

Wrong Signal

The light sentences being given to US soldiers found guilty of abominable crimes against Iraqi civilians are an insult to their victims. The sentences also send entirely the wrong signal to the world at large. The latest travesty of justice came with the pathetic sentencing of a US paratrooper who had pled guilty to the rape and murder of a 14-year-old girl in addition to the murder of her parents and six-year-old sister.

Because the 24-year-old soldier, Paul Cortez, cut a plea bargain with the prosecution, under US military law his 100-year sentence will actually mean only ten years in prison. Cortez copied another soldier's plea bargain for the same crime; the other soldier was given 90 years in jail--again likely to be little more than ten years. The US military argues it needs these men's testimony to convict the three other soldiers of this appalling attack in which no other witnesses survived. If the men are found guilty, they could in theory face a death penalty. Though from Abu Ghraib up to now, the evidence of brutal, sadistic and murderous behavior by scores of US soldiers has become all too strong, no convicted American serviceman has yet been handed sentences befitting the crimes.

What is notable is that few of these crimes were committed in the heat of battle when soldiers in any army are pumped up by fear and aggression. The murder of a family of four and the rape of a young girl--for which two soldiers will walk free in 2017--was plotted cold-

heartedly. The five men, manning a traffic checkpoint at Mahmoudiya near Baghdad a year ago, had seen the girl and realized that her father was the only man in the house. Emboldened by alcohol, they broke in and raped the girl while one of their number took the other three family members into another room and shot them dead. When all had raped the child, she too was murdered.

There are many US soldiers serving in Iraq who abhor what their president has forced them to do and are genuinely trying to do some good. These men and women will be as sickened as any decent person by such crimes. But the succession of rape, torture and group murders of which US troops have been convicted or for which they are to stand trial demonstrates a sinister truth which echoes America's failures in Vietnam.

These soldiers knew and understood even less than President Bush, about the country they were sent to invade. When they were not welcomed as liberating heroes, when the ultramodern technology which had blasted away Saddam's armies, proved woefully ineffective to deal with a civil insurgency, the Americans ran out of ideas. Knowing nothing and perhaps caring even less about the Iraqis, they were never in a position to win hearts and minds. Besieged in a foreign land, they dehumanized the Iraqis and once this was done, a catalog of atrocities became inevitable in the same grotesque patterns that culminated in the My Lai massacre in Vietnam.

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N. Korea's Welcome Opening

It was an invitation he couldn't refuse. North Korea asked Mohamed ElBaradei, director of the International Atomic Energy Agency, to Pyongyang to discuss dismantling its nuclear facilities.



can be slow, legalistic and equivocal. But as a keeper of the international nuclear order, it is better than the alternatives--

plant and, less than five years later, claimed a successful test of a nuclear bomb. North Korea signed the precursor to what could, if all goes much better than expected, eventually turn into a nuclear disarmament deal.

Under the pact, Pyongyang must shut down its Yongbyon nuclear reactor, allow IAEA inspectors back into the country and, within 60 days, disclose all its nuclear material and operations. In return, Pyongyang will get a dribble of heavy fuel oil, to be followed by more oil and aid if and when it begins to dismantle its nuclear facilities.

Although it's encouraging that Pyongyang has invited ElBaradei, the key test will be whether it discloses anything meaningful about its nuclear operations--which U.S. officials believe include stockpiles of bomb-ready plutonium and a program to enrich uranium. More critical still will be whether the famously secretive North Koreans will allow IAEA inspectors the access that will be required to verify their claims.

ElBaradei infuriated the Bush administration before its 2003 invasion of Iraq by refusing to endorse the U.S. view that Saddam Hussein had a functioning nuclear weapons program. He was eventually proved correct, of course, and in 2005 was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize (an award that was also an obvious rebuke to President Bush).

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The IAEA has not always enjoyed such access, or such a reputation. North Korea kicked out IAEA inspectors in December 2002, then fired up its plutonium

a conclusion even the Bush administration appears to have accepted.

watchdog agency, is imperfect in the way that all bureaucracies are imperfect; it

'Nairobi'

Once hailed as a 'City in the Sun', the Kenyan capital is increasingly depicted as reeling under violent crime where crooks with weapons--some only toys but frighteningly realistic--roam with impunity.

Police statements in early February that at least 50 civilians and security officials were killed in the space of a month sent Nairobi residents into a fit of panic--but also put security forces under new scrutiny.

