

Coverup of War Crimes in Iraq: When ‘Damning Evidence’ on Congenital Birth Defects becomes ‘No Clear Evidence’: Much-Delayed WHO Report

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In a 2010 alert, [‘Beyond Hiroshima - The Non-Reporting Of Fallujah’s Cancer Catastrophe’](#), we noted the almost non-existent media response to the publication of a new study that had found high rates of infant mortality, cancer and leukaemia in the Iraqi city. The dramatic increases in these rates exceeded even those found in survivors of the atomic bombs dropped by the United States on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. The Independent’s Patrick Cockburn was a lone exception in [reporting](#) these awful findings.

As many readers will recall, Fallujah was subjected to US military attacks in March 2004 and an even larger assault in November 2004 which also involved UK forces. Our media alerts at the time highlighted the abysmal lack of media coverage of Western war crimes in Fallujah, including the use of chemical weapons and depleted uranium. Media Lens paid particular attention to the appalling performance of BBC News ([‘Doubt Cast on BBC Claims Regarding Fallujah’](#), [‘BBC Silent On Fallujah’](#), [‘BBC Still Ignoring Evidence Of War Crimes’](#)).

And it is not just Fallujah that has suffered appallingly. Mozghan Savabieasfahani, an environmental toxicologist at the University of Michigan’s School of Public Health and author of the book *Pollution and Reproductive Damage*, [notes](#) that increasing numbers of birth defects have also been seen in Mosul, Najaf, Basra, Hawijah, Nineveh and Baghdad. In some provinces, adds Dr Savabieasfahani, the rate of cancers is also increasing. She says:

‘Sterility, repeated miscarriages, stillbirths and severe birth defects – some [never described](#) in any medical books – are weighing heavily on Iraqi families.’



In Basra, attacked and occupied by UK troops, childhood leukaemia rates [more than doubled](#) between 1993 and 2007, the year that UK troops withdrew from the city.

Dr Savabieasfahani describes ‘an epidemic of birth defects in Iraq’ and says that what is ‘most urgently needed’ is:

‘comprehensive large-scale environmental testing of the cities where cancer and birth defects are rising. Food, water, air, and soil must be tested to isolate sources of public exposure to war contaminants. This is a necessity to discover the source, extent, and types of contaminants in the area followed by appropriate remediation projects to

prevent further public exposure to toxic war contaminants.'

In 2012, the World Health Organization (WHO), after being pressured by public health experts for a decade, belatedly instigated a study in conjunction with the Iraqi Ministry of Health (MOH) to investigate 'prevalence and factors associated with congenital birth defects' in Iraq. But although the study is extensive in scale, with 10,800 Iraq households selected as the sample size, Dr Savabieasfahani describes the scope of the research as 'severely handicapped'. Why? Because of the controversial decision not to investigate the possible causes of birth defects and cancer; in particular, depleted uranium (DU), white phosphorus and other dangerous residues of the war, notably lead and mercury.

DU is a by-product of the process of enriching uranium. Because of its very high density, it is often used in weapons designed to penetrate buildings and armoured tanks. Dr Keith Baverstock, a former health and radiation adviser to WHO, [says](#) that:

'There is absolutely no doubt that DU is toxic if it becomes systemic and gets into the bloodstream.'

The decision by WHO and MOH not to consider uranium in their study 'is an important omission', says Dr Baverstock, and he 'believes that WHO has miserably failed to assess risks posed by DU... There is no doubt in my mind that the upper management of WHO failed to fulfil their obligations to examine the public health implications of DU.'

In 2004, Dr Baverstock was the lead author of a WHO report linking the US and UK use of depleted uranium in Iraq with long-term health risks. But the report was declared '[secret](#)' and never published. Dr Baverstock said that the report was 'deliberately suppressed', pointing the finger of suspicion at the powerful pro-nuclear UN body, the International Atomic Energy Agency.

The War Is Responsible – 'No Other Explanation'

The new WHO/MOH report was originally due to be published in November 2012, but it was indefinitely postponed with no satisfactory reason given. Months passed. Meanwhile, in March 2013, the BBC included a [report](#) on its World News channel about birth defects and cancer in Iraq. BBC reporter Yalda Hakim interviewed Dr Mushin Sabbak at Basra Maternity Hospital. He told her that he believed that 'mercury, lead, uranium' from the war were responsible for a 60 per cent increase in birth defects there since 2003. 'We have no other explanation than this,' he added. (An edited version of the World News segment appeared [here](#) on BBC News.)



Dr Chaseb Ali, a senior MOH official in Baghdad, told Hakim that:

'All studies done by the Ministry of Health prove with damning evidence that there has been a rise in birth defects and cancer, since the substances in question cause birth defects if the mother was exposed to them, or cancer, or in some cases, both.' (English subtitles)

The BBC journalist said in the report's voiceover:

'Dr Chaseb says there could be many factors, including the use of depleted uranium, and the looting and destruction of Saddam Hussein's laboratories.'

Tellingly, when the journalist asked the senior Iraqi health official whether, given the extensive findings of increased birth defects and cancer, the Iraq government would call for action, he smiled uncomfortably and said:

'I'll keep my thoughts to myself.'

