. “These people have been punctured by dozens of bits of metal.” He was right. One old man I visited in a hospital ward had 24 holes in the back of his legs and buttocks, some as big as pound coins. An X-ray photograph handed to me by one of his doctors clearly showed at least 35 slivers of metal still embedded in his body

Like the Sha’ab highway massacre on Thursday – when at least 21 Iraqi civilians were killed or burned to death by two missiles fired by an American jet – Shu’ale is a poor, Shia Muslim neighbourhood of single-storey corrugated iron and cement food stores and two-room brick homes. These are the very people whom Messrs Bush and Blair expected to rise in insurrection against Saddam. But the anger in the slums was directed at the Americans and British yesterday, by old women and bereaved fathers and brothers who spoke without hesitation – and without the presence of the otherwise ubiquitous government “mindere”.

“This is a crime,” a woman muttered at me angrily. “Yes, I know they say they are targeting the military. But can you see soldiers here? Can you see missiles?” The answer has to be in the negative. A few journalists did report seeing a Scud missile on a transporter near the Sha’ab area on Thursday and there were anti-aircraft guns around Shu’ale. At one point yesterday morning, I heard an American jet race over the scene of the massacre and just caught sight of a ground-to-air missile that was vainly chasing it, its contrail soaring over the slum houses in the dark blue sky. An anti-aircraft battery – manufactured circa 1942 – also began firing into the air a few blocks away. But even if the Iraqis do position or move their munitions close to the suburbs, does that justify the Americans firing into those packed civilian neighbourhoods, into areas which they know contain crowded main roads and markets – and during the hours of daylight?

Last week’s attack on the Sha’ab highway was carried out on a main road at midday during a sandstorm – when dozens of civilians are bound to be killed, whatever the pilot thought he was aiming at. “I had five sons and now I have only two – and how do I know that even they will survive?” a bespectacled middle-aged man said in the bare concrete back room of his home yesterday. “One of my boys was hit in the kidneys and heart. His chest was full of shrapnel; it came right through the windows. Now all I can

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say is that I am sad that I am alive.” A neighbour interrupted to say that he saw the plane with his own eyes. “I saw the side of the aircraft and I noticed it changed course after it fired the missile.”

Plane-spotting has become an all-embracing part of life in Baghdad. And to the reader who thoughtfully asked last week if I could see with my own eyes the American aircraft over the city, I have to say that in at least 65 raids by aircraft, I have not – despite my tiger-like eyes – actually seen one plane. I hear them, especially at night, but they are flying at supersonic speed; during the day, they are usually above the clouds of black smoke that wash over the city. I have, just once, spotted a cruise missile – the cruise or Tomahawk rockets fly at only around 400mph – and I saw it passing down a boulevard towards the Tigris river. But the grey smoke that shoots out of the city like the fingers of a dead hand is unmistakable, along with the concussion of sound. And – when they can be found – the computer codings on the bomb fragments reveal their own story. As the codes on the Shu’ale missile surely must.

All morning yesterday, the Americans were at it again, blasting away at targets on the perimeter of Baghdad – where the outer defences of the city are being dug by Iraqi troops – and in the centre. An air-fired rocket exploded on the roof of the Iraqi Ministry of Information, destroying a clutch of satellite dishes. One office building from which I was watching the bombardment literally swayed for several seconds during one long raid. Even in the Al-Noor hospital, the walls were shaking yesterday as the survivors of the market slaughter struggled for survival.

Hussein Mnati is 52 and just stared at me – his face pitted with metal fragments – as bombs blasted the city. A 20-year-old man was sitting up in the next bed, the blood-soaked stump of his left arm plastered over with bandages. Only 12 hours ago, he had a left arm, a left hand, fingers. Now he blankly recorded his memories. “I was in the market and I didn’t feel anything,” he told me. “The rocket came and I was to the right of it and then an ambulance took me to hospital.”

Whether or not his amputation was dulled by painkillers, he wanted to talk. When I asked him his name, he sat upright in bed and shouted at me: “My name is Saddam Hussein Jassem.” ◆