

American troops massacre Iraqi protesters in Mosul

Henry Michaels
16 April 2003

American troops opened fire on anti-US protesters in the northern city of Mosul on Tuesday, killing at least 10. Hours earlier, 20,000 people marched through the southern city of Nasiriyah to oppose Washington's plans to install a puppet government. In Baghdad, the US military tried to prevent journalists from reporting on the third straight day of anti-US demonstrations.

Even as President Bush, speaking in the White House Rose Garden, was declaring that the Iraqi people were "regaining control of their own destiny," US soldiers were turning their weapons on civilians opposed to American and US-appointed rulers.

Witnesses told the Agence France Presse (AFP) news agency that 10-12 people were killed and perhaps 100 wounded when US troops fired on a crowd protesting a speech by Mosul's new American-installed governor. The shooting broke out as the governor was making a pro-US speech from the building housing his offices.

The charges were denied by a US military spokesman, who said troops had first come under fire from at least two gunmen and fired back, without aiming at the crowd. "There were protesters outside, 100 to 150, there was fire, we returned fire," he said. "We didn't fire at the crowd, but at the top of the building."

Yet witnesses said US troops fired into the crowd after it became increasingly hostile towards the new governor, Mashaan al-Juburi. "They (the soldiers) climbed on top of the building and first fired at a building near the crowd, with the glass falling on the civilians. People started to throw stones, then the Americans fired at them," said Ayad Hassun, 37. "Dozens of people fell."

Hassun said the trouble broke out after the crowd interrupted Juburi's speech with cries of "There is no God but God, and Muhammad is his prophet." Juburi retorted, "You are with Saddam's fedayeen," to which the crowd chanted, "The only democracy is to make the Americans leave." Hassun said 20 US soldiers escorted Juburi back inside before firing from the building's roof.

Another witness, Marwan Mohammed, told AFP: "We were at the market place near the government building, where Juburi was making a speech. He said everything would be

restored—water, electricity, and that democracy was the Americans.

"As for the Americans, they were going through the crowd with their flag. They placed themselves between the civilians and the building. The people moved toward the government building, the children threw stones, the Americans started firing. Then they prevented the people from recovering the bodies."

According to a third witness, Abdulrahman Ali, the US soldiers opened fire when they saw the crowd running at the government building.

An AFP journalist saw a wrecked car in the square and ambulances ferrying wounded people to hospital, while US aircraft flew over the city at low altitude. As angry relatives of the dead and wounded voiced hatred of the American forces, a doctor at the city hospital, Ayad al-Ramadhani, said: "There are perhaps 100 wounded and 10 to 12 dead."

Another doctor, Said Altah, said: "Juburi said the people must co-operate with the United States. The crowd called him a liar, and tempers rose as he continued to talk. They threw objects at him, overturned his car, which exploded. The wounded said Juburi asked the Americans to fire."

Earlier Tuesday morning, some 20,000 people marched through Nasiriyah, chanting: "Yes to freedom... Yes to Islam... No to America, No to Saddam." They included leaders of the main Shiite Muslim opposition group, who boycotted the US-orchestrated gathering in the nearby ancient town of Ur to discuss forming an interim government.

The heavily guarded talks were attended by Washington's anointed ruler, retired general Jay Garner, and US envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, together with representatives from Britain, Australia and Poland, which contributed forces to the invasion force, as well as about 60 handpicked Iraqis. Garner opened the conference, saying, "A free and democratic Iraq will begin today."

But thousands of people marched against US plans to install Garner and a token administration. "Iraq needs an Iraqi interim government. Anything other than this tramples the rights of the Iraqi people and will be a return to the era of colonization," said Abdul Aziz Hakim, a leader of the largest Iraqi Shiite group, the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq.

Ibrahim al-Jaafari, one of the leaders of al-Daawa Party, a Shiite group, turned down his invitation to the Ur talks, saying he opposed foreign intervention “exerting pressure on certain Iraqi opposition groups and favoring others.”