Switching to English, he stated directly:

'I have no answer. I know the fact, but I cannot say anything.'

Hakim then spoke with two Iraqi Ministry of Health doctors working on the WHO/MOH study. These researchers discussed the increase in Iraqi birth defects, and blamed the increase on the war. The BBC reporter was told that the report had been repeatedly delayed but that:

'They confirm that the report will show a rise in birth defects in areas which show heavy fighting.'

There is no shortage of damning testimony of the awful Western legacy suffered by the people of Iraq. Donna Mulhearn is an Australian antiwar activist who has travelled repeatedly to Fallujah, talking with Iraqi doctors as well as affected families. She [told](#) journalist Kelley Vlahos:

'I believe the Iraqi government is responding to pressure from the US to keep the issue under the radar.'

The physical horrors reported by Mulhearn and others include:

'babies born with parts of their skulls missing, various tumors, missing genitalia, limbs and eyes, severe brain damage, unusual rates of paralyzing spina bifida (marked by the gruesome holes found in the tiny infants' backs), Encephalocele (a neural tube defect marked by swollen sac-like protrusions from the head), and more.'

Mulhearn said:

'When I was in Iraq earlier this year there was a definite feeling of fear and intimidation among doctors who felt pressure from the Government to stay quiet about increasing levels of cancer and birth defects.'

She added:

'One cancer specialist in Basra was removed from his senior position in a hospital because he has been outspoken on the issue of radiation caused by depleted uranium pollution and what he believes is its terrible impact on the health of Iraqis in the Basra region. He was nervous about giving us an on-camera interview because of possible ramifications.'

'We Worry That This Is Now Politics, Not Science'

In May 2013, with still no sign of the joint WHO/MOH report, a [call](#) was issued by a number of public health and medical experts, together with around 50 others including Noam Chomsky, asking for the immediate release of the report. A [petition](#) on Change.org, initiated by Dr Samira Alaani, a pediatrician working in Fallujah General Hospital, attracted almost 50,000 signatures. Dr Alaani wrote:

'I have worked in Fallujah as a Pediatrician since 1997 but began to notice something was wrong in 2006 and began logging the cases; we have determined that 144 babies are now born with a deformity for every 1000 live births. We believe it has to be related to contamination caused by the fighting in our city, even now, nearly 10 years later. It is not unique to Fallujah; hospitals throughout the Anbar Governorate and many other regions of Iraq are recording increases. Every day I see the strain this fear puts on expectant mothers and their families. The first question I am asked when a child is born is not "is it a boy or a girl?" but "is my child healthy?"' (Emphasis in original.)

She added:

'The research is now complete and we were promised that it would be published at the beginning of 2013, yet six months later the WHO has announced more delays. We worry that this is now politics, not science. We have already waited years for the truth and my patients cannot wait any longer. [...] My patients need to know the truth, they need to know why they miscarried, they need to know why their babies are so ill but, most importantly, they need to know that something is being done about it.'

When UN sanctions were imposed on Iraq in the 1990s, the British oncologist Karol Sikora, who was then chief of WHO's cancer programme, [wrote](#) that:

'Requested radiotherapy equipment, chemotherapy drugs and analgesics [were] consistently blocked by United States and British advisers [to the Iraq sanctions committee].

Dr Sikora told John Pilger:

'We were specifically told [by the WHO] not to talk about the whole Iraq business. The WHO is not an Organization that likes to get involved in politics.'

But it's even worse than that. WHO is an organization that seemingly bends to the will of powerful Western governments. Hans von Sponeck was the UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq before he resigned in 2000 in protest at the [appalling level of deaths](#) caused by the sanctions (his predecessor, Denis Halliday, resigned in 1998 for the same reason). Von Sponeck noted that:

'The US government sought to prevent WHO from surveying areas in southern Iraq where depleted uranium had been used and caused serious health and environmental dangers.'

Halliday [said](#):

'The World Health Organisation (WHO) has categorically refused in defiance of its own mandate to share evidence uncovered in Iraq that US military use of Depleted Uranium

and other weapons have not only killed many civilians, but continue to result in the birth of deformed babies.'

In July 2013, around 50 medical experts and other concerned people, wrote a second time to WHO:

'The joint WHO and Iraqi Ministry of Health Report on cancers and birth defect in Iraq was originally due to be released in November 2012. It has been delayed repeatedly and now has no release date whatsoever. [...] we are baffled and alarmed at the WHO's inability to release any of its findings, despite our urgent request of May 2013, for the WHO to release its report.

'The Iraqi birth defects epidemic, by itself, would outrage anyone with the simplest understanding of population health and disease. Who could justify blocking the release of information from a long-completed investigation of that epidemic?

