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Foreign &  
Commonwealth  
Office

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Dear David,

### Iraq: Civilian Casualty Figures

You asked us to look again at the question of civilian casualty figures in Iraq, following a request from the Prime Minister. We have since learned from JTAC that they have separately been tasked to produce figures on fatalities at the hands of foreign fighters in Iraq, which you will have seen.

We recommend that we do not take any ownership of figures of civilian casualties in Iraq. Overall, none of the estimates available is reliable, and we would have great difficulty defending the methodology behind them to the media or to Parliament.

We would likewise have difficulty compiling our own statistics. We very rarely have our own people on the ground following terrorist attacks, often relying on press statistics. But their figures result in widely differing estimates, as the journalists themselves are not there to produce a precise body count. We regard hospital and mortuary admissions as the most reliable figures available. These are collated by the Iraqi Ministry of Health, and we use them in our correspondence with the public (although they too are deficient in some ways). They differ greatly from the statistics used by the US, which are often very loose estimates. The Foreign Secretary did once draw in Parliament on a figure of 10,000 civilian deaths provided by the NGO Iraq Bodycount, but did not imply that the government was confirming the statistic.

The Iraqi Ministry of Health (MOH) estimates that 3,617 Iraqi civilians were killed and 14,554 injured during the period 5 April 2004 to 25 September 2004. This estimate, which is public, does not distinguish between military and terrorist action. A MOH estimate (not made public) does make this distinction, and indicates that a total of 516 and 2,016 have been killed and injured respectively as a result of terrorist attacks during that period.

As you will have seen, JTAC give a very different estimate, of 77 attacks by foreign fighters resulting in 1125 casualties since the beginning of 2004. They estimate that the vast majority (nearly 1000) were civilians. We understand that these figures are drawn largely from US (MNF) estimates, and

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that US permission would be needed to release them. MOD view the US figures as imprecise, and evidence of overall trends rather than casualty figures that could be presented to Parliament or the public.

We should be wary of being caught in a public debate over which of these figures are accurate. We should also be wary of being drawn into giving an estimate of the numbers killed by the MNF and Iraqi forces as against those killed by the insurgents. If we are able to give the one, pressure will build to release the other. We are aware of an Iraqi Ministry of Health unpublished estimate of 1,295 and 5,479 Iraqis having been killed and injured respectively in military action during the period 16 June 2004 to 10 September 2004. This is more than double the number they estimate were killed by terrorists. Although the figures include insurgents as well as civilians, the Iraqi figures as they stand now will not help us make the case that more civilians have been killed by terrorists than by military action.

The Embassy in Baghdad report that the MOH information is generally reliable but has some deficiencies. Figures from recent monthly reports do not tally with the six-month figures of 3,617 killed and 14,554 injured. Civilians taken to hospital injured but who subsequently die are not currently added to the killed total, thus underestimating the number of civilians killed. Additionally, hospital staff have come under pressure to inflate the casualty figures when they release these locally to the media. (The MOH have tried to ensure that the same data is also given locally to the media, and say that that happens much more often now). The MOH are currently in discussions on how to rectify these issues. We may be able to pass you more reliable figures in due course.

The Iraqi Ministry of Interior collects its own information about casualties from police forces etc on the ground - but it is regarded as much less reliable.

You asked for statistics produced by NGOs. These are very varied and their methodology is crude. Iraq Bodycount report a figure between 13,182 and 15,248 for the whole period since military action began in March 2003. MEDACT's figures, covering the period from March 2003 to October 2003, vary between 22,000 and 55,000.

Washington have conducted an open source search of what US institutions are saying about civilian casualties in Iraq. Again there is a huge variation in the figures. The Brookings Institute gives a figure from 11,400 to 22,200 killed as a result of violence from war and crime for the period from 30 April 2003 - 30 July 2004. On 25 September the Washington Bureau quoted the previously mentioned MOH figures of 3,617 Iraqis killed and 14,554 injured.

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The US have, like ourselves, stuck to the line that there are no comprehensive figures for civilian casualties and do not comment on suggested figures. The Embassy in Washington has asked for the US's official estimate of civilian casualties in Iraq. We still await the responses from the State Department and Department of Defense.

In sum, if we produce a figure that differs from the Iraqi government figures, we will have to defend it - and the way it was arrived at - before Parliament and the media. We have no collateral or means of checking the US statistics, which we consider highly unreliable. We recommend that for the moment we continue to put our public emphasis on specific atrocities against civilians, such as the mass killing of Iraqi children in Baghdad on 30 September, and their attempts to thwart our efforts to stand up independent Iraqi security forces.

I am copying this to Desmond Bowen (Cabinet Office), William Ehrman (Cabinet Office), Mike Naworynsky (MOD), Moazzam Malik (DFID), PS/"C", Edward Chaplin (Baghdad), Simon Collis (Basra) and Sir David Manning (Washington).

*Kara Owen*

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