



BACKGROUND:

Iraq: Counting the Casualties

The US Department of Defense has frequently claimed it does not keep an accurate count of civilian casualties as a result of military action.

WHY NUMBERS MATTER

Civilian casualties are the most tragic consequence of war. Collectively known as the laws of armed conflict, the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, their two additional protocols of 1977, and customary international law (principles widely accepted and considered binding) are detailed rules on how civilians and captured combatants must be treated, including: warring forces cannot intentionally attack civilians or their facilities; all feasible precautions must be taken to minimize harm to civilians; attacks that do not or cannot discriminate between combatants and noncombatants are prohibited; and, attacks causing disproportionate harm to civilians—those outweighing military advantage—are prohibited.

The Fourth Geneva Convention (officially “Convention IV, relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War”) specifically emphasizes protecting noncombatants from harm during periods of armed conflict. The rules apply not only to officially declared wars—an increasingly rare step taken in our modern day—but any armed conflict as well as cases of partial or total occupation of a territory, even if there is no armed resistance to this occupation. The Fourth Convention is now considered customary international law; therefore, nations at war must abide by its provisions and will be held accountable if they do not.

In modern warfare, it isn’t feasible to completely prevent civilian casualties and this is well understood. There is, however, a legal and moral obligation to proactively avoid harming civilians to the fullest extent possible.

Since the US invasion of Iraq began in 2003, CIVIC has urged the Pentagon to implement a mechanism to record the number of civilian casualties inflicted by US forces. The number of civilians harmed by operations is an important measure of how well US forces are doing in avoiding harm to civilians. Logically, if there is no effort to count civilians, there is no way the US can adequately back up the claim it is doing everything it can to avoid civilian casualties and abiding by its obligations under international law.

We must also remember that every statistic released on civilians killed and injured represents real human lives and families torn apart. The Pentagon being forthright with the information it keeps on civilians in conflict would let the citizens of Iraq know that the US recognizes their suffering and respects those who have been harmed. Many organizations have undertaken the task themselves, with varying results:

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ESTIMATES OF CIVILIAN CASUALTIES

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Iraq Body Count (IBC)

This ongoing project based in London maintains, and on a daily basis, updates a database of media-reported civilian deaths in Iraq. The count includes civilian deaths caused by US and Coalition military operations, by military or paramilitary responses to the Coalition presence (e.g. insurgent and terrorist attacks), and those deaths resulting from the breakdown in law and order that followed the Coalition invasion. Casualty figures are derived from online media reports from recognized sources, with minimum and maximum statistics given where these sources differ or where civilian vs. combatant status is unclear. As of June 3, 2010, IBC reports between 96,663 and 105,408 civilians killed since 2003. Please check the IBC site, www.iraqbodycount.org, for their most recent statistic.

The 2006 Lancet Study

The most recent Lancet study, published on October 11, 2006, found that approximately 601,000 Iraqi civilians died as a result of violence since the March 2003 invasion—or about 500 violent deaths per day throughout the country.¹ The estimate was based on interviews with residents during a random sampling of households throughout the country, conducted by Iraqi physicians and overseen by epidemiologists at Johns Hopkins University's Bloomberg School of Public Health.

Iraq Family Health Survey Study Group

The IFHS conducted a nationally representative survey of 9,345 households in Iraq, collecting data on all deaths between March 2003 and June 2006. Specifically, the study revealed a violent death rate of 1.67 per 1,000 people each year at a total 151,000 violent deaths over the three-year study period.²

Opinion Related Business

A polling organization based in London, Opinion Related Business (ORB), estimates that as many as 1,033,000 people have died as a result of the Iraq War between March 2003 and August 2007. By far the highest estimate, after conducting more than 2,400 interviews with Iraqi adults, ORB concluded that 20 percent of households in Iraq had lost at least one loved one.³

For success stories and additional information:

Marla Keenan
+1 202 558 0342
marlab@civicworldwide.org

1 Burnham, Gilbert, Riyadh Lafta, Shannon Doocy, Les Roberts. Mortality after the 2003 invasion of Iraq: a cross-sectional cluster sample survey. *The Lancet* (October 11, 2006), <http://brusselstribunal.org/pdf/lancet111006.pdf>

2 Alkhuzai, A.H., I.J. Ahmad, M.J. Hweel, T.W. Ismail, et al. "Violence-Related Mortality in Iraq from 2002 to 2006," *New England Journal of Medicine* 358-2 (2008): 484–93.

3 Opinion Research Business, "More than 1,000,000 Iraqis murdered", September 2007, <http://www.opinion.co.uk/Documents/TABLES.pdf>

Campaign for Innocent Victims in Conflict works on behalf of war victims by advocating that warring parties recognize and help the civilians they harm. CIVIC supports the principle that it is never acceptable for a warring party to ignore civilian suffering. In 2005, CIVIC's founder Marla Ruzicka was killed in Iraq by a suicide bomb while advocating for families of victims. CIVIC honors her legacy and strives to sustain her vision.

1210 18th Street NW, 4th Floor
Washington, DC 20036

Phone: +1 202 558 6958
Fax: +1 623 321 7076
Email: info@civicworldwide.org
Web: www.civicworldwide.org

