United Nations report: US killed 17 Iraqi women and children in January raid

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A United Nations report, obtained by the Associated Press Thursday, reveals that US missiles killed 17 people, all women and children, in two communities in southern Iraq during an air attack January 25. Forty-five houses were destroyed or damaged by the missiles that struck the al-Jumhuriya neighborhood in Basra and the village of Abu Khasib, 16 miles further south. The UN findings confirm the claims made by the Iraqi government following the attack.

The report was filed by Hans von Sponeck, UN humanitarian coordinator in Baghdad, after an on-the-spot investigation. Von Sponeck spoke to local government officials and relief agencies. According to the investigating team, despite some demonstrations against the US during its visit, "The human climate was one of sadness rather than aggressiveness."

Al-Jumhuriya is a poor neighborhood, with garbage-strewn streets. When the missile struck, most of the men were away. The US missile killed one woman and five children. Iraqi officials told von Sponeck that 64 people were injured and 30 still hospitalized. The UN report noted, "The UN team visiting the area verified that seven houses had been completely destroyed and a further 27 houses sustained damage. The damage was caused by both direct impact and the blast effect of the missile." In Abu Khasib, a village of some 400 houses, five women and five children died and 30 people were injured.

US air crews began using the missile that killed the Iraqis, the AGM-130, only in January. The weapon carries 2,000 pounds of explosives and is directed to its target after launch by a pilot watching the missile's path on a video screen.

The Pentagon acknowledged January 26 that a missile exploded in a residential area. The spokesman who made the announcement blamed Saddam Hussein's forces for the civilian deaths. "We regret any civilian casualties but this [the firing of US missiles] was done in response to a provocative attack against our planes by Saddam Hussein." The spokesman neglected to mention that the planes targeted in this "provocative attack" were flying in Iraqi air space, in the so-called no-fly zones established by the US after the Persian Gulf war.

The January 25 air attack was part of an escalating campaign of aggression by US and British forces against Iraq. Since December's bombing campaign, US and British planes have carried out 40 hits on Iraqi air defense sites, a greater number than were hit during the four-day assault. The US military is apparently expanding the scope of its attacks beyond what it terms self-defense. On Tuesday it struck three Iraqi anti-ship missile launchers near the gulf.

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