'Why have our inquiries failed to break the WHO's apparent filibuster against releasing that data? WHO has a staff of thousands, including medical doctors, public health specialists, scientists, and sophisticated epidemiologists. They are certainly capable of presenting that data to the public by now.' (Mozhgan Savabieasfahani, via email, July 26, 2013)

'A Total Reversal'

On September 11, 2013, Iraq's Ministry of Health finally published a ['summary report'](#). The World Health Organization was credited with assistance but, oddly, was *not* a signatory of the report (the study had previously been [presented](#) as a 'collaborative' study and 'co-financed' by WHO and Iraq's MOH). But even more bizarrely, the report claimed that:

'The study provides no clear evidence to suggest an unusually high rate of congenital birth defects in Iraq.'

Incredulous, Dr Savabieasfahani noted:

'This is a total reversal compared to previous statements from the same Ministry of Health, as broadcast worldwide in March 2013.' (Email, September 12, 2013)

This was the [item](#) on BBC World News in which Iraqi Ministry of Health researchers confirmed that the high rates of cancers and birth defects constituted a 'big crisis' for the 'next generation' of Iraqi children. There was 'damning evidence', a senior Iraqi MOH official had said, of a rise in Iraq birth defects.

Dr Savabieasfahani [said](#) that it was 'shocking to see this report declare "no clear evidence" for any abnormality in rates of "spontaneous abortions", "stillbirths", or "congenital birth defects" anywhere in Iraq.' She added bluntly:

'What happened to the data between March and September? Even though data analysis is prone to variations in output, which can lead to potential changes in conclusions, for a change of this magnitude - from "damning evidence" to "no clear evidence" -

extensive data manipulation must have taken place. [...] this new report must be viewed with extreme caution if not with suspicion and disbelief.'

Dr Amy Hagopian, a public health researcher at the University of Washington in Seattle, told Media Lens that, along with others, she would be 'pressing for the timely release of all remaining data and reports to ensure effective public health interventions can be developed and implemented.' (Email, September 14, 2013).

[Dr Keith Baverstock](#), the former WHO adviser on radiation and public health mentioned earlier, told us:

'I have not had time to study this report in detail so I will not comment on the scientific aspects. However, there are aspects which cause me very considerable concern. Firstly, this is not the independent academic analysis that is required - it certainly would not find a place in a reputable scientific journal. So it is strange to my mind that apparently reputable scientists have, through what is purported to be a peer review process, endorsed this study. I would have several questions for these people, none of whom I know. For example, how did they ensure that there was no selection bias: why was such a simplistic approach taken to the statistical analysis of the results. The implication is that these people were appointed by WHO although WHO does not appear to be a co-author, or in other ways connected with the report. If this peer review group have had access to information not in the report where and when will this information be made public?' (Email, September 17, 2013).

Dr Baverstock continued:

'From the WHO perspective I think the appointment of peer reviewers (if indeed WHO did appoint them) was extraordinarily inept. Five of the six reviewers were either from the UK or the USA, both countries which contributed to the environmental contamination in Iraq and therefore have a strong conflict of interest in this matter. The sixth reviewer from Norway may well have less of a conflict of interest but it is not clear that he is even qualified to review a study of this kind as his website says he is a social anthropologist and apparently he has no publications in the area of pregnancy outcome. It is the case that WHO suppressed a paper on the genotoxicity of uranium in 2001/2 at the time that Gro Harlem Brundtland, a former Prime Minister of Norway, was the WHO DG [Director-General].'

He concluded:

'The issue of the health consequences for the civilian populations of the Iraq wars is a very serious matter and nothing short of an independently conducted study prepared for a scientific journal will provide satisfactory answers.'

We also asked Noam Chomsky to comment. He told us:

'Extensive evidence had appeared about sharp increases in birth defects in regions of Iraq subjected to intense US assault, particularly Fallujah, where the crimes of November 2004 bear comparison to Srebrenica. Coverage has been slight and hopelessly inadequate. By now there are serious questions about analysis and perhaps withholding of data and reports. The time has surely come for careful inquiry and full disclosure.' (Email, September 16, 2013)

Denis Halliday [said](#):

'This tragedy in Iraq reminds one of US Chemical Weapons used in Vietnam. And that the US has failed to acknowledge or pay compensation or provide medical assistance to thousands of deformed children born and still being born due to American military use of Agent Orange throughout the country. The millions of gallons of this chemical dumped on rural Vietnam were eagerly manufactured and sold to the Pentagon by companies Dupont, Monsanto and others greedy for huge profits.'

He added:

'Given the US record of failing to acknowledge its atrocities in warfare, I fear those mothers in Najaf and other Iraqi cities and towns advised not to attempt the birth of more children will never receive solace or help.'

Halliday concluded that what is needed is a 'United Nations that is no longer corrupted by the five Permanent Members of the Security Council.'

So far, Lexis database searches yield not a single British newspaper mention of the publication of the study into Iraq birth defects, far less the report's 'shocking' shortcomings. But this is standard performance for the corporate media which have an established history of looking the other way when it comes to the crimes of the West.

We do not expect a media investigation anytime soon into why the study's methodology and findings appear to have been twisted by major political interests - presumably to avoid embarrassing the US and its allies who bombarded Iraq, resulting in the deaths of around one million people, littering the country with contaminants, and leaving a toxic legacy of cancer and birth defects.

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