What started decades ago as a trickle of low-level crime such as pick-pocketing has swelled into what some now call a tidal wave of violent robberies, burglary, rape of minors and carjackings--though Kenyan police have not actually released any official figures.

And the trouble has cut across social classes in this cosmopolitan hub of more than 2.5 million residents.

A joke making the rounds says Nairobi should be rebaptised "Nairobi"--a disturbing tag for a city that hosts the headquarters of two United Nations agencies and regularly welcomes celebrities, royalty and the Kenyan elite.

The Standard, a mass circulation daily that has chronicled the crime scene, went one step further in a screamer headline saying this east African country might just as well be called "Gangland Kenya."

Not all agree. Crime is not new though "the brutality (of the gangsters) is new," conceded national police spokesman Gideon Kibunjah.

But "we are increasing patrols and surveillance of notorious

spots. It is not as alarming as people say," he said. Police were quick to tout a huge security operation that caught and killed one of the country's most wanted gangsters, Simon Mathiri Ikere, 30.

"This is the greatest day in the police force," said Nairobi police commander Njue Njagi.

Ikere was blamed for a series of murders including two US citizens killed in a carjacking in the capital's outskirts--a period that also saw a senior aid worker gunned down in similar circumstances and several local residents slain.

And the elite are not immune. One of Kenya's most renowned scientists and leading HIV researcher, the professor Job Bwayo, was killed in a car-jacking on February 4. Russian, Danish and US diplomats and a Kenyan minister have also fallen victim to carjackings though survived.

Bank heists meanwhile have been carried out in broad daylight, claiming the lives of policemen and bank workers.

In 2005, US government analysts identified Nairobi as the "hub" of a worrisome new trend toward violent carjackings across Africa.

Both the US and the UN, citing crime, issued warnings against travelling to Kenya, notably its capital--a move that infuriated Nairobi whose economy relies on tourism revenue.

The disgruntled blame security forces, saying they are often despised and feared for alleged brutality, corruption and complicity with criminals.

They also blast the judicial system, which was shaken in 2003 over alleged graft among judges, saying it lacks resources and remains ineffective.

In a 2005 survey, global graft watchdog Transparency International found that nearly half of all Kenyans' transactions with Kenyan public and private officials in 2005 involved a bribe, up sharply from the previous year.

Police spokesman Kibunjah suggested the trouble was fed by arms spilling in from Kenya's lawless northwestern neighbor, Somalia, torn apart by fighting and without an effective central government since a 1991 coup.

Others, such as criminal lawyer Evans Monari, decried what they called a lack of coordination between police and the judiciary.

With the country gearing up for general elections next December, the opposition has turned security into a hot campaign topic.

The president meanwhile ordered a crackdown on illegal weapons this month, alarmed that insecurity will scare off foreign investment in this country of 33.6 million where 60 percent survive with less than a dollar a day.

Police have offered rewards of up to 150,000 shillings (2,140 dollars, 1,600 euros) for information on wanted criminals.

But not all residents want to help a force they feel is shady and trigger-happy itself.

"They are paid to do their job, if they need my help, the government should pay for it," protested Martin Mwangi, a college graduate.

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Still Stuck In the Mideast

A trilateral summit between the U.S., Israel and Palestinians held this week yielded no statement and no progress apart from a pledge to keep talking. In the diplomatic morass of the Middle East, even the United States is willing to consider the mere fact that a summit was held to be "useful and productive." But real progress is contingent on Hamas' decision to accept Israel's right to exist, a step the group is thus far unwilling to take.

Trilateral talks had not been held for six years. The Bush administration had made its distaste for the Palestinian leadership obvious and absent prodding from Washington, Israel was content to let Palestinians fight among themselves while Tel Aviv created facts on the ground and moved forward as it saw fit.

Both Washington and Tel Aviv mistakenly believed a weakened Palestinian leadership was to their advantage. They failed to realize that Palestinians would not be content with an ineffectual government and were prepared to replace Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and his Fatah movement with a more hardline group.

That happened in legislative elections in the Palestinian territory a little over a year ago, won by Hamas, which has never accepted Israel's right to exist. The best face that could be put on the election result was the hope that governing would force the group to compromise its headline positions. That did not happen. Instead, Fatah and Hamas struggled for power, a bloody contest that has claimed in excess of 100 lives. About a month ago, pressed by the violence and the need to do something about its image in the Middle East--the Bush administration seems to have grasped that its plans for Iraq depend, in part, on progress in the Israel-Palestinian conflict--Washington began to push for the trilateral summit.

