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Reports of sectarian massacres as Fallujah falls to Iraqi government

By James Cogan

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The US-backed prime minister of Iraq, Haider al-Abadi, went on state television Friday to boast that government troops had recaptured the Anbar Province city of Fallujah from Islamic State (ISIS) fighters. After weeks of constant air strikes and artillery bombardments, Special Forces units pushed far enough into the city to raise the Iraqi flag over the former government building.

In 2004, the American military reduced Fallujah to rubble as part of its ruthless drive to crush popular resistance to the US occupation of the country. Now, what was rebuilt is being reduced to rubble again. Video and photography from the city show scenes of devastated streets.

Freelance journalist Florian Neuhofer wrote on Sunday: “Most buildings bear the scars of battle. Houses are pockmarked with bullet holes, sometimes walls have been knocked down by heavy ordinance. On the city’s outskirts, coalition air strikes have collapsed roofs and turned buildings into mangled shapes of concrete and iron bars.”

Murderous combat is still taking place. Most reports indicate that the surviving several hundred ISIS militants, surrounded and expecting no mercy, particularly from the Shiite militias that make up a large proportion of the government forces, are fighting to the death. The Islamist extremists, who took control of the city in early 2014, have constructed a network of tunnels under the city from which they are launching suicide bombings and other attacks.

Over the weekend, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), which has a team outside Fallujah, reported that 4,000 civilians were able to pass through government lines and reach relief camps. NRC spokesperson Karl Scheembri told journalists: “We’re extremely concerned that the most vulnerable—pregnant women, the elderly, sick persons and people with disabilities—have been unable to come out and they are the ones who need aid most after months under siege with no food, no water and no medical aid.”

There are no reliable reports as to the number of civilians who have been killed or wounded. The estimate of how many people were trapped inside the city by the government siege ranged from 50,000 to 90,000.

To provide a justification in advance for casualties among the predominantly Sunni Muslim population of Fallujah, the Shiite-dominated Iraqi government had declared that people were being used by ISIS as “human shields.” Now that some people have been able to flee, government forces are declaring that the city is “deserted” in order to justify indiscriminate attacks. Florian Neuhoof wrote: “Unconstrained by fears of civilian casualties, the army is now bombarding Fallujah relentlessly. From beyond the ruined outskirts of the battered city, batteries of 155mm howitzers and Katyusha rocket launchers pour fire into the centre....”

The Iraqi forces are being accompanied by US, British and Australian military “advisors,” whose main role is to call in and target air strikes against alleged ISIS positions. A despicable editorial in the June 20 edition of the Rupert Murdoch-owned *Australian* boasted of the prominent role that Australian Air Force FA-18 fighter bombers have played in the destruction of Fallujah, declaring that Australian units “deserve the gratitude of the nation and the free world.”

On June 18, the governor of Anbar Province, Suhaib al-Rawi, issued an impassioned condemnation of the wholesale killing and torture that is being inflicted by Shiite militias, known as the “Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF). He told the Rudaw news agency: “Iraqi troops continue their advance into Fallujah, but with it, images of inhumane acts and abuse have come out, perpetrated by some armed groups that are sectarian in every sense.” A spokesperson for one of the Sunni tribes in Fallujah told Rudaw that at least 650 people are missing, feared murdered by the militias.

Suhaib al-Rawi told Al Jazeera last week that he believed “more than 49 civilians have lost their lives under torture.”

Al Jazeera correspondents interviewed three men in a camp outside the city who claimed they had been subjected to brutal treatment by Shiite militias and had witnessed a number of executions.

Mahmoud al-Naji al-Shoukor reported that the men in his group fleeing Fallujah had been separated from their women and children and taken to a makeshift detention centre. “They put some of us in a line on our knees, with our eyes blindfolded,” he said. “They started taking us one by one. They killed several men before it was my turn. I could hear the men scream and beg the militia to spare their lives—they were swearing that they never fought, and that they never joined ISIS—but that did not stop the militia from killing them.”

Mahmoud claimed he survived only because someone arrived who demanded that the killings stop, on the orders of the head Shiite cleric in Iraq, Ali al-Sistani. The other two men testified they had been beaten with pipes and tortured in other ways for six days before being rescued by government-aligned Sunni fighters.

Human Rights Watch released a report last week stating that it had received “credible allegations of summary executions, beatings of unarmed men, enforced disappearances, and mutilation of corpses by government forces over the two weeks of fighting.” It cited one case in which 17 males, including a 17-year-old teenager, were lined up and shot by Iraqi police and members of the PMF.

The atrocities against civilians are being carried out under the eyes of US and allied military forces. The Obama administration, the Cameron government in Britain and the Turnbull government in Australia share full responsibility for every war crime that is committed.

Further atrocities are now being prepared. Having destroyed the Anbar Province city of Ramadi and nearly recaptured Fallujah, the US-directed military campaign to shore up Washington’s puppet state in Baghdad is shifting its focus to the northern city of Mosul, which was taken by ISIS in June of 2014. Tens of thousands of troops and PMF militias will be sent to join the disparate government army units, US Marines, Kurdish forces and Christian and Yazidi militias that are already fighting ISIS in the north.

Reports over the weekend indicate that government forces advanced toward Qayara, a town 60 kilometres from Mosul that has a military airfield. This would be used as one of the staging bases for an offensive against the city. An estimated 1.5 million people are believed to be living in Mosul and the surrounding towns and villages.

A measure of the human catastrophe that has been inflicted on Iraq just during the last two years of fighting—on top of the carnage inflicted during the US occupation—was provided a United Nations report released last month. It said that more than 3.4 million people had been “internally displaced,” 2.6 million had fled the country altogether, and a further two million were expected to be turned into refugees by the offensives on Fallujah and Mosul.