

US attack on Tal Afar virtually ignored

By [Linda S. Heard](#)

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While the world has been falling all over itself to remember the victims of 9-11 and digging deep in its pockets to aid the wealthiest nation on the planet recovering from a natural disaster, a ferocious man-made onslaught on a town in northeast Iraq is being virtually ignored.

This is yet one more example of the double standards prevalent today when the color of your passport can determine your worth as a human being.

We saw this discrepancy recently when 1,000 Iraqis—mainly women and children—who lost their lives on a Baghdad bridge were a mere footnote in the Western media.

And we are witnessing this discrepancy now as our screens fill with images of Hurricane Katrina and 9-11 commemoration ceremonies with next to nothing about the horrors of Tal Afar, a stricken town in northeast Iraq, accused of harboring insurgents.

Like the people of New Orleans, almost 90 percent of Tal Afar's residents have fled their homes. And like their American counterparts, the doors of their houses are being smashed in by military forces, there to pacify the town after weeks of bombing and shelling.

The similarities don't end there. While people of the US Gulf Coast are suffering the effects of a cocktail of chemicals and effluent in the flood waters, 170 residents of Tal Afar have fallen ill to "curious poisons," which, according to Dr. Mohammed Qassem of the Iraqi Red Crescent, could result from "inhaling gases."

But unlike the unfortunates trapped for five days in the Superdome and the convention center who have been evacuated to air-conditioned reception centers around the US, many of Tal Afar's people can be found subsisting under canvas without access to clean water, food and medicines. There is no telethon for them. There are no convoys of aid-bearing trucks and planes, stuffed with food and blankets, headed in their direction.

The difference is the pleas of American victims were eventually heard loud and clear but those of people trapped inside Tal Afar or forgotten around its peripheries are lost in the ether. The afflicted of New Orleans deemed refugees were insulted, while refugees from Tal Afar don't have that luxury. Even to be acknowledged at all would be a step up.

Not only are Tal Afar's civilians in peril and left to their own devices, their neighbors can look forward to more of the same. "We tell our people in Ramadi, Samarra, Rawa and Qaem that we are coming," said Iraq's Defense Minister Saadan Al-Dulaimi.

"We are warning those who give shelter to terrorists that they must stop, kick them out, or

else we will cut off their hands, heads and tongues as we did in Tal Afar,” said this nice fellow, who was speaking figuratively according to news reports. Let’s hope so!

The mayor of Tal Afar says the problem is sectarian with Sunni Muslims being targeted, those same Sunnis who are being asked to vote on the country’s cobbled together new constitution, which threatens Iraq’s break-up. The mayor believes the ousting of *insurgents* could have been achieved by negotiation with Sunni tribal leaders.

In New Orleans, it was mainly poor African Americans held hostage to the deluge while the rich sped north in their SUVs and are now employing armed security guards—including those from Blackwater, a private contractor also operating in Iraq—to protect their mansions from looters.

It’s a similar “strong versus weak” principle in Tal Afar where organized insurgents are said to have escaped the city via a system of clandestine tunnels leaving women, children and the elderly to their fate.

Last Saturday, the Iraqi government, no doubt prodded by their American masters, ordered the closing of the border with Syria, which they say facilitates the entry and exit of foreign terrorists.

However, local Iraqi journalist Nasir Ali told Al-Jazeera that there were very few foreign combatants in the region. “Every time the US Army and the Iraqi government want to destroy a specific city, they claim it hosts Arab fighters and Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi,” he said.

And just as in New Orleans where reporters have been dissuaded from taking pictures of the dead with guns to their heads, the media is unwanted in Tal Afar. The US, which discouraged independent journalists in Iraq from the outset, has learned its lesson from Fallujah when a Marine was captured on video shooting dead an unarmed, injured Iraqi on the floor of a mosque.

On Sunday, the entire world remembered 9-11. So did Iraqis. For them it was not only the day the hopes and dreams of 3,000 innocents were incinerated, it also changed their world forever. The [Iraqi Girl Blogger Riverbend](#) expresses this far better than I can. After recounting the dismay she experienced while watching the twin-towers fall, and describing her subsequent fears that her country was in danger of being targeted for something it did not do, she writes:

“For the 3,000 victims in America, more than 100,000 have died in Iraq. Tens of thousands of others are being detained for interrogation and torture. Our homes have been raided, our cities are constantly being bombed and Iraq has fallen back decades. And for several years to come we will suffer under the influence of the extremism we didn’t know prior to the war.

“As I write this, Tal Afar, a small place north of Mosul, is being bombed. Dozens of people are going to be buried under their homes in the dead of the night. Their water and electricity has been cut off for days. It doesn’t seem to matter much, though, because they don’t live in a wonderful skyscraper in a glamorous city. They are, quite simply, farmers and herders not worth a second thought.”

Lastly, to those wealthy Arab countries racing to deposit millions of dollars in US aid coffers, I would say this: How about sparing a little compassion along with a few cents for your brothers and sisters in Iraq?

Linda S. Heard is a British specialist writer on Middle East affairs. She welcomes feedback and can be contacted by email at heardonthegrapevines@yahoo.co.uk.

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Articles by: **[Linda S. Heard](#)**

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