

Raw realities expose the truth about Basra

'It was an outrage, an obscenity'

Two British soldiers lie dead on a Basra roadway, a small Iraqi girl – victim of an Anglo American air strike – is brought to hospital with her intestines spilling out of her stomach, a terribly wounded woman screams in agony as doctors try to take off her black dress. An Iraqi general, surrounded by hundreds of his armed troops, stands in central Basra and announces that Iraq's second city remains firmly in Iraqi hands. The unedited al-Jazeera videotape – filmed over the past 36 hours and newly arrived in Baghdad – is raw, painful, devastating.

It is also proof that Basra – reportedly “captured” and “secured” by British troops last week – is indeed under the control of Saddam Hussein's forces. Despite claims by British officers that some form of uprising has broken out in Basra, cars and buses continue to move through the streets while Iraqis queue patiently for gas bottles as they are unloaded from a government truck.

A remarkable part of the tape shows fireballs blooming over western Basra and the explosion of incoming – and presumably British – shells. The short sequence of the dead British soldiers – over which Tony Blair voiced such horror yesterday – is little different from dozens of similar clips of dead Iraqi soldiers shown on British television over the past 12 years, pictures which never drew any condemnation from the Prime Minister.

The two Britons, still in uniform, are lying on a roadway, arms and legs apart, one of them apparently hit in the head, the other shot in the chest and abdomen.

Another sequence from the same tape shows crowds of Basra civilians and armed men in civilian clothes, kicking the soldiers' British Army Jeep and dancing on top of

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the vehicle. Other men can be seen kicking the overturned Ministry of Defence trailer, which the Jeep was towing when it was presumably ambushed.

Also to be observed on the unedited tape – which was driven up to Baghdad on the open road from Basra – is a British pilotless drone photo-reconnaissance aircraft, its red and blue roundels visible on one wing, shot down and lying overturned on a roadway. Marked “ARMY” in capital letters, it carries the code sign ZJ300 on its tail and is attached to a large cylindrical pod which probably contains the plane’s camera.

Far more terrible than the pictures of dead British soldiers, however, is the tape from Basra’s largest hospital that shows victims of the Anglo-American bombardment being brought to the operating rooms shrieking in pain.

A middle-aged man is carried into the hospital in pyjamas, soaked head to foot in blood. A little girl of perhaps four is brought into the operating room on a trolley, staring at a heap of her own intestines protruding from the left side of her stomach. A blue-uniformed doctor pours water over the little girl’s guts and then gently applies a bandage before beginning surgery. A woman in black with what appears to be a stomach wound cries out as doctors try to strip her for surgery. In another sequence, a trail of blood leads from the impact of an incoming – presumably British – shell. Next to the crater is a pair of plastic slippers.

The al-Jazeera tapes, most of which have never been seen, are the first vivid proof that Basra remains totally outside British control. Not only is one of the city’s main roads to Baghdad still open – this is how the three main tapes reached the Iraqi capital – but General Khaled Hatem is interviewed in a Basra street, surrounded by hundreds of his uniformed and armed troops, and telling al-Jazeera’s reporter that his men will “never” surrender to Iraq’s enemies. Armed Baath Party militiamen can also be seen in the streets, where traffic cops are directing lorries and buses near the city’s Sheraton Hotel.

Mohamed al-Abdullah, al-Jazeera’s correspondent in Basra, must be the bravest journalist in Iraq right now. In the sequence of three tapes, he can be seen conducting interviews with families under fire and calmly reporting the incoming British artillery bombardment. One tape shows that the Sheraton Hotel on the banks of Shatt al-Arab river has sustained shell damage.

On the edge of the river – beside one of the huge statues of Iraq’s 1980-88 war martyrs, each pointing an accusing finger across the waterway towards Iran – Basra residents can be seen filling jerry cans from the sewage-polluted river.

Five days ago the Iraqi government said 30 civilians had been killed in Basra and another 63 wounded. Yesterday, it claimed that more than 4,000 civilians had been wounded in Iraq since the war began and more than 350 killed.

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But Mr Abdullah's tape shows at least seven more bodies brought to the Basra hospital mortuary over the past 36 hours. One, his head still pouring blood on to the mortuary floor, was identified as an Arab correspondent for a Western news agency.

Other harrowing scenes show the partially decapitated body of a little girl, her red scarf still wound round her neck. Another small girl was lying on a stretcher with her brain and left ear missing. Another dead child had its feet blown away. There was no indication whether American or British ordnance had killed these children. The tapes give no indication of Iraqi military casualties.

But at a time when the Iraqi authorities will not allow Western reporters to visit Basra, this is the nearest to independent evidence we have of continued resistance in the city and the failure of the British to capture it. For days the Iraqi have been denying optimistic reports from "embedded" reporters – especially on the BBC – who gave the impression that Basra was "secured" or otherwise in effect under British control. This the tape conclusively proves to be untrue.

There is also a sequence showing two men, both black, who are claimed by Iraqi troops to be US prisoners of war. No questions are asked of the men, who are dressed in identical black shirts and jackets. Both appear nervous and gaze at the camera crew and Iraqi troops crowded behind them.

Of course, it is still possible that some small-scale opposition to the Iraqi regime broke out in the city over the past few days, as British officers have claimed. But, seeing the tapes, it is hard to imagine that it amounted, if it existed at all, to anything more than a brief gun battle.

The unedited reports therefore provide damaging proof that Anglo-American spokesmen have not been telling the truth about the battle for Basra. And in the end this is far more devastating to the invading armies than the sight of two dead British soldiers or – since Iraqi lives are as sacred as British lives – than the pictures of dead Iraqi children. ♦