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Carnage and corruption in Iraq

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10/27/2009

It is tragic that Iraq hits the headlines only if there is a major explosion with hundreds killed and injured. Yesterday's carnage in Baghdad is the second of its kind in two months, and yet another horrific reminder that the Iraqi people are still paying with their blood for the US-led invasion and occupation of their country.

Though inevitable, there is something morally questionable in the way Afghanistan has replaced Iraq in the news headlines. As the number of casualties suffered by US forces went down in Iraq and as the equivalent numbers of US and British casualties in Afghanistan started to climb, the latter has gradually displaced Iraq in the news schedules. This has given the impression that the situation in Iraq has improved markedly and that the country is making progress on all fronts. Back in June, amid much fanfare, the US forces were "withdrawn" from the Iraqi cities to various US bases around the country.

There is no doubt that the situation has improved for US forces, while British troops were airlifted from the fires of Iraq to be thrown into the flames of Afghanistan. The US plan for Iraq has so far succeeded in reducing its own casualties by pushing more of the Iraqi forces into the battle against the "insurgency" – better known in Iraq as the "honourable patriotic resistance" to distinguish it from the hated al-Qaida-style terrorists attacks.

But try to tell Iraqis who are not part of the ruling circles that their situation has improved since the occupation and they will remind you not only of the countless dead and injured but also of the million-plus orphans and widows, the 2 million who fled the country, and the 2 million internal refugees, most of whom live in dreadful squalor.

They will tell you about the sewage covering the streets of many towns and cities, the lack of clean water, fuel and electricity, and the ever deteriorating health and education services. They will tell you about the more than 50% unemployment, the kidnapping of children, the

fear of women to move freely, and the rapid rise in drug abuse and prostitution. They will describe the horrific methods of torture inflicted on the tens of thousands of prisoners in Iraqi and American jails. They will remind you that if a "world-famous patriot" such as Muntadhar al-Zaidi, who threw his shoes at President Bush, was tortured by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's own guards and forces, what chance ordinary citizens?

Iraqis will also instantly refer you to the corrupt rulers who came to Iraq "on the backs of US tanks". They will tell you of the division of ministries and senior posts among the various sectarian and ethnically identified political allies of the US. Indeed, corruption has reached such levels that the minister of trade and his brothers have been accused of stealing hundreds of millions of dollars by the "Integrity Committee", while the deputy transport minister was caught receiving \$100,000 as the "first instalment" of another huge bribe.

While Iraq and its people continue to suffer, with most of the western media ignoring their plight, President Obama is still pursuing President Bush's goal in Iraq – to have a government in Baghdad that is closely allied to the US. This is incompatible with bringing about a stable, peaceful and democratic Iraq. What US strategists have yet to learn is that the Iraqi people will not freely accept a pro-US regime in Baghdad and that the "exit strategy" will inevitably result in long-term occupation, and bring only more bloodshed and destruction.

Why are the Iraqi people expected to elect a disparate collection of corrupt and sectarian pro-US politicians? The only realistic exit strategy must start with the right of the Iraqi people to self determination, free of American intervention.