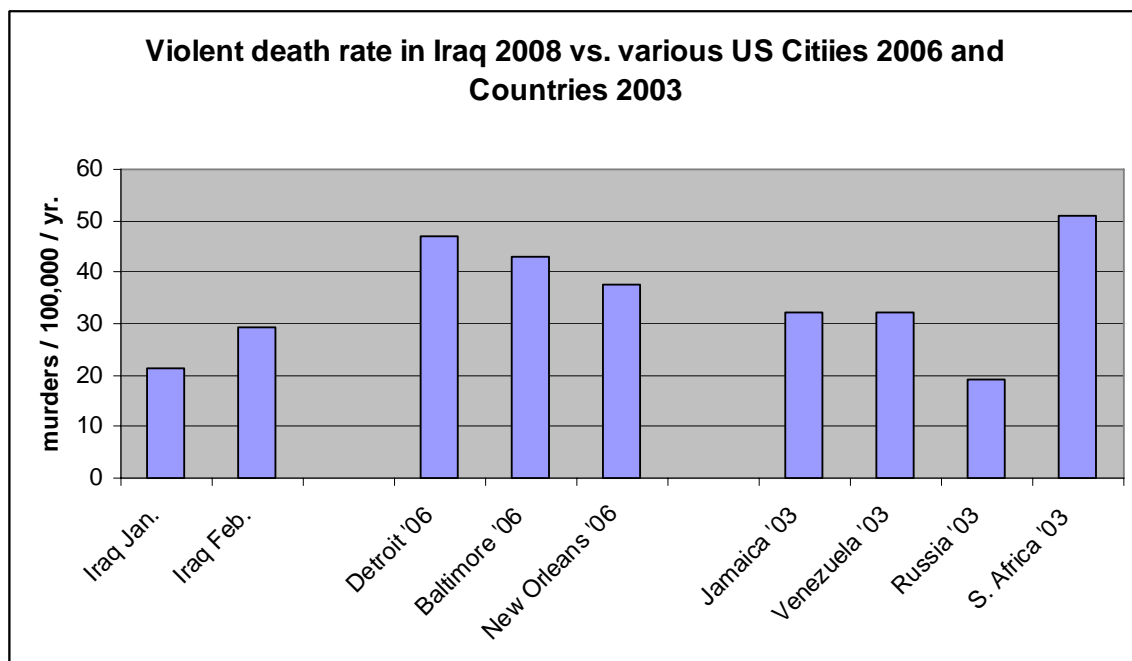


Statement prepared for Heike Hansel, MP & colleagues  
Given by Les Roberts, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University  
Berlin, March 8, 2008

First of all, I thank each of you for making time from your busy schedules in order to meet with us today.

Belligerents in times of war almost always downplay the number of deaths they induce. In Rwanda in 1994, in Sudan and Zimbabwe today, we think that the press, and satellite imagery, and NGO's or UN workers on the ground, would inform us when a major catastrophe is underway. We think it is impossible in this information age, that most of a million people could be murdered somewhere without any nation or the UN expressing outrage over the death toll. But, in spite of hundreds of members of the press being present, that is exactly what has happened in Iraq.

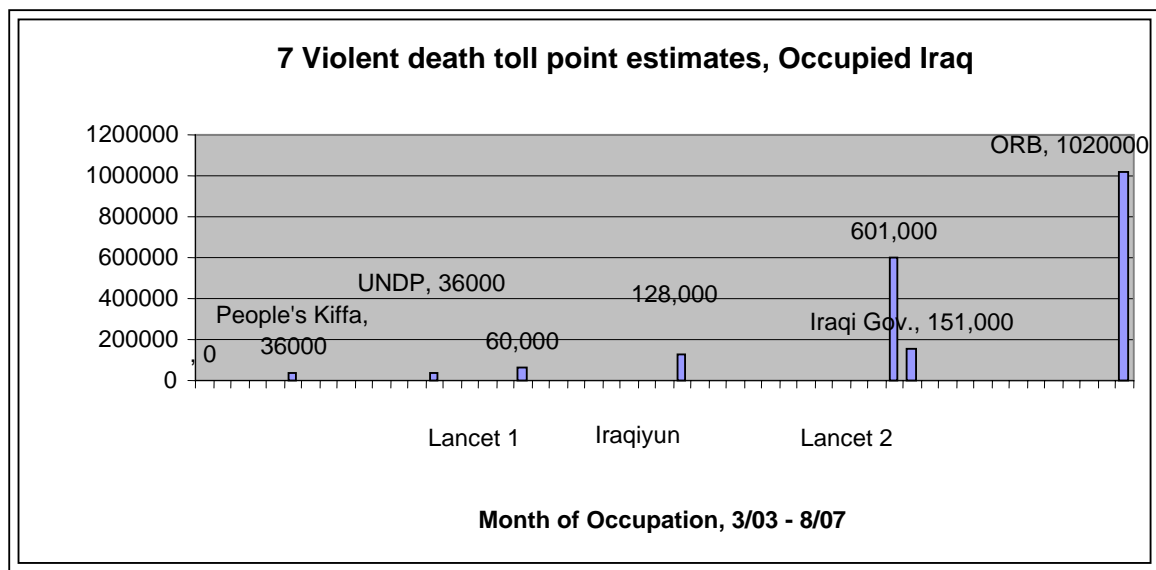
Over the last two months, the Iraqi Government and US Military have claimed that there were 1099 violent deaths in Iraq. This has been repeated in the press all over the world, purported to be evidence that the surge is working. Virtually no one has pointed out the absurdity of these numbers. If this is true, it suggests that the murder rate in Iraq is half that seen in Detroit and Baltimore in 2006 and significantly lower than the rate in Jamaica and Venezuela. I have friends living in Baltimore and friends living in Iraq, and I just don't find this plausible. If these numbers are true, given the death rate in Iraq from natural causes, it suggests that only ~5% of all deaths today are from violence. What is more absurd is that the press just repeats these reports again and again until most people believe them.



