

# U.S. Travesty, Terrorist Atrocity, and UN Tragedy

By Stephen Zunes | August 26, 2003

Iraq is not the first country the United States has intervened in and then tried to have the United Nations try to clean up after it. Never before, however, have the consequences of a U.S. military action been so tragic for the world body and its dedicated civilian workers.

The Bush administration has insisted that the United States—not the international community—should be responsible for securing the peace and determining the political future of the Iraq. Other countries are welcome to put their soldiers and civilian workers on the line, but only under U.S. leadership.

As a result, in order to provide badly needed humanitarian relief to a country that has suffered from a brutal dictatorship, three major wars, devastating sanctions, some of the heaviest bombing in history, a foreign invasion, and a total breakdown of law and order, the United Nations Security Council agreed to partly legitimize the U.S. occupation through a May 2003 resolution recognizing the U.S. and UK as “occupying powers.”

Furthermore, this authority places full responsibility for security on the occupying powers. It does not grant the UN any authority for security, even for its own personnel. The U.S. refused to allow any UN peacekeeping or security troops into Iraq.

While most Iraqis celebrated the collapse of Saddam Hussein’s regime, there is growing outrage at the military occupation. The UN should never have agreed to participate under the authority of the occupation force. The unfortunate result of that participation is that anyone working in Iraq while the U.S. is occupying the country is now a military target.

More than twenty humanitarian workers, administrators, advisers, and other international civil servants paid for this policy with their lives when a terrorist’s bomb destroyed the UN’s Iraq headquarters in a former Baghdad hotel.

Ironically, the vast majority of UN member nations opposed the U.S. invasion of Iraq as a violation of the UN Charter and other fundamental principles of

international law. UN humanitarian workers were among the most outspoken opponents of the twelve-year U.S.-led sanctions regime against the country. Sanctions hurt the Iraqi people far more than they did Saddam Hussein, who took advantage of the chronic shortages to extend his control over the population. It was UN inspectors who correctly recognized that all or virtually all of Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction, delivery systems, and development facilities had already been destroyed some years earlier, thereby challenging the Bush administration’s grossly exaggerated claims of an advanced Iraqi WMD program, which was used to rationalize the U.S. invasion.

Among those killed in the terrorist attack in Baghdad was UN special representative Sergio Vieira de Mello, who had become the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights last year after the U.S. blocked the reelection of his predecessor Mary Robinson, the former Irish president and outspoken human rights advocate. The U.S. preferred de Mello’s more low-key style developed over his decades of service to the United Nations, and while human rights activists initially were disappointed in his appointment, they acknowledged his skills and dedication.

Among the UN posts previously held by the former Brazilian diplomat was that of chief administrator of East Timor during that country’s two-year transition to independence following the withdrawal of Indonesian occupation forces in 2000. Ironically, if Iraq were under a UN Trusteeship (as had been East Timor) rather than being under a U.S. military occupation, this tragedy would probably have never happened. Citizens of non-self-governing territories are generally more willing to trust a UN administration to advance their interests than they do a foreign superpower with strong economic, political, and strategic interests in the region. This makes it easier



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to assume a greater level of cooperation by the subjected population.

In Iraq, however, the Bush administration has insisted that the U.S. military—not UN peacekeeping forces—should be responsible for maintaining peace and security. Already, questions are being raised as to why—despite some beefing up of security around the building preceding the attacks—the UN headquarters was not guarded nearly as well as comparable buildings in Baghdad that are housing U.S. military and civilian personnel. Indeed, the vulnerability of the UN facility may have contributed to its selection as a target for the suicide truck bomber.

President Bush's confident pledge following the attack that "Iraq is on an irreversible course toward self-government and peace" may unfortunately be as premature as his speech on the deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln where he stated that "major combat operations in Iraq have ended." There is disturbing evidence that an increasing number of the violent guerrilla cells in Iraq are not simply the remnants of Baath Party loyalists of the old regime, but independent nationalists and Islamists who were opponents of Saddam Hussein—yet see U.S. forces as foreign occu-

piers, not liberators. As a result, the resistance is likely to grow, not weaken.

Like other counter-insurgency wars in recent history, the United States is now faced with a lose-lose situation. Failure to aggressively pursue the terrorists and other guerrilla elements in Iraq could be seen as a sign of weakness, yet such offensive military actions in a largely urban country would inevitably lead to still greater civilian casualties and—in reaction—still more recruits for extremist groups.

It may not be long before a majority of Americans find themselves in agreement with the longstanding critics of the U.S. invasion and occupation: even putting aside the important moral and legal issues, the U.S. conquest of Iraq has made the United States and the international community less secure rather than more secure.

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Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF), a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC, online at [www.irc-online.org](http://www.irc-online.org)) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at [www.ips-dc.org](http://www.ips-dc.org)). ©2003. All rights reserved.

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### Recommended citation:

Stephen Zunes, "U.S. Travesty, Terrorist Atrocity, and UN Tragedy," (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, August 26, 2003).

### Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2003/0308unbomb.html>

### Production Information:

Writer: Stephen Zunes

Editor: Erik Leaver, IPS

Layout: Tonya Cannariato, IRC

p. 2

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