

Civilian death toll in Iraq estimated at over 600,000: NCC notes Lancet study

News in the [October 31, 2006](#) issue

A newly estimated civilian death toll of more than 600,000 Iraqis since the U.S.-led invasion confirms the fears of churches that opposed the war in 2003 and dramatically belies Washington's estimates, said Bob Edgar, the top executive of the National Council of Churches.

A study by researchers at Johns Hopkins University—published October 11 by the *Lancet*, a British medical journal—arrived at the number for the war's civilian deaths, which greatly exceeds the estimates by the Bush administration and the Pentagon.

President Bush argued in a news conference that the study's "methodology is pretty well discredited." Some experts agreed that the death estimates have a wide margin of error and include victims of disease and war-related problems. Bush also said that many of the violent deaths in Iraq have been caused by terrorists, criminals and sectarian militias. Indeed, U.S. military authorities in Baghdad reported October 12 that death squads killed 1,450 people in September in that city, where violence is at an all-time high.

"The perpetrators of this war can no longer tell us this is 'collateral damage' as they prosecute this war," Edgar said. "They must face up to the widespread death and destruction that is being inflicted daily upon innocent men, women and children living in a country that never attacked the United States."

Only days before, Edgar had promptly condemned North Korea's testing of a nuclear device—just as he has repeatedly addressed moral-political issues during his tenure on behalf of the 35-denomination NCC.

Regarding Iraq, he noted that religious figures from the late Pope John Paul II to mainline Protestant, African-American and Orthodox church leaders spoke out

against attacking Iraq before military action was taken.

“They warned that such a war did not remotely meet the criteria of a just war,” he said. “If these new estimates are true, the criterion of avoiding the deaths of noncombatants has been shattered.”

Edgar, who attended a 2002 New Year’s service at a Presbyterian church in Baghdad, said he prays for an Iraqi child whose photo hangs outside his office and for all Iraqis undergoing “unspeakable horrors.” Edgar urged that “a just and lasting peace be found by good and faithful people to bring an end soon to this dreadful war in Iraq.”