In the interim, however, Saudi Arabia undertook its own diplomatic initiative. Alarmed by the mounting violence among Palestinians, it brought together Mr. Abbas and Hamas' leaders in Mecca to broker a deal. On Feb. 8, the two sides agreed to create a unity government in which Hamas would have nine Cabinet seats, Fatah six and some smaller par-

ties four. (Fatah boycotted the Hamas government formed after the January 2006 elections.) While Hamas will retain the prime minister's office, other key posts such as foreign minister and the all-important interior minister--in charge of the security services--will be held by independent individuals.

The most important part of the deal is what was left out: It does not require Hamas to explicitly recognize Israel or renounce violence. The letter from Mr. Abbas reappointing Mr. Ismail Haniyeh as prime minister calls on Hamas to "abide" by Palestinian and Arab resolutions that include recognition of Israel, and to "respect" past agreements and international law. That is not enough for Israel, nor for the U.S. and other governments that condition aid to the Palestine authority--and its eventual recognition--on the renunciation of violence and the explicit acceptance of Israel's right to existence.

The deal transformed summit. What was intended to be a confidence-building exercise that would ideally begin to discuss the parameters of a Palestinian state instead focused on the

terms of the unity government agreement. Mr. Abbas made clear his determination to go through with the deal, while U.S. State Secretary Condoleezza Rice and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert have said that they will not recognize a government that includes Hamas if it does not change its position. That is not an idle threat: A lack of recognition means that the Palestinian government will not receive aid from the U.S. or other Western nations or the tax revenues that Israel collects on its behalf.

The bottom line is that all three parties are weak. The U.S. has lost credibility as a result of the mess in Iraq; Mr. Olmert's government has been wracked by scandals; Mr. Abbas has been eclipsed by Hamas. None of the three is in a position to demand much from its partners. Moreover, the U.S. has another country to factor into its response: Saudi Arabia. Since the Saudis brokered the unity deal, the Bush administration's unwillingness to back the new government looks like an attempt to undercut Saudi peacemaking--and its regional influence.

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Unconventional Oil Think of Volume, Not Quality

For decades, doom-sayers have wailed that we are running out of oil, and economists have replied smugly that price rises would always bring forth extra supply. A new report from the consultancy, Wood Mackenzie, suggests that

needed much sooner than many industry experts had expected. Demand continues to blossom and, while new oil is always being discovered, many of today's largest fields are in decline. As soon as 2020, conventional production could reach a

monopolisation of many of the most promising conventional oil fields by state-owned companies. The longer oil prices stay high, the greater the private sector's confidence in unconventional oil. So how should governments respond?

engineers is as worrying as the scarcity of oil.

The shift to unconventional resources also amplifies the case for pollution taxes or a credible system of tradable permits. A predictable price on carbon dioxide would promote the development



An oil refinery on Galveston Bay in Texas City, Texas.

both may be right and that will lead to some difficult choices.

Wood Mackenzie's report identifies 3,600bn barrels of unconventional reserves such as oil shales and sands. This is a colossal figure: current global oil consumption is about 30bn barrels a year. Better, these reserves are widely dispersed, with large resources near consumers in North America and China. They offer reassurance against the depletion of conventional oil and against instability in the Middle East.

The good news ends there, however. The report makes it clear that these reserves might be

plateau, leaving unconventional reserves to take up the slack.

If the report is correct--a big if--then it is worrying. Unconventional oil is expensive to exploit. The technology is unproven for all but a few early projects, and engineers are scarce. Unconventional oil production is also an environmentally damaging mining operation that uses a lot of energy and water to produce low-quality crudes.

Unconventional oil has become more attractive in the past few years because of high crude prices, technological breakthroughs and the

There is a balancing act here. It would be handy to have proven techniques for extracting oil and gas from unconventional sources in the US and Canada. Society as a whole would benefit from the increased security of supply but subsidising unconventional production promises high emissions and plenty of pork with little assurance of success. Governments should focus more on basic technology and here the scarcity of qualified

of a wider variety of alternative energy sources; it would encourage energy conservation; and it would boost technologies that reduce the environmental impact of any energy source, including unconventional oil.

The next few decades will see a tug-of-war between ever better energy production technology and ever more elusive energy sources. If we can give the technology a hand, so much the better.

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