When Publicity Becomes Propaganda

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THAT propaganda is not the sole domain of dictators was brought home yet again by recent coalition activities in Iraq. Against the background of exploding sectarian violence, and petty internal bickering between Iraqi politicians (those ungrateful beneficiaries of democracy and freedom!), the Bush-Blair axis is desperate to justify the invasion and occupation of Iraq. Nothing else could explain the cynical timing of "Operation Swarmer" - billed as "the largest air assault operation" since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 (coming soon to a war theatre near you...). All this, even as the third anniversary of the Iraq invasion is marked by widespread global protests.

So let us evaluate the claims being made by the US Army about this offensive. "This was an operation to achieve military aims. This was not a PR exercise" according to Lt. Col. Edward Loomis. Listening to this, one is reminded of the old Bangla proverb: *"Thakurgharey key rey?" "Ami kola khai na"* (which is hard to translate, but in effect refers to a degree of defensiveness that stinks to high heaven...)

In November 2004, the US launched a major "counter-insurgency campaign", which effectively demolished the town of Fallujah, at the cost of thousands of Iraqi lives - though officially those are not counted by the US military. Fortunately, others such as the Iraq Body Count, DO keep track! On that occasion, the considerable might of the US military machine was unleashed on a densely populated area, with predictable consequences.

By contrast, "Operation Swarmer" was basically a routine exercise in a sparsely populated desert area. The only thing exceptional about it was the number of troops - in particular Iraqi troops - involved. While one may be singularly grateful for that particular contrast between the two offensives, and what it implies in terms of the relative losses of human life - and I, for one, am *very* grateful! - it nevertheless reinforces the suspicion that "Operation Swarmer" is little more than a PR exercise...

Another interesting contrast between the two operations is over the issue of aerial bombardment. The attack on Fallujah saw dozens of heavy air strikes in 2004. "Operation Swarmer" however involved no airstrikes, despite being described somewhat misleadingly, as an aerial assault operation. All the aircraft used were in fact troop-carrying helicopters. But given the considerable liberties with the truth regularly taken in the use of terms like transparency, justice and democracy, this must be counted as a minor fib...!

While the assault on Fallujah saw the deployment of around 17,000 American troops, only a few hundred were involved in "Operation Swarmer". In fact, by the second day of the operation, the total fighting force i.e. Americans *and* Iraqis, had already been scaled down to only 900 - hardly what one would consider required troop numbers for a major offensive!

Nor were the results of the operation anything to write home about. The first three days saw no clashes and no casualties among Americans or Iraqi troops (so where *were* all these dangerous insurgents??). While several caches of weapons and explosives had been recovered, most of these were the kind of small arms one might expect to find the homes of rural Iraqis, who have been increasingly engaged in protecting their homes and families.

All this points to the inevitable conclusion that the main purpose of this much-publicised "assault" was to distract attention from the opposition to the war as the third anniversary of the invasion approached, as well as to highlight the ability of Iraqi troops to operate independently (UK Independent). Indeed, the UK Secretary of State for Defence, John Reid, was at pains to point out that "this operation is Iraqi-led, something that on this...scale would not have been possible 12 months ago". This, even as he was forced to concede that Iraqi troops were not capable of taking control yet in *any* of Iraq's 18 provinces!

Nevertheless, he insisted that the army was growing in strength, claiming that there were now 240,000 troops, with 59 battalions capable of taking the lead operations. One can only hope that his calculations do not include the "ghost battalions" previously identified by the veteran Iraqi politician Mahmoud Othman. These are units in which officers pocket the pay of non-existent or long-absent soldiers. Dr. Othman mentioned knowing at least one unit supposedly