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News / **IRAQ: UNCENSORED**

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December 19, 2006

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You can't get much further from the chaos and destruction of the Iraq war than Hanapepe. Here on Kauai's sleepy west side, alaea (Hawaiian salt) is made in traditional ponds beside a salt crescent beach and sugar cane fields.

But here, under a wooden pavilion at Salt Pond Beach Park, before a gathering of some 40 concerned citizens, independent journalist Dahr Jamail recently spoke about the war in Iraq. It was Jamail's last speaking engagement after addressing groups at Oahu's Church of the Crossroads, the University of Hawaii's School of Communications and, on Kauai, Island School, Lydg Park as well as an aired segment on Hawaii Public Radio and two appearances on Kauai Community Radio KKCR.

Jamail's trip to Hawaii was organized and sponsored by Janos Samu and the Kauai Peace Group, American's Friend's Service Committee and many individuals, according to Kauai Peace Group's Ray Catania.

Wearing a blue Aloha shirt and kukui nut lei, Jamail discussed U.S. geopolitical strategy in the Middle East, what he called the failure of America's corporate media and his own experiences in occupied Iraq. Jamail visited Iraq four times between November 2003 and February 2005, totaling eight months on the ground as an unembedded journalist.

Jamail, who has written for the Nation, the Independent, the Guardian, Asia Times and Inter Press Service, has also reported for Democracy Now!, the BBC and many other media outlets. He has been translated into more than ten languages. Born and raised in Houston, Texas, Jamail formerly worked as a mountaineering guide in Alaska, but explained that his desire to combat what he termed "the corruption of the mainstream media" led him to Baghdad.

"Nobody wants to be kidnapped and staring into the camera saying 'Bush please pull out all the troops.'"
- Dahr Jamail

Without the protection of U.S. troops, Jamail had to do his best not to stand out while he was gathering information in the streets. "I cut my hair short, grew a beard, dressed locally and my interpreter picked me up in a beat-up old car at different times. We would drive around to be sure we weren't being followed, go to some pre-set interviews and then come back and



quickly as possible,” Jamail said.

Jamail used British journalist Robert Fisk’s term “mouse journalism” to describe how he worked, saying that the alternative was to report as a captive from inside a hotel as many other journalists do.

“It’s frightening to work in Iraq as a journalist,” Jamail added

While in Iraq, Jamail interviewed Iraqi civilians, government officials, displaced persons and reported extensively on the state of Iraqi hospitals under occupation (read his exhaustive report here).

Jamail prefaced his talk with a warning: “some of this is really horrific, depressing and heavy, but the situation in Iraq is definitely not an upper.” His intention, Jama said, was to encourage citizens to become better informed and more involved in order to make America a better place.

In the lead up to the invasion of Iraq, Jamail began, America’s mainstream media not ask tough questions about alleged links between 9/11 and Iraq or the presence of WMD, but instead acted as a cheerleader for war. Rather than show the horrors of war, Jamail asserted that the U.S. mainstream media’s portrayal of war was like a “perverse video game” or military arms sale presentation with slick graphics and interactive maps.

Citing a study by media watch group FAIR (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting), Jamail explained how U.S. media outlets presented strong biases against anti-war speakers. Jamail also pointed out significant drops in press freedoms in both the U.S. and Iraq between 2002 and 2006 based on the NGO advocacy group Reporters Without Borders’ annual Worldwide Press Freedom Index.

Referring to what is called “perception management,” Jamail quoted Samir Khader, senior editor for Al Jazeera satellite channel who said, “you cannot win a war with rumors, without media and without propaganda.”

Jamail continued with a quote by Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Peter Pace. During a March 2006 appearance on Meet the Press, Pace, the highest ranking member of the U.S. military, when asked how things were going in Iraq said, “I’d say they are going well. I wouldn’t put a great big smiley face on it, but I’d say they are going very, very well from everything you look at.”

In contrast to this statement, Jamail cited statistics spanning the period of post-Gulf War sanctions to the present, including changes in Iraqi life expectancy, infant mortality, child mortality, IDPs (Internally Displaced People), refugees who have fled Iraq and the number of Iraqi civilians killed and wounded since the 2003 U.S. invasion.

Jamail also discussed U.S. military deaths (over 2,900), the frequency with which U.S. troops are killed (2.6 per day, 10/06) and the number injured (over 46,000). Rarely mentioned, however, were the deaths of some 600 civilian contractors and an unreported number of so-called Green Card soldiers who, in exchange for fighting with the U.S. military, are offered green cards after successfully completing tours of duty. These are mostly impoverished citizens of Mexico and Central America, but also South Africa and other countries.