Public health data tends to be collected in two ways: passive and active information networks. In passive systems, data flow in via morgue tallies, hospital records, or death certificate submissions. These systems are never complete.

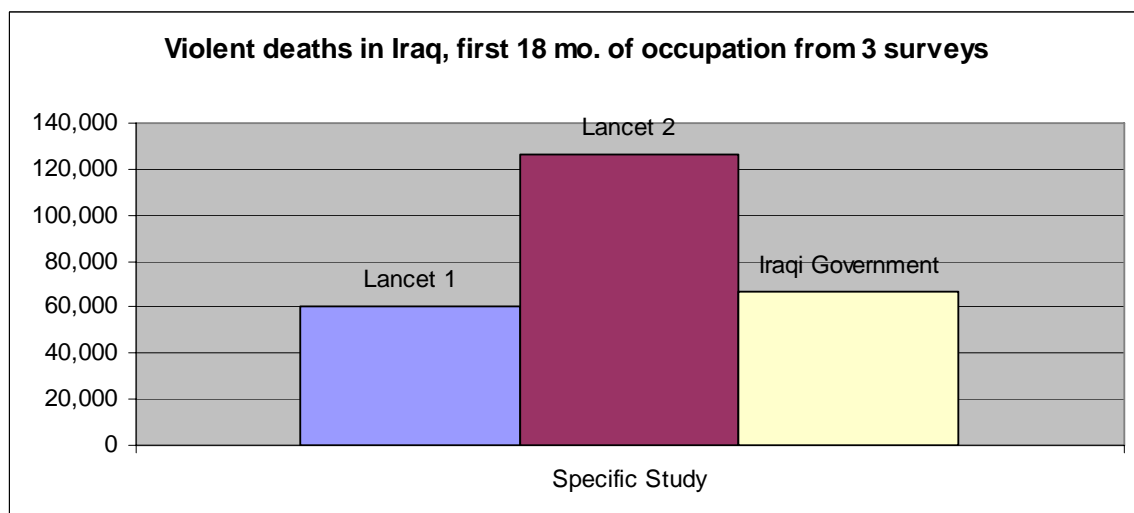
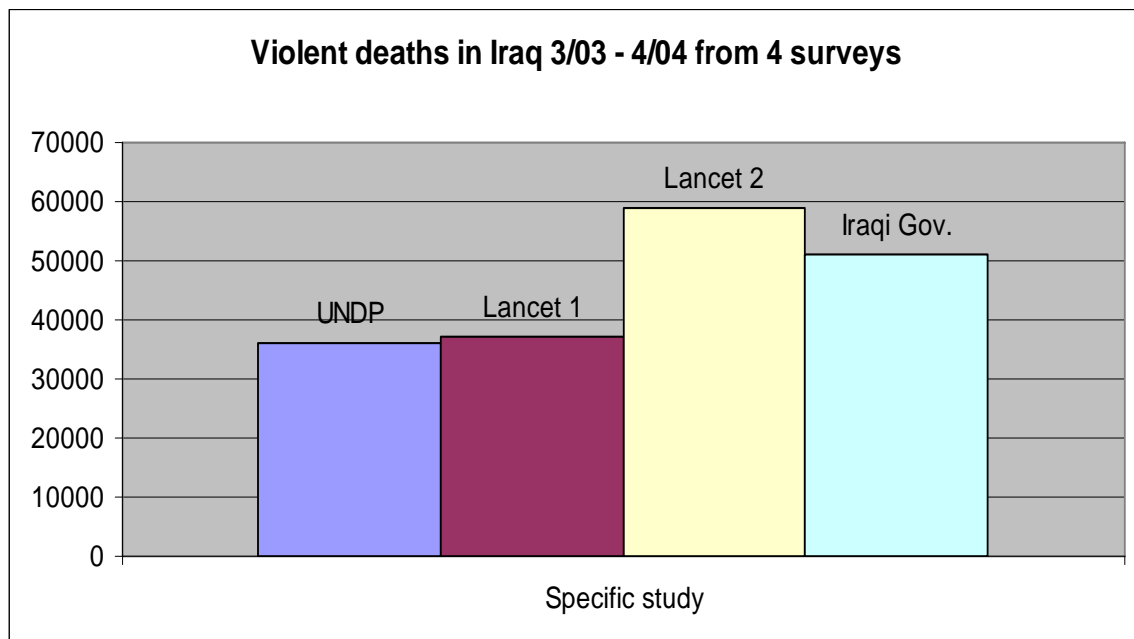
The Western press has focused on passive death numbers in Iraq: mostly a newspaper report tallying project called Iraq Body Count, or the Iraqi Government morgue and hospital based system. Because most of the reports in the press actually come from official Iraqi Government reports, these two systems have had similar tallies and trends over time. Few people realize that in 2002 before the war, when things were functioning comparatively well, only about 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of deaths in Iraq were recorded by the Government.

