The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
In-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

Baghdad under U.S. Occupation and Iraqi Anger

by Doi Toshikuni

While American journalism is fixated on reporting the almost daily deaths of G.I.s and other Americans in Iraq, numbers already far exceeding casualties suffered during the war, the U.S. government provides no information about Iraqi citizens killed and the U.S. press self-censors reports of the killing and maiming of Iraqi citizens months after the Bush administration declared victory in Iraq. Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, commander of U.S.-led forces in Iraq now acknowledges that "our iron-fisted approach to the conduct of ops was beginning to alienate Iraqis" and called for cutting back on the violence associated with the 143 raids conducted in July. Exemplifying the U.S. military's new 'cultural sensitivity', the general observed that "when you take a father in front of his family and put a bag over his head and put him on the ground, you have had a significant effect on his dignity and respect in the eyes of his family," resulting the possible creation of more enemies than you capture. When then has been the fate of the Iraqi people in the early months of U.S. occupation? The following report from ground zero, Baghdad conveys a citizens' eye view of the continuing bloodshed, destruction and demoralization experienced in the capital. This article by journalist Doi Toshikuni appeared in Shukan Kinyobi, July 4, 2003.

Physician: "In this part of the leg the bone has been destroyed." In a ward of a hospital in Baghdad, the doctor explains showing the x-ray of the left thigh of a small boy. "The muscles, nerves, and blood vessels are cut off. The part below the injury is becoming gangrenous."

The patient Mustafa Al Duli, is a boy of eight. Three days before Baghdad fell, on the afternoon of April 6, in front of his mother's family home, where they had moved out of fear of bombing by US forces, a bomb fragment slashed through his left leg. His uncle, who was nearby, died instantly. His head split by a bomb fragment. Since then, Mustafa has been operated on seven times and has been in bed more than forty days. He cannot move, and is suffering from malnutrition. The muscles of his leg and hips peeled off, exposing the bone. His mother, Nagam, age 27, has been taking care of him all the while, sleeping on the floor of the sick room. Nagam said "I'm completely exhausted. I'm worried. I don't know when my son will die. If he dies, my life will be over."

Mustafa's father, Ahmad, age 30, took me to the place where Mustafa was struck by the bomb in a Shiite section of western Baghdad. "This is a residential area of ordinary citizens. The U.S. says that this is a military base. But most residents here are poor people who can't even get enough food. Are these houses government buildings? Is this a military base?" Ahmad asked, pointing.

It is only a dozen or so meters from where the bomb fell to the front of the house where Mustafa and others were playing. The car that his uncle had driven to reach this house was burned, and many bomb fragments had gone right through it. Fragments penetrated the wall in front of the house, and holes left by the fragments that went through were here and there.

To this residential area, too, the U.S. army came from time to time. At the time that Ahmad was showing me the sight, a military vehicle approached. As he passed with one hand on the machine gun mounted on the car, a Black American soldier greeted us, waving, sticking his thumb up. Ahmad said "They killed residents and they wave with a smile as if nothing has happened. I wait for the day of revenge"

Security Only Worsens

Two days after I first visited Mustafa's sick room, a five year old girl by the name Iraf Jabbar was carried into the same room. While playing with a friend in front of her house, a metal cylinder that she picked up exploded. It was a cluster bomb. One of her friends died. Another is about to die. She lost fingers on her right hand.

Iraf, with a bandaged right hand , doesn't answer no matter how much I talk with her. Holding a doll in her left hand, she stares at me with large eyes. According to her mother, who came with her, she lost speech because of the shock of the explosion.

In the adjacent sick room, a woman was hospitalized. Her entire family was injured by American bombs. When the bandage was taken off to be changed, the flesh on the shin of the right leg of Ekras Muhammad, age 34, a housewife, was gouged and the bone exposed. As for her left leg the seam where it was amputated showed.

One day before the fall of Baghdad, she was walking with her husband and three children along the road when a missile exploded nearby and the entire family was wounded. Their three sons were released from hospital, but her husband sustained a serious leg injury and is unable to walk. He remains in another hospital. Both parents were hospitalized over forty days and there is no one to support their livelihood, Ekras said. "Americans say that they are fighting terrorists. But victims are ordinary citizens. What happened to me and my family is as you see."

While hospitals overflow with patients injured by the American attacks, now, nearly two months after the "conclusion" of the war, worsening security is the most serious problem for Baghdad citizens.

A male student from Baghdad University: "There are burglars in the streets. At night, shootouts begin. I am from the Arubea district, where children have guns. Everywhere, guns are bought and sold. If you go to the market, two or three burglars are there. If you don't hand them your money, you will be shot. I have seen such sights and heard such things."

A female student from Baghdad University: "Bad security especially affects women because we cannot move freely. Even now, when I commute to the university, someone from my family has to accompany me. My sisters commute to other universities, so many escorts are necessary. Now the majority of my family's work is to protect the safety of women."

What is "Liberation"?

We face rising unemployment due to the destruction of infrastructure and the collapse of administration, as well as the shortages of electricity, gasoline and cooking gas, which are essential to citizens' lives and the delay of educational functions. In short, the bases for citizens' lives were destroyed. The war that brought these outcomes, was it "liberation" as Bush said? I posed this question to citizens in Baghdad.

