

The Mysterious Case of the Vanishing World Tribunal on Iraq

David Cromwell

"The best relationship with our viewers is no longer one of parent-child but of consenting adults trying to piece together the best picture of the world." (Roger Mosey, head of BBC TV news)

"A good case can be made that propaganda is a more important means of social control in open societies like the United States than in closed societies like the late Soviet Union... This system of thought control is not centrally managed... It operates mainly by individual and market choices, with the frequent collective service to the national interest arising from common interests and internalised beliefs." (Edward Herman)

World Tribunal? What World Tribunal?

Media Lens has detected a recent shift in media reporting. It is hard to quantify, but there is a palpable uneasiness amongst media professionals at the increasing rise of the 'blogosphere' and internet-based 'alternative' media sites. Joe and Jo Public are increasingly aware that the news and commentary distributed by the BBC, ITN, Channel 4 news and the liberal broadsheets, are protecting major war criminals in London and Washington.

A blanket of almost total media silence covers Bush and Blair's crimes in Iraq, and their support for relentless corporate exploitation around the globe. These war criminals continue to be presented as world-straddling father figures who could "solve" poverty in Africa and so become the beloved figureheads of a "great generation".

Consider that virtually the entire British media ignored the deliberations of the World Tribunal on Iraq in Istanbul from June 24-27. Modelled on Bertrand Russell's tribunal on the US invasion of Vietnam, the tribunal consisted of hearings into numerous aspects of the invasion and occupation of Iraq. A jury of conscience from ten different countries listened to the testimony of 54 advocates. This jury declared the war one of the most unjust in history:

"The Bush and Blair administrations blatantly ignored the massive opposition to the war expressed by millions of people around the world. They embarked upon one of the most unjust, immoral, and cowardly wars in history. The Anglo-American occupation of Iraq of the last 27 months has led to the destruction and devastation of the Iraqi state and society. Law and order have broken down completely, resulting in a pervasive lack of human security; the physical infrastructure is in shambles; the health care delivery system is a mess; the education system has ceased to function; there is massive environmental and ecological devastation; and, the cultural and archeological heritage of the Iraqi people has been desecrated." (World Tribunal on Iraq, 'Press Release about Jury Statement,' June 27, 2005, <http://www.worldtribunal.org/main/?b=93>)

The jury presented 13 findings against the US and UK governments that included:

* Planning, preparing, and waging the supreme crime of a war of aggression in contravention of the United Nations Charter and the Nuremberg Principles.

* Targeting the civilian population of Iraq and civilian infrastructure.

* Using disproportionate force and indiscriminate weapon systems.

* Failing to safeguard the lives of civilians during military activities and during the occupation period thereafter.

* Using deadly violence against peaceful protestors.

The jury also levelled charges against the security council of the United Nations for "failing to stop war crimes amongst other crimes". It also charged "private corporations for

profiting from the war" and accused the corporate media of "disseminating deliberate falsehoods and failing to report atrocities". (ibid.)

Veteran activist Walden Bello, reporting from Istanbul, pointed in particular to the "combination of eyewitness accounts that made clear beyond a shadow of doubt that the siege of Fallujah in November 2004 was a case of collective punishment". (Bello, 'The Perfect Storm: the World Tribunal,' June 28, 2005; <http://www.focusweb.org/main/html/Article631.html>)

Bello noted, too, that the tribunal clearly showed the extent of "the western media's participation in the manipulation of public opinion".

At a press conference after the tribunal, jury chairperson Arundathi Roy said: "If there is one thing that has come out clearly in the last few days, it is not that the corporate media supports the global corporate project; it **+is+** the global corporate project."

This is a perfect summation indicating why corporate crimes rarely surface in the corporate media. A newspaper database search on July 5 revealed that only one newspaper - the small-circulation Morning Star - had reported on the Tribunal. There was nothing in the Guardian, the Observer, the Independent, the Independent on Sunday, the Financial Times, the Times or any of the other 'watchdogs of democracy'. There were also zero mentions at BBC news online. Although Media Lens is unable to monitor all television and radio news bulletins, we are not aware of any broadcast reports of the tribunal.

The level of professional media discipline required to fail to report such an important event is truly remarkable. But then, as we have frequently noted, this is standard practice when 'our' crimes are under scrutiny, rather than the crimes of official 'enemies'.

