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WHY DID WE GO TO WAR IN IRAQ?

Dr Jenny Grounds, Medical Association for Prevention of War, Iraq War Inquiry Group

I wonder how many of you remember where you were when you first heard of the attack on the world trade centre. I certainly do.

I also remember starkly what my first reaction was: there goes any hope for real action on climate change, or nuclear disarmament or world peace, because this will lead to war in the middle east propagated by a vengeful and opportunistic George W Bush and his team of warmongers. It was only later that I started to contemplate the horror of what had happened to the thousands of people affected directly by the attack.

The only good to come of it all was that MAPW increased its membership and activity, and I started going to meetings and getting landed with a series of executive roles over the ten or so years since then. Health care practitioners have a particular type of concern about war, as we are the professionals called upon to repair the damage to soldiers and civilians and we know that what we do can never put people's lives back the way they were before. Despite all the good work of the Red Cross, Medics sans Frontiers, huge losses of life, limb and function of people and communities will always result from armed conflict.

We all campaigned very strongly against the invasion of Iraq in those months leading up to it: the biggest rallies held in Australian cities for many years took place, the new social media was abuzz with protest, and many prominent people like Desmond Tutu urged the leaders of US, UK and our own John Howard for restraint.

But the lies kept rolling off the lolling tongues of the war-dogs. Saddam Hussein was hiding nuclear weapons: this despite protests of the weapons inspectors themselves; 2/3 of US citizens had been tricked into believing that Saddam Hussein was at least partly responsible for 9/11 attacks. And then there was the promise that it would be short and sweet, over in a jiffy with minimal loss of life: nothing could be further from the truth.

A decision to take a country to war is probably without exception the single most solemn responsibility of any government.

When Governor General Peter Hollingworth asked John Howard about the legal processes involved in his decision, first with the Afghanistan war to which he offered the ANZUS Treaty as sufficient basis for action by his government.

In relation to Iraq Peter Hollingworth quotes John Howard as saying that no approval

by the governor general was required, nor had it been obtained for commitment of troops to Bougainville, Somalia, Bosnia, Cambodia, Rwanda, Vietnam or East Timor.

Howard was on very shaky ground both legally and with regard to intelligence.

The ANZUS treaty is poorly understood by many Australians but one would expect the Prime Minister to know that it in no way commits us to automation when it comes to going to war because the US is doing it.

It is a simple agreement to discuss and inform about any such decisions by either party. And it is based on the UN charter, set up in 1945 to promote "universal respect for, and observance of, human rights" and to take "joint and separate action to that end."

The UN promotes diplomacy as a means for resolving conflict.

Only the United Nations, not individual states, had the right to decide whether Iraq was in breach of UN resolutions. For that reason alone the invasion is seen by many to be in breach of international law.

Yet Prime Minister Howard joined us up to the US coalition of the willing right from the moment the world trade centre was hit.

And did he consider the likely effects of such an invasion?

How predictable was this prolonged war? Could he have known that it would lead to such a huge body count, infrastructure demolition, bitter lingering hatred, millions of displaced people, many trying to get to Australia only to be drowned or locked up like criminals themselves when they get here?

Many informed parties predicted a long and destabilizing war.

Several studies on the likely humanitarian effects had been produced, two by Medact, the UK counterpart of MAPW, and one by the Centre for Economic and Social Rights, (in New York) and groups which specialize in managing the consequences of armed conflict like Red Cross/Red Crescent and UNICEF.

They all showed that any attack on Iraq would threaten the lives, health and environment of many Iraqis, especially children, who were already suffering terrible malnutrition and disease due to the first Iraq war and the subsequent economic sanctions. As an indicator of this, the infant mortality rate in Iraq was 65 per 1000 live births in 1991 but had nearly doubled by 1998. The Oil for food program helped a little but was insufficient and corrupted, with two successive heads resigning in protest at its effects on innocent peoples lives. All reports indicated that the international community had little capacity to respond to the harm that children would suffer by a new war. A statement issued by a group of Australian federal politicians in 2003 opposed our involvement in the war, and stated that "Civilians are the first casualties of war. War will mean further humanitarian devastation, and a flood of new refugees".

