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The coalition's reputation takes another hit

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The scandal over abuses of Iraqi prisoners by coalition forces continues to grow. Despite promises of punishment for those found guilty of such abuse—and doubts over the veracity of photographs showing abuse by British soldiers—the damage to the coalition's reputation may prove irreparable

OVER the past few months, the credibility of the coalition that invaded Iraq has been damaged by its failure to find weapons of mass destruction and its inability to keep the peace. In recent days, it has been undermined further by the publication of pictures of American and British troops abusing Iraqi prisoners. Photographs broadcast by CBS, an American television network, showed naked prisoners being forced by American soldiers into degrading poses, including simulated sexual acts. Britain's *Daily Mirror* published a picture of what seemed to be a British soldier urinating on a hooded Iraqi captive, who the newspaper said was later thrown from a moving vehicle. And if these images had not already caused enough international outrage, on Tuesday May 4th American officials revealed that two Iraqi prisoners had been killed—one by a soldier, one by a civilian CIA contractor—and that the deaths of ten others detained in Iraq and Afghanistan were still under investigation.

Reuters/Courtesy of the New Yorker



The coalition's leaders, desperate to contain the damage, are promising full investigations, and punishments for the guilty parties. On Wednesday, as Britain's prime minister, Tony Blair, told Parliament that he regarded mistreatment of prisoners as "wholly unacceptable", President George Bush went on two Arabic television channels, pledging that soldiers who murdered or abused Iraqi prisoners would be "brought to justice". However, Mr Bush risked causing further anger in the Muslim world by stopping short of apologising in person.

On Thursday, the *Washington Post* published photographs of yet more instances of American troops maltreating prisoners. The newspaper also quoted senior White House officials as revealing that Mr Bush had scolded his defence secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, for failing to improve conditions for Iraqi detainees and failing to inform the president about investigations into the abuse cases. Rising anger in Congress over the scandal has led to speculation that Mr Rumsfeld may be forced to resign.

The abuses by American soldiers are believed to have taken place late last year at the Abu Ghraib prison near Baghdad. Lieutenant-General Ricardo Sanchez, the commander of American forces in Iraq, ordered an inquiry in January after receiving reports of the incidents. In March, criminal charges were filed against six members of a military-police battalion. On Monday, it was announced that six other American officers, in positions of authority at the jail, had been given a "reprimand" and a seventh had received a "letter of admonishment". Though the seven had not carried out abuses themselves, said Mr Sanchez, they had been responsible for setting standards of conduct among their men.

The alleged abuses by British soldiers, of an Iraqi arrested for stealing, were supposedly perpetrated several months ago by members of the Queen's Lancashire Regiment in Basra, in southern Iraq. However, questions have been raised about the authenticity of the photographs depicting the abuses. Military sources have said that a rifle and an army truck shown in the photographs are different from the types used by British forces in Iraq. They also questioned the lack of visible injuries, or even sweat, on the near-naked prisoner in the pictures. Such doubts have given rise to suggestions that the

photographs may show a reconstruction of the alleged incident, rather than the real thing. The *Daily Mirror* insists, however, that the pictures are real. It says the two soldiers who provided them have claimed that "hundreds" more such pictures are in circulation among British troops.

As if the allegations of mistreating Iraqi prisoners were not enough, on Monday a United Nations human-rights official, Paul Hunt, called for an independent inquiry into whether American forces had used indiscriminate force in civilian areas during their month-long siege of Fallujah. American troops have been battling with Iraqi and foreign fighters in the central Iraqi city since the murder and mutilation of four American contractors there, in late March. However, Mr Hunt said that according to some reports, 90% of the 750 people thought to have died during the siege were non-combatants. While acknowledging that reliable information was hard to obtain, he said there were credible claims of "serious breaches of international humanitarian and human-rights law" by coalition forces in Fallujah.

On Wednesday, a group of 14 Iraqi families who say their relatives were unlawfully killed by British forces took their cases to the High Court in London, seeking damages on the grounds that the killings were a denial of the victims' right to life under the European Convention on Human Rights. Despite the growing number of cases where coalition troops' conduct in Iraq is being questioned, the evidence so far still points to isolated cases of serious misconduct, rather than any systematic and officially sanctioned torture or shoot-to-kill policy. Nevertheless, America's and Britain's reputations are bound to be seriously damaged, especially among those whose doubts over the coalition's motives for invading Iraq were always strongest.

Anger in the Arab and wider Muslim world at America's policies in the Middle East will only have been intensified by the prominence that the region's media have given to the alleged abuses by coalition forces. Of course, the Arab press's angry editorials would have more credibility if they did not so often remain silent on much worse abuses by their own countries' despotic regimes. And the condemnations by the UN's human-rights envoy might have more force if the UN itself were not mired in allegations of multi-billion-dollar corruption over its former oil-for-food programme for Iraq. Nevertheless, having claimed higher motives for invading Iraq, America and its allies can only expect to be judged by more exacting standards than those by which others are measured.

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