

A young Iraqi doctor testifies on the horror in Iraq

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"There were only local anaesthetics available to amputate limbs"

What's a young Iraqi physician doing in snowy Brussels on a chilly November night? Dr. Salam Ismael is in Europe to testify about the human rights violations committed against his people in Iraq. Iraq, the country in our history books defined as the "cradle of civilization;" a country that every Iraqi is proud of. Medical Aid for the Third World[i][i], the Belgian NGO that sent four physicians into the bombed-out hell of Baghdad in 2003, has brought him to Brussels for a few days to share his experiences. I had the opportunity to talk with him before he presented his uncensored photo and film material in a conference room of Intal[ii][ii].

Twenty-nine years ago, Salam (whose name means "peace") was born in the Al-Adhamya district of Baghdad to a Shia mother and a Sunni father, so the idea of a civil war — Sunni against Shia — is, understandably, alien to him. After finishing his secondary schooling he went to the Medical School of Baghdad, and, as a young doctor, had just started his first year of specialization in orthopaedic surgery, when the United States attacked his country in March 2003. Dr. Salam chose to cease his studies and leave his position as chief of junior doctors in Baghdad, to volunteer his services in the heaviest hit areas of the country. In October 2003, together with a few other junior doctors, he founded Doctors for Iraq, and since that time has undertaken missions to the most remote and besieged areas and refugee camps to bring aid to the victims.

You were in Fallujah during the first siege in April 2004. Can you tell me something about what you witnessed there?

The day prior to the siege of Fallujah I had a day off. I was home alone and Al-Jazeera transmitted images of the first bombings. Together with a few other doctors I decided to go to Fallujah. I left a note for my family explaining where I was and that I hoped to see them again when I returned. When we arrived at Fallujah the bombings had started and we entered the city through the desert, as all the roads were blocked. Fallujah lies along the Euphrates and to get to the hospital one has to traverse a bridge across the river. It was impossible to reach the hospital, since American troops had closed the bridge. We turned back to town and established a field clinic.

During our stay in Fallujah, American snipers controlled a part of the city, which we called the 'ghost area'. Everything that moved became a target and even ambulances weren't spared. An ambulance was hit by a missile right before our eyes and completely burned out. This incident was reported by BBC news.[iii][iii] I was wounded in the chest by shrapnel

during this attack.

The first siege of Fallujah was carried out under a frequently applied tactic called the 'general punishment rule'. When American troops get attacked near a city or village they besiege it. They impose a curfew, which makes it rather impossible for residents to get food supplies. Electricity and water are cut off. This situation persists for days or weeks; families are trapped in their homes. Then, during house raids, numerous people get arrested without any charge.

The 9th of April became known as 'cluster bomb night'. US troops tried to capture the Julian district and used cluster bombs, which cause extremely severe injuries. We treated numerous victims and we had to divide our limited amount of anaesthetics among them. There were only local anaesthetics available to amputate limbs and the doctors had to stitch the wounds with ordinary needles and sewing thread.

After a few days we ran out of food and had to survive on juice, cookies and sugar. There wasn't a living soul in the streets and ambulances were constantly targeted. When the siege finally came to an end, the first convoy entered the city. Young men arrived in trucks with food supplies and a banner displaying the words "Gift from Sadr City". Sadr City is a poor Shia neighbourhood in Baghdad and Fallujah has a mainly Sunni population. In Iraq there is a great solidarity among the people and the so-called looming civil war is nothing but a fabrication to divide the country.

Half a year later Fallujah was besieged again. What happened then?

The second siege of Fallujah was much worse. When we tried to transport the dead bodies out of the city, we discovered that the American army had made use of illegal weapons.

Is there any evidence of that?

I'm convinced that the testimony of eyewitnesses, scientific facts and an international investigation will provide the evidence. Napalm is an inflammable, sticky gel that burns at 300-350°C (572-662°F), causing fourth degree burnings. The American troops used napalm combined with white phosphorous, which makes the temperature increase up to 3000°C (5432°F). The chemicals react with the water in human cells. Clothes stay intact, but the affected skin burns to the bone. Since these chemicals react with water, the effect worsens when you pour water on it. The only means to stop the burning is by smothering it with mud.

During the three or four days following the attacks, aid workers couldn't get access to the city. When they were finally allowed to enter, they found that in some districts whole streets and compounds had been bulldozed. You need to understand that the remains of white phosphorous and napalm only stay on the ground for 48-72 hours. After that period you can't find any useful samples for analysing purposes. On human bodies the effects of these weapons will remain visible for a longer time. We also found bodies of civilians that were obviously not killed in a fighting position. Some of them were lying in their beds when they died and didn't show external injuries, which also indicates the use of chemical weapons.

Even absent the use of chemical weapons, crimes against humanity occurred. According to the Geneva Conventions it is forbidden to deny life necessities to the people. This is, as a matter of fact, a much more severe violation of human rights than is the use of phosphorous

and napalm.

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