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RAMSEY CLARK: THE TRAGEDY OF WAR AS AN END IN ITSELF

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Above all, it is the premeditated attack on life, the human casualties, that make “the scourge of war” so horrible and dehumanizing.

The first Gulf War in January-February, 1991, is a classic example of the human destructiveness of war as an end in itself. The Pentagon states it conducted 110,000 aerial sorties against Iraq in 42 days, one every 30 seconds, unleashing 88,500 tonnes of bombs. Iraq was essentially defenceless.

On March 1, 1991, Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf said, “We must have killed 100,000,” according to the Los Angeles Times. On March 20, the Wall Street Journal reported that Schwarzkopf provided Congress the figure 100,000 Iraqi military killed. On May 22, the Defense Intelligence Agency placed the number of Iraq soldiers killed at 100,000.

On March 3, the London Times reported allied intelligence estimated 200,000 Iraqi soldiers were killed. A French military intelligence source gave the same 200,000 figure to the Nouvelle Observateur. In the summer of 1991, former secretary of the navy John Lehman told a gathering of business and political leaders the Pentagon estimated 200,000 Iraqis were killed in the war.

In response to the question how many soldiers and civilians were killed in Iraq in the war, then-Gen. Colin Powell told the New York Times on March 23: “It’s really not a number I’m terribly interested in.”

Civilian casualties from the bombing were in the tens of thousands. Thousands died from direct bomb hits, but far more died from the destruction of facilities essential to civilian life. Within hours of the first bomb there was no electricity anywhere in Iraq. In the first two days, pipes distributing water ran dry throughout the country.

During the first week of February ‘91, I travelled more than 3,000 kilometres in Iraq with two photographers and a translator, examining the destruction of civilian life and emergency medical services. The first night in Baghdad the minister of health, who had no communication outside his temporary office in a hospital except by courier, said his first three priorities were clean water, water, water.

He estimated at least 3,000 civilians were dead, 25,000 more were in hospitals and clinics and a quarter million more were sick without medicines or medical care, from drinking polluted water. All municipal water systems in the country were destroyed - a

fact we confirmed in dozens of cities from Basra in the far south to Samarra north of Baghdad.

To be severely nauseated, plagued with diarrhea, dehydrated, desperately thirsty and have nothing to drink but the water that made you sick is a special misery.

Visits in seven hospitals are never to be forgotten. On the first night, we entered a major hospital in Baghdad. What greeted us was a scene somewhere between Dante's Inferno and M*A*S*H. Cold and dark, with two candles for 20 beds, the room was crowded with patients, families, health professionals.

Sobbing, murmuring, urgent instructions from doctors, occasional shrieks of pain, and the wail of grieving relatives filled the air. One middle-aged woman had about 30 shrapnel wounds on her back. A 12-year-old girl whose left leg had been amputated near the hip without anesthetics was in delirium. A semiconscious woman who had been seriously injured when her house caved in had not yet been told that she was the sole survivor of her family of seven.

A surgeon who had just performed radical surgery on a young man's arm came over to us. He was exhausted and near despair. Trained in England to be a surgeon, he was now working frantically 18 to 20 hours a day. He told us there was no anesthesia, so patients were held down by aides during operations. Gauze, bandages, adhesive tape, and antiseptics had run out.

He held out his bare hands and said, "These are my tools to heal the sick. The few hours I have to sleep I wake up to find myself rubbing my hands. I have no clean water to wash them with, no alcohol to kill germs, our glove supply was exhausted a week ago. I move hour after hour from the open wounds of one person to another, spreading infection. I cannot help my patients."

In Basra, we saw a middle-class residential area that was heavily damaged on Jan. 31. Twenty-eight persons were reported killed, 56 were injured, 20 homes and six shops were destroyed. We inspected about 18 units in a very large low-cost public housing project that were destroyed or severely damaged on Jan. 28, killing 46 and injuring 70. The nearby high school was damaged by a direct hit on a corner. The elementary school across the street was damaged. We visited an area where, on Feb. 6 - the day we arrived - 14 persons were killed, 46 injured and 128 apartments and homes destroyed or damaged together with an adjacent Pepsi-Cola bottling plant and offices across a wide avenue.

The United States has put its casualties at 148 - of whom it says 37 were killed by U.S. "friendly fire." The remainder were by chance, negligence and mechanical failure.

More than 1,000 Iraqis died for every U.S. death. It was a slaughter.

The war itself, for all its terror, inflicted minor destruction compared to the U.N. sanctions imposed by the Security Council days after Iraq invaded Kuwait. An

international health group estimated that “an excess of 46,900 children died between January and August, 1991,” in Iraq from sanctions and the effect of the bombing, according to a report in the Sept. 24, 1992, New England Journal of Medicine. In 1995, a U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization report found 12 per cent of children surveyed in Baghdad wasted and 28 per cent stunted. FAO team members estimated “567,000 children had died as a consequence of economic sanctions.”

When I met the minister of health, a Kurd and a medical doctor, in Baghdad on Feb. 24, 2003, he gave me the ministry’s detailed report on the effects of the sanctions on the people of Iraq, through December, 2002. It stated 1,807,000 people had died in Iraq as a direct result of the sanctions since their imposition on Aug. 6, 1990. Of these 757,000 were children under the age of five.

The health ministry confirmed that Iraq is less well prepared to treat large numbers of civilian casualties now than it was in 1991 when sanctions had been in place for only six months. It has struggled for 12 years to rebuild its health care system and secure vital medicines, medical supplies, and equipment. Its priorities have been nutrition related illnesses, cancers primarily related to depleted uranium ammunition used by U.S. forces in 1991 and medical services for a weakened population.

Emergency medical service capacity will be exhausted in days if cities are bombed. The probability of more intensive bombing of cities with street combat and far greater civilian casualties is high. Protected supplies of drinking water ambulances, oxygen tanks, anaesthetics, antiseptics, sutures, bandages, burn treatment supplies, gasoline powered generators are not sufficient and cannot be quickly obtained.

Thousands may die who could be saved if there were reserves of medical emergency supplies protected from bombing.

Since 1991, the U.S. has spent hundreds of billions of dollars on new war technology, weapons and special forces training. Iraq has been struggling to survive.

President George W. Bush presided over the execution of 152 people during his five plus years as governor of Texas - far more than any other U.S. governor since World War II and more than one-third of all executions in the United States during his terms as governor. Of those executed, all were poor, 50 were African Americans, 21 Hispanic, two were women. Included were teenagers at the time of their offence, mentally retarded persons and foreign nationals executed in violation of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations.

Bush has sought war with Iraq throughout his presidency. He and a handful of advisers are obsessed with the desire to control Iraq and its resources, and have brought us all to the brink of disaster. He will not be compassionate in the conduct, or aftermath of war.

He must be restrained by world opinion, opposition from the people of the United States and by the United Nations and its members that understand the tragedy of war.

International human rights activist Ramsey Clark was U.S. attorney-general from 1967-69 under president Lyndon Johnson.