

INDEFENSIBLE

This century's first major war has entered its most dangerous, nightmarish phase and, despite initial American claims, is causing a humanitarian tragedy of massive proportions. The April 3 rocket strike in the neighbourhood of Baghdad in which dozens were killed and more than 120 injured climaxes a series of such vicious assaults on the civilian population by the invading forces. But more outrageous has been the acknowledgement by the American military that it has resorted to the use of the deadly cluster bombs, which are known to cause indiscriminate damage on a wide area. The forced admission, while giving the lie to the Iraqi people, invites the charge that the American and British forces had violated international rules of war. It should also alert the international community to the enormity of the suffering being inflicted on the civilian population by the so-called coalition forces. Even before the admission by the American and British military that they had used cluster bombs, there were overwhelming humanitarian arguments of calling a halt to the bombing campaign which had uprooted civilian life in the major cities of Iraq. Claims over the precision bombing had been proved hollow, with misdirected missiles falling across the border in Iran and causing also the downing of coalition aircraft in "friendly fire."

Cluster bombs, however, belong to a completely different category. Designed to destroy large concentrations of heavy armour and infantry, these weapons can cause damage on a mass scale. Each cluster scatters around 150 bomblets over a wide area. More than this potential for damage, critics have in particular raised the dangers flowing from the bomb's lack of precision guidance. Dropped from a height, the bomblets can wander off target and also remain unexploded. Rather like landmines, they litter the

ground with the potential to explode months or years later. Their use during the U.S.-led campaign in Kosovo raised worldwide protests, with thousands of unexploded bombs still remaining embedded in the ground. The use of the clusters in Afghanistan again invited protests. It was for the first time on April 3 that the American and British military admitted to the use of cluster bombs in the campaign in Iraq. The admission, after an Iraqi doctor in Baghdad hospital confirmed that 33 civilians had been killed in a cluster bomb attack, came under bizarre circumstances of admission, denial and admission that were a testimony to the strength of the opposition to their use.

As the American war machine rolls on, what is also clear is that the shock and completely justifiable anger expressed by some sections of the international community over the use of the cluster bombs is only matched by the silence in the rest of the world. In two weeks since the launch of the U.S. campaign, the anti-war movement seems to have lost its steam except for sporadic acts of protest. A desensitised world, introduced to the war games during the 1991 conflict in the Gulf, has apparently become immunised to the poignant and heart-rending scenes of human tragedy being brought forcefully home by a plethora of independent media organisations. There is a fatalistic mood of resignation in the capitals around the world. The war, which inflicted huge collateral damage even before it began by undermining the United Nations and the trans-Atlantic alliance, is taking a heavy toll on international conventions. If and when this war is concluded, the U.N. will have much repairing to do. Topping the list is its own credibility, badly eroded by the U.S.' unilateral act of aggression. ■

Courtesy, *The Hindu*, 12 April 2003, Editorial

London Mayor blasts Bush, compares him to Saddam

The mayor of London has launched a blistering attack on US President George W. Bush, comparing the White House administration to the government of former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussain.

In comments broadcast on BBC television news on Thursday night, Mayor Ken Livingstone said Bush was "not the legitimate president" of the United States. "This really is a completely unsupportable government and I look forward to it being overthrown as much as I looked forward to Saddam Hussain being overthrown," he told a meeting at his City Hall head-quarters. His comments were roundly condemned by political opponents, who said they would discourage US tourists visiting London and could trigger an American popular boycott of British exports.

White House spokesman Ari Fleischer dismissed the comments during a news conference in Washington. "First of all, I've never heard of the fellow. Second of all, I wouldn't dignify it with a comment," he said. Livingstone, widely known in Britain as "Red Ken", was an outspoken opponent of British involvement in the US led invasion of Iraq to topple Saddam.

A former maverick member of Prime Minister Tony Blair's Labour Party, he was suspended from the party, years ago and stood against Labour's official candidate in the mayoral election.

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