

British army admits brutalising Iraqi civilians

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The British army has issued a public apology for brutally beating Iraqi civilians in the town of Majar al Kabir, 120 miles north of Basra.

According to the *Daily Mirror* newspaper, on August 23 soldiers from the 22nd Special Air Service (SAS) clubbed and kicked 11 Iraqis they falsely believed to have been involved in the killing of six British military police officers in the town on June 25.

The elite troops—which specialise in counterinsurgency operations and counterrevolutionary warfare—used stun grenades to swoop on three houses in the town, kicking in doors and lashing out with boots and rifle butts against the occupants. A woman was amongst those injured.

The owner of one house in which nine men who were watching TV were arrested, butcher Moayad Jabar, told the newspaper: “It was about 11 p.m. when suddenly I heard an explosion and the door was kicked open.

“Lots of soldiers rushed in pointing rifles at us and screaming ‘Down! Down! Down!’ Others came into the back at the same time. They made us lie down on the ground and wouldn’t let us speak. I was very afraid because I didn’t know what was happening.

“They started to pull my cupboard doors off and empty all my possessions on the floor. The women and children were frightened and crying. Then the men dragged us to armoured cars putting their boots on our heads all the way to the army base.”

Basim Hasan, also a butcher, received a black eye and cuts to his face. He told the *Mirror*’s reporter Tom Newton Dunn: “When I was lying down one of the soldiers stamped on my head. My face hit the ground so hard I lost consciousness.”

Abdule Amer, a chemistry teacher, explained: “We didn’t offer any resistance. I asked one soldier ‘Do you speak English?’ But he kicked me in the face, giving me a black eye and nose bleed.”

The home of vegetable seller Choban Jasem was

raided at the same time. His sister-in-law had begged the soldiers not to hurt her children and was struck over the head with a rifle butt in response.

Jasem, who is 62, said: “While I was on the ground, a soldier kicked me hard on the nose. I started bleeding heavily.

“Then they dragged me to an armoured car outside through rocks on the street, which gave me a big cut on my knee. I didn’t know why they were taking me and thought I was going to die. I kept asking them ‘Why, why?’ But they told me to shut up.”

The 11 were handcuffed and removed to the headquarters of the King’s Own Scottish Borderers regiment, where they were beaten again. Only after 18 hours, when it had been established from photographs and a list of names that the wrong men had been arrested, were the group released.

The Ministry of Defence (MoD) in London claimed to know nothing of the savagery of the SAS, despite the incident occurring almost two weeks before the *Mirror* broke the story. A spokesman claimed it would investigate the allegations but said it was unaware that any of the civilians had been mistreated. Yet just one day later it was reported that the MoD has agreed to pay a few hundred pounds in compensation to each of those arrested because they were innocent.

However, a spokesman said the payments still did not mean the MoD accepted allegations that SAS soldiers had abused the men during the raid. A spokesman claimed, “Some people received minor injuries, but that is part of the nature of this kind of operation.”

He added that there is not likely to be any further investigation into the matter.

Within Majar al Kabir itself, however, the armed forces were forced to issue an unprecedented public apology for the troops behaviour, such is the outrage amongst local people.

Town leaders warned the *Mirror* that British soldiers

were now in danger. Council leader Sadek Al-Hul warned, "I've told the British that people are very angry with them over what they did. The next time soldiers come to arrest anyone here I expect they'll be shot at." And Basim Hasan complained: "My father and brother were hanged by Saddam Hussein because all my family fought him. We welcomed the British. Now they've done this to us.

"The way we were treated is how Saddam's people would have treated us. They've made a very bad mistake. I don't want to have to fight them like I fought Saddam."

Like Basra, Majar al Kabir is a Shia town, and had been one of the centres of opposition to Saddam Hussein's regime. But the increasing arrogance and brutality of British forces, whose intrusive weapons searches of homes over the last months have made the colonial character of their occupation clear, has inflamed popular resentment.

The death of the six military police officers following one such raid was the largest British loss of life in a hostile incident to date.

Fearing similar retaliatory action, Major Stuart Irvine of the British army distributed an open letter offering his "humblest apologies" for the incident, and pledging a full investigation and compensation for injuries and wrongful arrest.

The letter accepted that "Eleven townsfolk were arrested and treated very badly. All were arrested without reason.

"The incident happened as we are still trying to bring those people who killed our six military police colleagues to justice."

The letter attempted to dissociate troops based in Majar from the SAS unit responsible for the raid, stating, "The operation was conducted by a small group of coalition forces. These people were not from Camp Abu Najir nor were they the soldiers stationed in Majar."

The revelations of events in Majar came just one day after British army officer, Colonel Tim Collins, was cleared by an internal investigation of charges of committing war crimes in Iraq.

Collins had been lionised by the British press after he made a speech to his unit on the eve of the war telling them: "We go to liberate, not to conquer. If you are ferocious in battle, remember to be magnanimous in

victory."

The colonel had been accused by a US army reservist of ill-treating Iraqi POWs and civilians, but the MoD said no criminal proceedings or internal disciplinary action would be brought against Collins who is now tipped for promotion.

The colonel's investigation hit the headlines because he was cleared. There have been numerous other charges against British soldiers for brutalising Iraqi civilians, however, including photographs apparently taken by troops showing them engaged in the torture of their captives. News of such incidents is barely reported, and little details given of the outcome of any investigations.



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