

Two version of the truth

By James Cusick

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Why eight-year-old Hanan Saleh Matrud was killed is not clear. Hanan lived in Karmat Ali, an area known to be hostile to coalition forces in Iraq, when on August 21 last year a patrol from the First Battalion of the King's Regiment were "engaged" by several stone-throwing mobs.

A British soldier fired a warning shot into the air to disperse the stone throwers, which they did, according to the army. But "a number of minutes" later the patrol noticed "a girl who had been cut across the abdominal area". The girl was Hanan and she was still conscious, but the wound was serious. She was taken to the Czech hospital in northern Basra where she died the next day.

However, the account given by Iraqi eyewitnesses – and reported by Amnesty International – and Hanan's family couldn't be more different. One witness, Mizher Jabbar Yassip, said an armoured vehicle stopped outside the entrance to an alley that led to Hanan's house. Three or four soldiers got out. A group of children gathered about 60 or so metres from the vehicle. "Suddenly a soldier aimed and fired a shot which hit Hanan in her lower torso."

Her uncle, Fellah, carried her to the vehicle. Witnesses say the soldiers were reluctant to take her to hospital, but they did. According to Hanan's family, military police photographed the area and interviewed witnesses the day after the killing. Hanan's body was also photographed in the Czech hospital.

However, Adam Ingram, the armed forces minister, in a statement made on January 19, said no investigation was initiated by the UK military authorities into Hanan's death. She is only one of 37 civilians that UK forces have been involved in killing since May 1 last year.

Just as Ingram was apparently certain that Hanan's death had not been investigated, he is equally clear that his office has received "no adverse or other reports" into the treatment of detainees in Iraq. Like the differing accounts of the King's Regiment and Hanan's family, Ingram's version of events and the account offered by the International Committee of the

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Red Cross (ICRC) in Geneva, cannot both be correct.

Foreign Secretary Jack Straw wrote to his shadow Michael Ancram last week, detailing an ICRC report that was delivered on February 26 this year to the office of US administrator in Iraq Paul Bremer and officials from the office of the UK special representative for Iraq. At the meeting, the ICRC presented a report on the treatment of detainees in Iraq by coalition personnel.

Straw says the meeting was reported to London by the UK special representative on February 27. A telegram noted that a copy of the report had already been provided to Permanent Joint Headquarters (Northwood). Although it was signed by the UK's Special Representative in Iraq, Sir Jeremy Greenstock "in the usual way that telegrams are signed by Heads of Mission" Straw admitted Greenstock hadn't in fact seen the ICRC report, and hadn't been at the meeting.

There is mounting political concern over why Prime Minister Tony Blair said he did not see the report until Monday, May 10, and said he did not know of the allegations it contained. Nor did Jack Straw, Ingram or Geoff Hoon. But the February report from the ICRC and the allegations of torture and abuse it contained was not – as this newspaper reported last week – the first alarm bell to have rung in Iraq. It was, in fact, only a summary of a year of ICRC probes in Iraq.

According to the ICRC in Geneva, the February report "summarises a series of working papers handed over to the coalition forces". ICRC delegates' findings were based on their observations and private interviews with prisoners of war and detainees during the 29 visits the ICRC conducted in 14 places of detention throughout Iraq between March 31 and October 24, 2003. The ICRC also says delegates met regularly with representatives of the coalition authorities to "present them with serious concerns regarding the treatment of persons protected by the Third and Fourth Geneva Conventions" who the coalition were holding in Iraqi detention centres.

The ICRC's director of operations, Pierre Krahenbuhl, now believes the leaking of the February report may have damaged the political neutrality of his organisation, and has tried to close down the material coming out of the ICRC. But Krahenbuhl is not back-tracking on any of the content listed and re-emphasised its conclusions in report after report during a year of occupation in Iraq. He dismisses accusations that the reports were mainly on issues of food and water. "I won't go into details," he said in Geneva, "but the issues are clearly of treatment ... some of the elements the ICRC found were tantamount to torture."

The ICRC in London told the Sunday Herald that after each visit or inspection a report was compiled and delivered to coalition authorities. An accompanying discussion with senior coalition figures was routine.

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In addition to the ICRC's review of incidents where detainees had been shot or wounded, the ICRC also investigated the places where mistreatment of detainees was said to be taking place. The mandate of the Geneva Convention technically allowed the ICRC unrestricted access. The military intelligence sections of Baghdad's Camp Cropper and Abu Ghraib jails were inspected. Other inspections included Al-Baghdadi, Heat Base and Hubbania Camp in the Ramadi governorate; the Tikrit holding area (the former Saddam Hussein Islamic School); a former train station, Al Khaim, that had been converted into a military base; the ministry of defence and presidential palace in Baghdad, and the former mukhabarat secret police office in Basra.

An ICRC source in London said: "Before and after each visit we would speak to the person in charge of the facility. We expected them to look at our recommendations. After each visit there would have been a report and a dialogue with the coalition authorities – both UK and US."

Yet nobody in either the Foreign Office or MoD is able to say if senior ministers read these reports and who should have ensured they did. The Sunday Herald has established how this should have happened. The Foreign Office has a seconded adviser on human rights working with the "ministry of human rights" inside the coalition authority in Baghdad. The ICRC report would have immediately gone to the "human rights" department and then be sent by secure "telegram" to London for distribution.

So how did Blair, Straw, Hoon and Ingram fail to get the reports? A Whitehall source said: "It is entirely possible that ministers did not see these reports – but only if they had specifically asked not to see them. Not everything goes to ministers – especially if they wanted the bad news kept well away from them."

James Cusick is Westminster Editor of the Glasgow Sunday Herald in Scotland.