Even some of those at the meeting said they did not want Garner leading the interim administration. “We will press for any Iraqi civilian administration regardless of what the Americans say. An administration by Garner is not acceptable,” said Mowaffak al-Rubaie, an Iraqi physician.

Anti-US demonstrations were reported elsewhere in Iraq on Tuesday. In Kut, another southern city, hundreds of protesters blocked Marines from entering the city hall to oust a Shiite cleric who has declared himself in control there. Military officials have accused Said Abbas of being Iranian-backed and of making anti-American statements in local mosques.

Some 20 Marines from Task Force Tarawa decided against trying to enter the city hall after being confronted by 1,200 protesters, Lieutenant Colonel Jean Malone said. The protesters were shouting “No, No Chalabi!”—referring to Ahmed Chalabi, the leader of the Pentagon-backed Iraqi National Congress.

For the third day running, hundreds of Baghdad residents gathered outside the Palestine Hotel, now a makeshift US military headquarters, in protest at the occupation and the failure of coalition troops to stem looting. As a dozen heavily-armed US marines looked on nervously, some 300 people pressed against the razor wire encircling the entrance, chanting slogans and brandishing handwritten placards.

“This is no freedom,” they chanted. “No to America, No to Saddam.” Many in the crowd yelled at the Marines, asking “Where is our future?” Others demanded, “Give us security.” One hand-painted banner accused the Allied forces of “protecting the oil and leaving the stores, universities and hospitals”

A United Press International correspondent said demonstrators called for the evacuation of US and British “occupation troops” from Iraq, shouting “Death to America... Death to Bush.” Previously banned political parties and new political groupings distributed leaflets urging Iraqis to close ranks and reject foreign occupation. Some groups held banners that read “Iraq First.”

For the first time, US forces tried to prevent the media from covering the protests. According to an AFP correspondent, visibly-angered US military officials moved reporters and photographers about 30 meters from the hotel entrance.

“We want you to pull back to the back of the hotel because they (the Iraqis) are only performing because the media are here,” said a marine colonel, who wore the name Zarcone but would not give his first name or title.

The angry crowd later moved to nearby Firdos Square—where a statue of Saddam Hussein had been toppled just six days earlier in a media event staged by the US military. [See “The stage-managed events in Baghdad’s Firdos Square: image-making, lies and the ‘liberation’ of Iraq”.] Despite the presence

of three Marine armoured amphibious vehicles, the Iraqis chanted: “No, no, USA.”

Saddam’s statue was brought down on April 9 by a few dozen Iraqis and US Marines. The Western media widely portrayed the orchestrated event as a spontaneous act of jubilation and popular support for the American occupiers.

Predictably, the considerably larger protest in Firdos Square against US rule has received little or no coverage in the US and other Western media. Almost without exception, journalists employed by the major media organizations are continuing to uncritically promote the Bush administration’s lies and distortions.

The US military is determined to keep it that way. Early on Tuesday morning, the US military conducted a further exercise in intimidation against the hundreds of journalists staying at the Palestine Hotel. On the pretext of hunting down “hardcore Iraqi fighters,” Marines stormed through the hotel, searching rooms.

Soldiers kicked doors down, roused journalists from their beds and pointed M-16s in their faces, footage from Associated Press Television News showed. Marines were seen guarding suspects in a hall and interrogating a man who claimed to be a cameraman. Four Iraqi men who did not have proper identification were reportedly detained.

The raids hit the 16th and 17th floors, where journalists with CNN, Turkish TV, Japanese TV and other networks were staying. A CNN producer, Linda Roth, said she opened her door to find armed Marines, who ordered her to get down while they searched her room without explanation.

Just last week, an American tank opened fire on the Palestine Hotel, killing two journalists and wounding three others. A number of correspondents have denied claims by US military commanders that enemy fire was coming from the building.

In response to the growing wave of popular discontent, US military commanders on Tuesday deployed 2,000 Iraq police officers in Baghdad under the direction of Major-General Zuhair al-Nuami, who headed the police force at Saddam Hussein’s Interior Ministry. In the name of “liberation,” some of the Baathist regime’s most hated representatives are back on the street, supported by US soldiers.



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