Violent And Barbaric US Soldiers

BBC news director Helen Boaden was pressed by several Media Lens readers - acting of their own volition, an uncomfortable thought for some in the media - just why the BBC had ignored all the evidence of Bush and Blair's war crimes presented at the World Tribunal on Iraq. She replied:

"We've covered the issues discussed many times and will continue do so, though we did not cover this - not least for logistical reasons." (Email to Media Lens reader, June 29, 2005)

Readers may well be scratching their heads, wondering how they managed to miss all of these BBC reports covering the G8 leaders' culpability for war crimes. You may also be wondering why the BBC, one of the world's most lavishly-funded news corporations, could not manage even one short item from Istanbul on any of its flagship news programmes.

Regular readers may recall that Boaden has already declared publicly that: "you can be certain that if we had proof of [US war crimes], it would be leading every bulletin." (Email to Media Lens, May 19, 2005)

But despite the copious evidence presented at the World Tribunal in Istanbul, the BBC maintains a stoic refusal to report US/UK atrocities and war crimes.

However, the BBC can no longer maintain, for example, that there is no evidence of napalm use by US forces in Iraq. It is now on the official record that the US +has+ deployed an updated form of napalm - and that US officials even lied about it to Britain (See: Colin Brown, 'US lied to Britain over use of napalm in Iraq war,' The Independent, June 17, 2005; Andrew Sparrow, 'Parliament misled over firebomb use,' Daily Telegraph, June 20, 2005; Richard Norton-Taylor, 'US misled UK over Iraq fire bombs,' The Guardian, July 1, 2005).

We have seen no BBC bulletin leading with - or even mentioning - the appalling issue of napalm use by "coalition" forces in Iraq.

Nor have we seen any mention of the urgent humanitarian crisis in the western Iraqi cities of Haditha and Al-Qa'im, an area that is home to 300,000 people, where hospitals have been attacked and damaged by US forces. Eyewitnesses, including medical personnel, claim that US soldiers violated the Geneva Convention and international law by preventing civilians from accessing healthcare. US forces also prevented food and medication reaching Haditha and Al-Qa'im and targeted the cities' two main hospitals, medical staff and ambulances. According to Dr. Salam Ismael, general secretary of the Doctors for Iraq Society:

"Eyewitnesses reported at least one patient being shot dead in his bed on a hospital ward.

Doctors were prevented from assisting patients and civilians in need. A number of doctors and medical personnel were killed in the attack and others were arrested by US forces in the hospital. They were later released, along with the hospital manager who was detained for two days.

"The huge military operations in the area have caused widespread damage and an unknown number of civilians were killed and injured during the attack.

"Video footage shot by doctors shows a badly damaged medical store in the Haditha hospital and damaged surgical theatres. The medical store contained medicine and equipment for all hospitals and medical centres in the west of Iraq. Staff and patients say the damage was carried out by 'by violent and barbaric US soldiers.'" (Ismael, 'Iraqi hospitals attacked and damaged by US forces,' July 2, 2005; <http://tinyurl.com/aw9h2>)

Reports of brutal "coalition" attacks on Iraqi hospitals, however, are deemed unsuitable for British audiences of mainstream media, including the 'impartial' BBC.

SUGGESTED ACTION

The goal of Media Lens is to promote rationality, compassion and respect for others. When writing emails to journalists, we strongly urge readers to maintain a polite, non-aggressive and non-abusive tone.

Write to Helen Boaden, director of BBC news, Email:
helenboaden.complaints@bbc.co.uk

And Roger Mosey, head of BBC television news: Email:
roger.mosey@bbc.co.uk

And Mark Byford, deputy director-general Email:

mark.byford@bbc.co.uk

Ask why the BBC is failing to cover the many reports of alleged US war crimes in Fallujah and elsewhere in Iraq. Why did the main BBC news programmes ignore the recent World Tribunal on Iraq? When has the BBC ever reported on Bush and Blair's culpability for war crimes?

Please copy your emails to the following:

Pete Clifton, BBC news online editor
Email: pete.clifton@bbc.co.uk

Mark Thompson, BBC director general
Email: mark.thompson@bbc.co.uk

Michael Grade, BBC chairman
Email: michael.grade@bbc.co.uk

Ask the following newspaper editors why they ignored the recent World Tribunal on Iraq:

Martin Newland, editor of the Daily Telegraph
Email: Martin.Newland@telegraph.co.uk

Simon Kelner, editor-in-chief of the Independent and Independent on Sunday
Email: s.kelner@independent.co.uk

Guardian editor, Alan Rusbridger:Email:
alan.rusbridger@guardian.co.uk

Observer editor, Roger Alton:Email: roger.alton@observer.co.uk

Financial Times editor, Andrew Gowers:Email:
andrew.gowers@ft.com

Please send copies of all emails to medialens at: editor@medialens.org