

Protecting Civilians

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James Ron

As the U.S. gears up for an Iraqi war, scant public attention is being paid to a looming human rights disaster. U.S. officials have promised their warplanes will not indiscriminately target civilians, but have said little about a host of other urgent concerns.

Canada's leaders can perform a crucial service by asking tough questions and demanding real answers, pushing Pentagon planners to examine the human rights implications of their plans.

Contrary to what anti-war protestors argue, the threat to Iraqi civilians does not come only, or even chiefly, from Western bombs. U.S. and British warplanes are likely to use a fair number of smart weapons to avoid hitting civilians, and the accuracy of Western airpower has advanced considerably since the days of Vietnam war-style saturation bombing.

Once U.S. warplanes swing into action, however, Iraqi forces may begin targeting potential insurgents in the country's southern Shi'ite communities. If they do, many innocent civilians will suffer. What will the U.S.-led coalition do in response? Iraqi soldiers killed some 30,000 people in 1991 following a Shi'ite rebellion launched, in part, due to U.S. appeals. Despite their partial responsibility for those events, however, American forces stationed in nearby Kuwait stood idly by.

Kurds in Iraq's northern regions are similarly vulnerable. There, local militias have carved out an autonomous region under the protection of a U.S.-patrolled no-fly zone, and until now, Iraqi forces have not attacked for fear of triggering an American response. Once a U.S.-led shooting war begins, however, at least some Iraqi units may penetrate the northern enclave. If the northern Kurdish militias crumble, who will protect the civilian population?

Perhaps U.S. and British commanders have taken all this into consideration, and are already drawing up plans to insert a civilian protection force once the fighting begins.

The recent record, however, gives cause for concern. In 1999, NATO warplanes tried to avoid hitting civilians in Yugoslavia, but did precious little to protect Kosovo's civilians from deadly Serbian reprisals.

Soon after the U.S.-led air war on Yugoslavia began, tens of thousands of refugees began pouring into Albania and Macedonia. The evidence suggests that Serbian forces launched their ethnic cleansing effort only after the NATO air war began. Serbian troops had previously killed and displaced Kosovar civilians, but until then, had not attempted to comprehensively depopulate the province. By launching the war on Serbia, in other words, American leaders bore partial responsibility for Kosovo's deadly bout of ethnic cleansing.

Despite this weighty moral obligation, the Pentagon was caught unawares and did very little to protect Kosovo's 1.6 million civilians. U.S. and British protection forces were not airlifted into the embattled province, and NATO warplanes flew so high they could not target Serbian paramilitaries. The U.S. had resolved to push Serbian forces out of Kosovo through high-altitude bombing, but was unwilling to risk American lives to physically protect civilians.

As a result, over 10,000 Kosovars died in a very short time, and some 800,000 were violently forced across international borders. Sexual assaults, torture, small massacres, and forced marches took place under the very noses of NATO warplanes and CNN cameras.

And while the Kosovo border had plenty of journalists and human rights researchers on hand, it took weeks for NATO logisticians to bring humanitarian relief to desperate refugees. Transport from Albanian ports to the mountainous Kosovo border was enormously difficult, but NATO planners had not pre-positioned relief supplies or prepared landing strips.

To those watching the 1999 refugee outflow, it almost seemed that the Pentagon had forgotten that there were civilians in Kosovo, and that a NATO air war might lead to their victimization. This oversight was all the more troubling, given that the Kosovo campaign was loudly billed as a humanitarian intervention.

Perhaps the Pentagon has learned from its Kosovo mistakes and has developed comprehensive plans to protect Iraqi civilians once the war begins. Iraqi Shi'ites and Kurds do not vote in U.S. elections, however, and make no contributions to American political parties. Without representation in the U.S. political system, it is hard to get one's interests heard. Recall that several U.S. administrations have been willing to let international sanctions cripple Iraq's healthcare facilities, with devastating consequences for ordinary Iraqis. This does not bode well for a wartime civilian rescue force.

Media reports predict the U.S. will begin attacking Iraq in February 2003. In the meantime, Canada can and should make a difference. It can ask tough questions of U.S. military planners, and can insist that price of Canadian support for the war is a viable protection plan for Iraq's civilians. A human rights disaster looms over the horizon, but its worst effects can be mitigated through proper planning.

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James Ron holds the Canada Research Chair for Conflict and Human Rights at McGill University.