

World Tribunal on Iraq: Testimony of Dahr Jamail

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Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#)

In-depth Report: [IRAQ REPORT](#)

Thank you very much for inviting me to the Culminating Session of the World Tribunal on Iraq. I first went to Iraq in November of 2003 as an American citizen both frustrated and horrified by what my unelected government was doing. I went to report on the situation because I was deeply troubled by the “journalism” being provided by the corporate media. At the time, as a frustrated mountain climber from Alaska working as a journalist in Iraq, I never would have believed I would be providing testimony to the World Tribunal on Iraq. I want to thank the organizers for this opportunity. I am honored to be here in solidarity with the Iraqi people.

In May of 2004 I interviewed a man who had just been released from Abu Ghraib. Like so many I interviewed from various US military detention facilities who’d been tortured horrifically, he still managed to maintain his sense of humor.

He began laughing when telling me how CIA agents made him beat other prisoners. He laughed, he said, because he had been beaten himself prior to this, and was so tired that all he could do to beat other detained Iraqis was lift his arm and let it drop on the other men.

Later, he laughed again as he told me what else had been done to him, when he said, “The Americans brought electricity to my ass before they brought it to my house.”

But this testimony is not about the indomitable spirit of the Iraqi people. About the dignity and strength of Iraqis, we need no testimony. This testimony is about ongoing violations of international law being committed by the occupiers of Iraq on a daily basis in regards to rampant torture, the neglect and obstruction of the health care sector and the ongoing failure to allow Iraqis to reconstruct their infrastructure.

To discuss torture, there are many stories I could use here, but I’ll use two examples indicative of scores of others I documented while in Iraq.

Ali Abbas lives in the Al-Amiriyah district of Baghdad and worked in civil administration. So many of his neighbors were detained that friends urged him to go to the nearby US base to try and get answers for why so many innocent people were being detained. He went three times.

On the fourth he was detained himself. Within two days he was transferred from the military base to Abu Ghraib, where he was held over three months without charges before being released.

“The minute I got there, the suffering began,” said Abbas about his interrogator, “I asked him for water, and he said after the investigation I would get some. He accused me of so many things and asked me so many questions. Among them he said I hated Christians.”

He was forced to strip naked shortly after arriving, and remained that way for most of his stay in the prison. "They made us lay on top of each other naked as if it was sex, and beat us with a broom," he said. In addition to being beaten on their genitals, detainees were also denied water and food for extended periods of time, then were forced to watch as their food was thrown in the trash.

Treatment also included having a loaded gun held to his head to prevent him from crying out in pain as his hand-ties were tightened.

"My hands were enlarged because there was no blood because they cuffed them so tight," he told me, "My head was covered with the sack, and they fastened my right hand to a pole with handcuffs. They made me stand on my toes to clip me to it."

Abbas said soldiers doused him in cold water while holding him under a fan, and oftentimes, "They put on a loudspeaker, put the speakers on my ears and said, "Shut Up, Fuck Fuck Fuck!" In this manner Abbas's interrogators routinely deprived him of sleep.

Abbas said that at one point, "Two men came, one a foreigner and one a translator. He asked me who I was. I said I'm a human being. They told me, 'We are going to cut your head off and send you to hell. We will take you to Guantánamo.'"

A female soldier told him, "Our aim is to put you in hell so you will tell the truth. These are the orders we have from our superiors, to turn your lives into hell."

Abbas added, "They shit on us, used dogs against us, used electricity and starved us."

He told me, "Saddam Hussein used to have people like those who tortured us. Why do they put Saddam into trial, but they do not put the Americans to trial?"

But unlike Saddam Hussein, the US interrogators also desecrated Islam as part of their humiliation.

Abbas was made to fast during the first day of Eid, the breaking of the fast of Ramadan, which is haram (forbidden).

Sometimes at night when he would read his Koran, Abbas had to hold it in the hallway for light. "Soldiers would walk by and kick the Holy Koran, and sometimes they would try to piss on it or wipe shit on it," he said.

Abbas did not feel this was the work of a few individual soldiers. "This was organized, it wasn't just individuals, and every one of the troops in Abu Ghraib was responsible for it."

Accounts by human rights groups support this. According to an April 2005 Human Rights Watch report, "Abu Ghraib was only the tip of the iceberg, it's now clear that abuse of detainees has happened all over – from Afghanistan to Guantánamo Bay to a lot of third-country dungeons where the United States has sent prisoners. And probably quite a few other places we don't even know about."

