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Iraq's Shocking Human Toll: About 1 Million Killed, 4.5 Million Displaced, 1-2 Million Widows, 5 Million Orphans

By John Tirman, *The Nation*. Posted February 2, 2009.

We are now able to estimate the number of Iraqis who have died in the war instigated by the Bush administration. Looking at the empirical evidence of Bush's war legacy will put his claims of victory in perspective. Of course, even by his standards -- "stability" -- the jury is out. Most independent analysts would say it's too soon to judge the political outcome. Nearly six years after the invasion, the country remains driven by sectarian politics and major unresolved issues, like the status of Kirkuk.

We have a better grasp of the human costs of the war. For example, the United Nations estimates that there are about 4.5 million displaced Iraqis -- more than half of them refugees - - or about one in every six citizens. Only 5 percent have chosen to return to their homes over the past year, a period of reduced violence from the high levels of 2005-07. The availability of healthcare, clean water, functioning schools, jobs and so forth remains elusive. According to Unicef, many provinces report that less than 40 percent of households have access to clean water. More than 40 percent of children in Basra, and more than 70 percent in Baghdad, cannot attend school.

The mortality caused by the war is also high. Several household surveys were conducted between 2004 and 2007. While there are differences among them, the range suggests a congruence of estimates. But none has been conducted for eighteen months, and the two most reliable surveys were completed in mid-2006. The higher of those found 650,000 "excess deaths" (mortality attributable to war); the other yielded 400,000. The war remained ferocious for twelve to fifteen months after those surveys were finished and then began to subside. Iraq Body Count, a London NGO that uses English-language press reports from Iraq to count civilian deaths, provides a means to update the 2006 estimates. While it is known to be an undercount, because press reports are incomplete and Baghdad-centric, IBC nonetheless

provides useful trends, which are striking. Its estimates are nearing 100,000, more than double its June 2006 figure of 45,000. (It does not count nonviolent excess deaths -- from health emergencies, for example -- or insurgent deaths.) If this is an acceptable marker, a plausible estimate of total deaths can be calculated by doubling the totals of the 2006 household surveys, which used a much more reliable and sophisticated method for estimates that draws on long experience in epidemiology. So we have, at present, between 800,000 and 1.3 million "excess deaths" as we approach the six-year anniversary of this war.

This gruesome figure makes sense when reading of claims by Iraqi officials that there are 1-2 million war widows and 5 million orphans. This constitutes direct empirical evidence of total excess mortality and indirect, though confirming, evidence of the displaced and the bereaved and of general insecurity. The overall figures are stunning: 4.5 million displaced, 1-2 million widows, 5 million orphans, about 1 million dead -- in one way or another, affecting nearly one in two Iraqis.

By any sensible measure, it would be difficult to describe this as a victory of any kind. It speaks volumes about the repair work we must do for Iraqis, and it should caution us against the savage wars we are prone to. Now that Bush is gone, perhaps the United States can honestly face the damage we have wrought and the responsibilities we must accept from it.