"Liberation? We can't even walk freely in the streets. It's dangerous. There are many US army checkpoints. I don't call this liberation. It is occupation." (University student, 39)

"Do they bomb us and call it liberation? Have you seen the streets and the security situation. If this is 'liberation' I don't want any 'liberation'". (Housewife, 38)

"How is this 'liberation'? Where is freedom? What are US forces doing for Iraqi people?" (Female college student, 31)

"On the first day after the war ended, we complained to the American army that the university buildings were plundered and set ablaze. We also told them that burglars were robbing banks. But they didn't move. We also said that medical supplies were being robbed from the hospital, but it was useless. Under the US military, every building was plundered. They didn't come to maintain the security of Iraq citizens." (University professor, 64)

A man whose older brother was a former government telecommunications official and is an active Shiite, is also not pleased by the liberation of the US army. "Iraq is now controlled by foreign power. But it is a country with an old civilization. The people do not accept occupation. Bush says that the Americans came to liberate Iraq. If those words are true, then I am thankful to America. But if they intend to stay long, we, the people, will fight." (Restaurant manager, 49)

The American army, while completely destroying the Iraqi social order still is unable to secure the peace and safety of the citizens two months after the occupation. How do the citizens of Baghdad compare the present situation with the situation under Saddam Hussein?

"The Saddam Era was Better than This "

"Hussein was an out and out terrorist. He killed many people. There was not enough medicine or food. Nothing was good for the people. Things are much better now. The present situation is compensation that we pay for the sake of freedom. We should wait for two years or so for the situation to improve. " (Female medical student, 18)

This view was expressed by just one person out of about thirty citizens that I interviewed. The opinion of the majority of those interviewed may be summarized as follows: "Of course Saddam was a dictator and an awful leader. However, in those days, security was maintained. We could live. At present under the Americans things are much worse." (Graduate student, 38)

"Certainly, during the Hussein era, we feared the secret police. But the situation was not this awful. We could live properly like people of other countries. As for me personally, Hussein did bad things, but things were better than now." (Housewife, 38)

If so, I asked, what do you think was the purpose of American invasion of Iraq? Almost every answer was this: for the sake of Iraq's oil. "They destroyed the government buildings and left them as they were plundered. How come just the oil fields and refineries were protected? Why were they not plundered and destroyed?" (Female college student, 31)
"They camouflage, saying that it was for the sake of democracy and to wage war on terror, but the real reason was to control the oil." (University student, 39)

"First they controlled the oil of Gulf producers like the Saudis, Now they want to control Iraqi oil. In this way, the US will be able to control Japan and Europe, who depend on Middle East oil." (Former inspector in the Ministry of Communications, 38)

Now, in Iraq, attacks on the American forces occur frequently. From my experience of directly seeing the heightening of anti-American sentiment among Baghdad citizens, it seems that this is not the 'exceptional activity of remnants of the old army or some radical groups,' but a symbolic expression of anger at the occupying army by the entire nation.

On June 13, approximately one hundred Iraqis were killed in the American army's sweep in a place one hundred and fifty kilometers northwest of Baghdad and in Barad seventy kilometers northeast of Baghdad. Consequently, further heightening of anti-American sentiment is anticipated and attacks on US forces, far from becoming weaker, may even increase.

On June 12, the US General David McKiernan said that "The entire land of Iraq is still a battlefield." When the person with the highest responsibility for Iraqi security, who is expected to have the best grasp of the situation assesses it this way, the Japanese politician who proposed a special law to send troops to Iraq while knowing nothing of the actual situation affirms that there are non-combat regions of Iraq. This is indeed strange.

I was in Baghdad for two weeks from mid-May. At night, gunshots were heard frequently, and the risk of attack was high. There were frequent events in which citizens were attacked by burglars and were wounded or killed. From about five to six hundred kilometers from the Jordan border to Baghdad, there is constant danger of attack by anti-American guerrillas. Viewed through the eyes of people who personally experienced this situation, where is a peaceful area of Iraq?

Will Japan Become an Enemy?

The Japanese Secretary of Defense said at a press conference on June 13 that, "The use of military power to suppress burglary is not combat." However, when attacked with automatic weapons and cannon fire in "non-combat areas", does he think that the Self-Defense Force members can protect their lives with small arms? Or, in this kind of emergency, does he expect the American army with its heavy equipment to protect the SDF? If so, far from providing rear support to US forces, the result would be that the SDF would be supported by them. What support this would amount to can no longer be known.

When carrying out overseas support activities, the first consideration is the needs of the country, the most effective method, and what can be done to please the people. However, when I look at Japan's proposed humanitarian and reconstruction support for Iraq, it seems to me that the eyes of the Japanese government are trained on the American government rather than on Iraq and the first priority seems to be on pleasing the Americans. It seems to me that this reversal of the central and the peripheral is creating all kinds of contradictions and inconsistencies.

In the Arab world generally, pro-Japanese sentiment is strong. At its base is the image of Japan "as a brave nation in Asia who once fought against America, the big country" and as "one of the advanced industrial powers that produced superior industrial products like electric appliances and cars." This pro-Japanese sentiment was deeply affected by the Japanese government's support for the Iraq War. "Iraqi people are fond of Japan. We feel pain that Japan was the victim of the atomic bomb. We have profound relations with Japan in the areas of economics and education," So the Vice Dean of the School of Education of Baghdad University observed. "However, in the present circumstances, Japanese moves cannot be accepted by the Iraqi people. I'm speaking about the Iraqis as a nation. Japan requires US permission to support Iraq and is unable to make an independent judgment."

When Japanese self-defense forces appear before the people of Iraq in military uniforms to provide rear support for American and other armies, in the eyes of the Iraqi people their image must overlap with that of US forces.

Translation by Kyoko Selden for Japan Focus.