The report adds, "Harsh and coercive interrogation techniques such as subjecting detainees to painful stress positions and extended sleep deprivation have been routinely used in detention centers throughout Iraq. An ICRC report concluded that in military intelligence sections of Abu Ghraib, 'methods of physical and psychological coercion used by

the interrogators appeared to be part of the standard operating procedures by military intelligence personnel to obtain confessions and extract information.”

Amnesty International has also released similar findings.

Other human rights groups report that US military doctors, nurses, and medics have been complicit in torture and other illegal procedures such as those administered to Sadiq Zoman.

55 year-old Zoman, detained from his home in Kirkuk in a raid by US soldiers that produced no weapons, was taken to a police office in Kirkuk, to the Kirkuk Airport Detention Center, the Tikrit Airport Detention Center and finally to the 28th Combat Support Hospital, where he was treated by Dr. Michael Hodges, a Lt. Col.

Lt. Col. Hodges’ medical report listed Zoman’s primary condition as hypoxic brain injury (brain damage caused by lack of oxygen) “with persistent vegetative state,” myocardial infarction (heart attack), and heat stroke.”

After one month in custody, Zoman was dropped off in a coma at the General Hospital in Tikrit by US soldiers. Zoman’s last name was listed as his first name on the report, despite the fact that all of his identification papers were taken during the raid on his home. Because of this, it took his desperate family weeks to locate him in the hospital.

Hodges’s medical report did not mention the fact that the back of Zomans’ head was bashed in, nor that he had electrical burn marks on the bottoms of his feet and genitals, or why he had lash marks across his back and chest.

Today he lies in bed still in a coma, and there has been no compensation provided to his now impoverished family for what was done to Sadiq Zoman.

Another aspect I shall discuss is the catastrophic situation of the health system in Iraq. I’ve recently released a report on the condition of Iraq’s hospitals under occupation.

Although the Iraq Ministry of Health has supposedly gained its sovereignty and received promises of over \$1 Billion of US funding, hospitals in Iraq continue to face ongoing medicine, equipment, and staffing shortages under the US-led occupation.

During the 1990’s, medical supplies and equipment were constantly in short supply because of the sanctions against Iraq. The war and occupation brought promises of relief from effects of the sanctions, yet hospitals have had little chance to recover and re-supply: instead, the occupation has closely resembled a low-grade war since its inception. In addition, allocation of resources by occupation authorities has been dismal. Thus, throughout Baghdad there are ongoing shortages of functional equipment and medicines of even the most basic items such as analgesics, antibiotics, anesthetics and insulin. Surgical items and even basic supplies like rubber gloves, gauze and medical tape are running out.

In April 2004, an ICRC report stated that hospitals in Iraq are overwhelmed with new patients, short of medicine and supplies and lack both adequate electricity and water, with ongoing bloodshed stretching the hospitals’ already meager resources to the limit.

Ample testimony from medical practitioners confirms this crisis. A general practitioner at the prosthetics workshop at Al-Kena Hospital in Baghdad, Dr. Thamiz Aziz Abul Rahman,

said, "Eleven months ago we submitted an emergency order for prosthetic materials to the Ministry of Health, and still we have nothing." After a pause he added, "This is worse than even during the sanctions."

Dr. Qasim al-Nuwesri, the chief manager at Chuwader General Hospital, one of the two hospitals in the sprawling slum area of Sadr City, Baghdad and home to 3 million people, added that they, too, faced a shortage of most supplies and, most critically, of ambulances. But for his hospital, the lack of potable water was the major problem. "Of course we have typhoid, cholera, kidney stones...but we now even have the very rare Hepatitis Type-E...and it has become common in our area," said al-Nuwesri, adding that they never faced these problems prior to the invasion of 2003.

Chuwader hospital needs at least 2000 liters of water per day to function with basic sterilization practices. According to Dr. al-Nuwesri, they received 15% of this amount. "The rest of the water is contaminated and causing problems, as are the electricity cuts," added al-Nuwesri, "Without electricity our instruments in the operating room cannot work and we have no pumps to bring us water."

At Fallujah General Hospital, Dr. Ahmed, who asked that only his first name be used because he feared US military reprisals said of the April 2004 siege that "the Americans shot out the lights in the front of our hospital. They prevented doctors from reaching the emergency unit at the hospital, and we quickly began to run out of supplies and much needed medications." He also said that Marines kept the physicians in the residence building several times, intentionally prohibiting them from entering the hospital in order to treat patients.

In November, shortly after leveling Nazzal Emergency Hospital, US forces entered Fallujah General Hospital, the city's only healthcare facility for trauma victims, detaining employees and patients alike. According to medics on the scene, water and electricity were "cut off," ambulances targeted or confiscated by the US military, and surgeons, without exception, kept out of the besieged city.