The other way that public health data is collected is by active finding of cases, usually by population-based methods such as surveys. These almost always produce higher estimates than passive surveillance systems, be it for the rate an illness, an illegal activity, or deaths in times of war. The more incentive there is to not report events, the bigger the discrepancy between passive surveillance networks and surveys tends to be. No one would suggest that a newspaper tally of reported rapes in Berlin would be more than a small fraction of all episodes, and yet they assume that death rates in Iraq from newspaper reports are somehow mostly complete? There have now been 5 surveys and two active attempts by Iraqi national non-governmental groups to count all deaths. These estimates have been roughly 4 to 15 times higher than the various surveillance estimates available at the time of the surveys. These 7 deaths estimates are very consistent with each other in their description of deaths over time. One census estimate of 36,000 deaths as of August of 2003 seems high and is not well documented. The one survey that is the least consistent was one released two months ago that was conducted by the Iraqi government. That survey differed from most other sources suggesting that only one in 6 deaths during the occupation were from violence and that the rate of violence did not increase over the first 40 months of occupation. But this apparently lowest survey, an Iraqi Government estimate, still suggests that over 400,000 excess deaths occurred over the first 40 months of occupation.



What is most astonishing, is that when the 4 surveys which can be compared over the first 13 months, or the three including the one by the Iraqi Government are compared

over the first 18 months, they paint a very consistent picture of a roughly 30% rise in deaths over the pre-war rate due to violence.



A poll by the University of Maryland a year ago found that most Americans believed that less than 10,000 Iraqis had died because of the invasion. This suggests that Americans, and I suspect to a lesser extent Europeans, have little idea about how violent things really are in Iraq. Moreover, by constantly downplaying the death toll by a factor of ten in the western press and publishing estimates far higher and more accurate in the Middle-eastern press, the reporting of the ongoing death toll, a tangible,

non-subjective, verifiable measure, is ironically further driving a wedge between the views and dispositions of peoples in the Middle-east and the West.

You are in a unique position to disturb the process of Western self-dilution. You are a NATO partner of the US. You are their partner in Afghanistan. Given your history and national reluctance to send your soldiers abroad in recent decades, you hold a unique position to demand evidence that your partners are abiding by their obligations under the Geneva Conventions to protect civilians. And to do so, all you need to request from this moment forward is a monthly listing of all violent deaths in Iraq. When it comes you can confirm or refute it very easily and we can discuss how. By applying pressure to have the Coalition report more honestly, I believe you will be serving the long-term interests of both our countries. Moreover, by pointing out that you don't accept the absurd American propaganda currently being produced, Germany will be in the short-term communicating to people in the Middle-east that you have too much concern for the people of Iraq to allow these dismissive reports to go unchallenged.

When the President of Sudan denies widespread massacres in Darfur, when President Ahmadinejad downplays the Holocaust, we are all appalled. Please do not allow Germany to be associated with the Americans doing the same thing as part of their so-called war on terror.

Again, thank you for your time and consideration.