What we have seen since then is that these predictions have been born out many-fold. Total deaths since the invasion began are up to nearly 120,000, with 107 deaths happening since the start of this month from continuing violence.

Suicide bombings are a huge contributor to these numbers these days. A study published by the British Medical Journal *The Lancet* a year ago details the extent and effect of these blast attacks, which kill children more than adults, which cause injuries which require sophisticated medical care to manage, mostly not available now in Iraq, and account for nearly 40,000 injuries, lethal and non-lethal between 2003 and 2010.

MAPW and others have called loudly and clearly for an inquiry into Australia's involvement in the Iraq war before.

This year, in the lead up to the tenth anniversary of the Invasion on March 9th 2013, Sue Wareham our former president started sending out signals again over the issue and in a very short time she found she had attracted the interest of a group of lawyers, academics former heads of the Defence Department, former weapons inspectors, and a former prime minister, all of whom were prepared to put pen to paper, and launch a fresh call for an Inquiry.

"Why did we go to War in Iraq?" is the book that got us on the speakers list at this forum, which is after all a sort of writers' festival. I have to say that I wrote only a very small part of it.

But I can commend it to you as a document which details events leading up to the war accurately.

It also argues powerfully that a decision to send our young men and women to pursue that war of aggression in a land far away was unwise, unjust, unfruitful, and very probably illegal, and is requiring of close scrutiny.

As the executive summary states " Unless we know how decisions were made to go to war, we cannot safeguard Australia against undertaking ill-founded military actions in the future".

The report does not prescribe a particular type of inquiry, but discusses the pros and cons of each possibility.

It also stays this side of recommending a management plan, preferring to leave this to the recommendations of the people holding an inquiry.

However there is general agreement by writers that the minimum treatment would have to be amendment to the War Powers Bill, allowing for a majority in both houses of parliament as a whole, to approve Australia's involvement. This would give an opportunity to discuss the predicted humanitarian effects of such drastic action as war.

It is also recommended that Australia, having agreed to extend the jurisdiction of the

International Criminal court to crimes of aggression, including by Australia, a government would be wise to check the legality of a decision to go to war very carefully, by consulting widely and including a check with the ICJ itself to avoid future prosecution by that court.

Yesterday an email came to me about Desmond Tutu's withdrawal from speaking at a Leadership event in South Africa because he was feeling very uncomfortable with the idea of sharing the stage with another invited speaker, Tony Blair. I'd like to finish with a quote from his statement.

"On what grounds do we decide that Robert Mugabe should go the International Criminal Court, Tony Blair should join the international speakers' circuit, bin Laden should be assassinated, but Iraq should be invaded, not because it possesses weapons of mass destruction, as Mr Bush's chief supporter, Mr Blair, confessed last week, but in order to get rid of Saddam Hussein?"

"The cost of the decision to rid Iraq of its by-all-accounts despotic and murderous leader has been staggering, beginning in Iraq itself. Last year, an average of 6.5 people died there each day in suicide attacks and vehicle bombs, according to the [Iraqi Body Count project](#). More than 110,000 Iraqis have died in the conflict since 2003 and millions have been displaced. By the end of last year, nearly 4,500 American soldiers had been killed and more than 32,000 wounded.

"On these grounds alone, in a consistent world, those responsible for this suffering and loss of life should be treading the same path as some of their African and Asian peers who have been made to answer for their actions in the Hague.

"But even greater costs have been exacted beyond the killing fields, in the hardened hearts and minds of members of the human family across the world.

Has the potential for terrorist attacks decreased? To what extent have we succeeded in bringing the so-called Muslim and Judeo-Christian worlds closer together, in sowing the seeds of understanding and hope?"

"Leadership and morality are indivisible. Good leaders are the custodians of morality. The question is not whether Saddam Hussein was good or bad or how many of his people he massacred. The point is that Mr Bush and Mr Blair" (and I would add Mr Howard) "should not have allowed themselves to stoop to his immoral level.

"If it is acceptable for leaders to take drastic action on the basis of a lie, without an acknowledgement or an apology when they are found out, what should we teach our children?"

The campaign to call for an inquiry into the Iraq war is called IWIG and it has a website and face book page, so please have a look and show your support if you are convinced as I am that change is needed to prevent our troops being involved in further unjust wars.