Hospital raids by US military and US-backed Iraqi forces now appear to be standard operating procedure. On the 18th of this month, doctors at the main hospital in Baquba went on strike, saying they are fed up with constant abuse at the hands of aggressive Iraqi police and soldiers.

Dr. Mohammed Hazim in Baquba, pleaded for his governor to protect he and his colleagues from "organized terrorism of the police and army."

When wounded Iraqi security forces showed up demanding treatment, Dr. Hussein told one of them he would require an x-ray. The doctor was told to go to hell by the policeman he was treating and was then beaten. The same policeman then ordered another police officer to put a bag over the doctor's head and take him away.

"Our security guards tried to stop them, telling them I was a doctor, but they didn't listen and beat the security guards too," he said, "Then one of them put a gun to my head and threatened me."

Similar behavior has been reported during the recent US-Iraqi military operations in Haditha and Al-Qa'im. Doctors also recently went on strike at the large Yarmouk Hospital in

Baghdad in a very similar incident.

Many doctors in Iraq believe that the lack of assistance, if not outright hostility, by the US military, coupled with the lack of rebuilding and reconstruction by foreign contractors has compounded the problems they are facing.

The former ambassador of Iraq Paul Bremer admitted that US led coalition spending on the Iraqi Health system was inadequate when he said, "It's not nearly enough to cover the needs in the healthcare field."

When asked if his hospital had received assistance from the US military or reconstruction contractors, Dr. Sarmad Raheem, the administrator of chief doctors at Al-Kerkh Hospital in Baghdad said, "Never ever. Some soldiers came here five months ago and asked what we needed. We told them and they never brought us one single needle...We heard that some people from the CPA came here, but they never did anything for us."

At Fallujah General Hospital, Dr. Mohammed said there has been virtually no assistance from foreign contractors, and of the US military he commented, "They send only bombs, not medicine."

International aid has been stymied by the horrendous security situation in Iraq. After the UN headquarters was bombed in Baghdad in August 2003, killing 20 people, aid agencies and NGOs either reduced their staffing or pulled out entirely.

With senior Iraqi doctors fleeing Iraq en masse for fear of being kidnapped, interns and younger doctors are left to deal with the catastrophic situation. The World Health Organization last year warned of a health emergency in Baghdad, as well as throughout Iraq if current conditions persist. But despite claims from the Ministry of Health of more drugs, better equipment, and generalized improvement, doctors on the ground still see "no such improvement."

In conclusion, a quick summary of the overall situation on the ground in Iraq is in order. Over two years into the illegal occupation, while Iraq sits upon a sea of oil, ongoing gasoline shortages plague Iraqis who sometimes wait 2 days to fill their cars. In a country where a long gas line once meant a one-car wait, Iraqis who are lucky enough to afford it now purchase black market petrol and hope that it is not watered down.

Electricity remains in short supply. Most of Iraq, including the northern region, receives on average 3 hours of electricity per day amidst the nearly non-existent reconstruction efforts. Even the better areas of Baghdad receive only 6-8 hours per day, forcing those who can afford them to use small generators to run fans and refrigerators in their homes. Of course, this is only for those who've been able to obtain the now rarefied gasoline.

The security situation is, needless to say, horrendous. With over 100,000 Iraqis killed thus far and the number of US soldiers killed approaching 2,000, the violence only continues to escalate.

Since the new Iraqi so-called government was sworn in two months ago, well over 1,000 Iraqis and over 165 US soldiers have died in the violence. These numbers will only continue to escalate as the failed occupation grinds on. As the heavy handed tactics of the US military persist, the Iraqi resistance continues to grow in its number and lethality.

As I mentioned before, potable water remains in short supply. Cholera, typhoid and other water-borne diseases are rampant even in parts of the capital city as lack of reconstruction continues to plague Iraq's infrastructure. Raw sewage is common across not just Baghdad but other cities throughout Iraq.

With 70% unemployment, a growing resistance and an infrastructure in shambles, the future for Iraq remains bleak as long as the failed occupation persists. While the Bush Administration continues to disregard calls for a timetable for withdrawal, Iraqis continue to suffer and die with little hope for their future. With each passing day, the catastrophe in Iraq resembles the US debacle in Vietnam more and more.

Dr. Wamid Omar Nadhmi, a senior political scientist at Baghdad University who was invited to this tribunal, told me last winter, "It will take Iraqis something like a quarter of a century to rebuild their country, to heal their wounds, to reform their society, to bring about some sort of national reconciliation, democracy and tolerance of each other. But that process will not begin until the US occupation of Iraq ends."

And it is now exceedingly clear that the only way the Bush Administration will withdraw the US military from Iraq in order for Iraqis to have true sovereignty is if they are forced to do so.

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