Citing U.S. government and non-government sources, Jamail spoke about war-related illnesses amongst soldiers, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and exposure to depleted uranium which is suspected with being, at least in part, linked to the Gulf War syndrome which is believed to have killed over 11,000 veterans of the 1991 war.

Jamail’s descriptions of Iraqi civilian casualties and the shift in deaths generated by occupation forces to death squads led him to discuss reports published in the prominent British medical journal The Lancet which, in October 2004, estimated that there had been around 100,000 excess civilian deaths since the invasion. An October 2005 study by Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health reported that 650,000 Iraqis have died since the start of the war.

Iraq has been in a state of civil war for well over a year, Jamail asserted, but said that the U.S. mainstream media is “consistently about a year behind the ball,” not that only in recent weeks have some media outlets started to use the term “civil war.”

Looking at former U.S. Ambassador to both Honduras (1981-1985) and Iraq (2004-2005), John Negroponte (currently National Intelligence Director), Jamail said that Negroponte and retired Colonel James Steele (of Iran-Contra fame) were also active in counseling "Special Police Commando Units" in Iraq which, according to Jamail, was another term for the death squads which are now running amok in Iraq today.

Horror images of death, disfigurement and torture so familiar to the people of Central America in the 1980s, Jamail said, are replaying in the streets of Iraq today.

"I'd say things are going very, very well." – Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Peter Pace

Shifting from descriptions of the Iraq Jamail experienced first hand between 2003-2005, Jamail talked about what he called "the myth that the U.S. military is in control," propagated by the administration and corporate media. He mentioned increased attacks on the U.S. military, engineering giant Bechtel Corp's hasty retreat from Iraq, unfinished reconstruction projects, missing billions of dollars and the abysmal state of the Iraqi infrastructure (68% lack safe drinking water, energy shortages of all kinds).

This, coupled with massive outbreaks of diseases like hepatitis, cholera and typhoid, over 50% unemployment, over 70% inflation, rampant kidnappings and a drastic drop in the number of Iraqi professionals (doctors, etc.), stands in stark contrast with the U.S.'s elaborate plans in Iraq, Jamail said.

As for the new \$592 million American embassy in Baghdad, according to Jamail, it is a heavily fortified slice of America designed to accommodate up to 8,000 government officials. The facility has 21 buildings that include troop barracks, food courts, gymnasiums, a yoga studio, first-run theaters, a school and more in an area roughly the size of Vatican City.

A couple of years ago there were over 100 U.S. bases in Iraq, Jamail said, but the number has been reduced to some 53 as consolidation takes place, creating massive military complexes like Camp Anaconda northeast of Baghdad. According to Jamail, the U.S. is planning to build between six and twelve enormous military bases in Iraq.

"If you think the U.S. having a permanent world empire is a good thing, then this is really good news." – Dahr Jamail

Jamail does not believe recent gains in Congress by the Democrats will significantly change U.S. strategies and policies. Citing major U.S. policy reports like the 2002 National Security Strategy, Joint Vision 2020 and the Quadrennial Defense Review, Jamail told the crowd not to simply take his word for it, but look up the documents themselves, read, learn and act.

"Information control and manipulating language is how they get away with this," Jamail said. "If for one week Americans could see what was being done in their names, the powers that be would be in big trouble." Jamail railed against what he called "the media's insidious culture of self-censorship" but he also encouraged all to read as much as possible from many varied sources and to write to their local papers and pressure them to cover these issues aggressively.

"Don't feel powerless," Jamail told the crowd. "Get involved, commit to local issues and work to change what you can at home. If there are things that you think aren't good for the people of the island or the island itself, do what's readily available."

Jamail suggested supporting an army resister's family, keeping pressure on the media and pursuing self-education about important issues.

"The onus falls on our shoulders as citizens of this country. If we want to change the direction, we need to figure out what we have to start doing individually and then collectively. Take it to the next level with activism or whatever you are already committed to."

For more information about Dahr Jamail, visit <http://dahr.org/>. A question and answer session with Jamail can be found on page 7 of this issue.

Jon Letn

Other day stories

Reality Check: An Interview with Dahr Jamail



Inside the “bloodiest war on record for journalists” from a writer who has been warned not to return

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Obama Mania

Obama would become first Hawaii-born president in U.S. History

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~ An Overdue Visit ~

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Island-wide Newspaper distribution on Maui, Hawaii
71 Baldwin Avenue Suite B2 & B5
Paia, HI 96779, Ph. 808-579-8020, fax 808-579-8026

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