

US military opens fire on Iraqi civilians following skirmish in Samarra

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The US media is hailing the American military's success in repelling an attack on two convoys in Samarra in central Iraq, but other news accounts report indiscriminate firing by US forces following the initial attack, and numerous civilian deaths.

In an assault that apparently represented a new level of coordination by Iraqi resistance forces, groups of insurgents opened fire Sunday afternoon with small-arms fire, mortars, homemade bombs and rocket-propelled grenades (RPG) on two separate US military convoys that had just delivered currency to two banks in Samarra, a city located 60 miles north of Baghdad. Attackers shot at the US forces from the street and from rooftops.

American military officials noted that the nearly simultaneous attacks were coordinated, involving between 60 and 100 guerrillas. US Brig. Gen. Mark Kimmitt told a news conference, "It was a large group of people. Are we looking at this one closely? Yes. Is this something larger than we've seen over the past couple of months? Yes. Are we concerned about it? We'll look at it and take appropriate measures in future operations."

Capt. Andy Deponai, whose tank was hit by a rocket-propelled grenade, indicated surprise about the character of the attack. "Up to now you've seen a progression—initially it was hit-and-run, single RPG shots on patrols, then they started doing volley fire, multiple RPG ambushes, and then from there this is the first well-coordinated one," he told the press. "Here, it seems they had the training to stand and fight."

According to Fourth Infantry Division spokesman Lieutenant Colonel William MacDonald, the American forces fought back with tank fire when they were attacked by the Iraqis. American forces destroyed several buildings allegedly used by the resistance. US military vehicles were obliged to break through a barricade thrown up by the guerrillas, which included pick-up trucks and taxicabs.

The US military reported different figures Sunday and Monday on the number of casualties and enemy fighters captured during the engagement. Officials first reported that 46 Iraqis were killed, at least 18 wounded and 11 captured. On Monday, the military reported that 54 were dead, including 24 Iraqi guerrillas around one convoy and 22 around the other, 22

were wounded and only one captured.

Another spokesman for the Fourth Infantry Division, Master Sgt. Robert Cargie, claimed that after driving off the attackers, US troops discovered that many of the dead and wounded Iraqis were wearing uniforms of the Fedayeen, a militia loyal to former president Saddam Hussein. However, Gen. Kimmitt suggested that the different figures on casualties were due to the guerrillas having carried away their dead, tacitly acknowledging that there were few, if any, bodies of fallen Iraqis left after the fighting.

The American version of the event was sharply contradicted by Iraqi witnesses and foreign journalists who followed up on the story.

Samarra's police chief, Colonel Ismail Mahmoud Mohammed, told the press that resistance fighters who attacked the US convoys withdrew once the Americans returned fire. "There was an attack and an exchange of fire between the Americans and the resistance lasting half an hour. The resistance withdrew, then [US] bombardments started, using all manner of weapons in all directions and without any discrimination."

Sheikh Mohammed Abd al-Karim, in charge of security on the local municipal council, confirmed this version of events. "There were shots, and then a half-hour exchange with the assailants, who then fled. Then there was a massive US bombardment in which buildings, including mosques and schools, were hit by the Americans."

Iraqi witnesses said that the US military's figure of 54 fighters killed was a fabrication. Local residents reported that American fire killed eight or nine Iraqis, all civilians. US Colonel Fredrik Rudesheim acknowledged that the reported number of Iraqi dead was not based on a body count, but on interviews with the American soldiers involved.

According to *AlJazeera.net*, Samarra Hospital accident and emergency department anesthesiologist Bassam Ibrahim told the press: "We received the bodies of eight civilians, including a woman and a child." Hospital director Abd Tawfiq said, "More than 60 people wounded by gunfire and shrapnel from US rounds are being treated at the hospital."

Among the wounded were a number of people praying in a nearby mosque, including a 12-year-old boy. Reporters noted

the impact of a rocket on one of the outer walls of the al-Shafi mosque, some 60 yards from the hospital.

Agence France Presse (AFP) correspondents also reported seeing a civilian bus entirely burned out 35 yards from the main entrance of the town's hospital. The correspondents were shown two Iranian passports said to belong to visitors killed on board the bus. The latter were apparently pilgrims en route to visit the mausoleum of a major Shiite authority.

Reda Yosofyan, a member of the Iranian parliament's national security and foreign policy commission, said the US was directly responsible for the Iranians' deaths. "This event will evoke even more distrust between Iran and the US," he told *Aljazeera.net*.

Workers at a nearby pharmaceutical plant were also fired on by the US forces. At least two were killed and "many wounded" as they walked out of the factory at the end of their shift, according to plant employees. Just as staff at the State Enterprise for the Manufacture of Drugs and Medical Equipment finished work, a US tank arrived and opened fire with machine guns, according to Reuters.

An AFP correspondent saw blood spattered on the ground and bullet holes in a sentry box near the factory gates. When asked what had happened, the plant's obviously shaken manager told the correspondent, "Go see in the hospital." A mortar attack on the US military's nearby headquarters forced the reporter to withdraw.

BBC correspondent Peter Greste in Samarra indicated that there were burned out cars scattered throughout the city, and buildings riddled with bullet holes. According to the BBC, "He [Greste] says there is an unmistakable sense of anger among local people—who say the US response to the attacks was indiscriminate and unnecessary."

Sabah Jerges of the Associated Press spoke to some of the angry residents. They explained that resistance fighters had attacked the American convoys, but that when US forces began firing at random, many civilians got their weapons and joined the fight. Townspeople were bitter about recent nighttime raids by the US military.

"Civilians shot back at the Americans," 30-year-old Ali Hassan told the AP. "They claim we are terrorists. So OK, we're terrorists. What do they expect when they drive among us?"

One of the civilian installations fired on indiscriminately was a kindergarten. "Luckily, we evacuated the children five minutes before we came under attack," said a guard at the facility. "Why did they attack randomly? Why did they shoot a kindergarten with tank shells?"

A number of destroyed vehicles sat in front of the hospital, where, according to local residents, US tanks shelled people who were dropping off the injured.

Jerges of the AP reported, "The scars of the battle were evident Monday. About a dozen cars lay destroyed in the streets, many apparently crushed by tanks, and bullet holes

pocked many buildings. A rowdy crowd gathered at one spot, chanting pro-Saddam slogans. One man fired warning shots in the air when journalists arrived on the scene."

Also on Sunday afternoon in Samarra, four men in a black BMW opened fired at soldiers of the 244th Engineer Battalion. According to the US military, the soldiers fired back and wounded the men.

The US media was quick to report that Samarra lies in the so-called "Sunni triangle ... the heartland of Saddam Hussein loyalists." Edward Wong of the *New York Times* observed that the town "is just south of Tikrit, the birthplace of Mr. Hussein and a stronghold of Baathist Party supporters and Iraqis hostile to the occupation."

New York Newsday's Mohammed Bazzi, however, reports that just the opposite has been the case, at least until recently. Bazzi writes, "This city offers a window into how the US-led occupation is losing ground in Iraq. Unlike most Sunni Muslim cities in central and western Iraq, Samarra was a place that US forces had a shot at winning over. The city of 200,000 was one of the few Sunni-dominated areas that suffered under Saddam Hussein's rule, mainly because Samarra and its leading tribes were regional rivals to Hussein's hometown, Tikrit.

"But the Americans have been unable to capitalize on Samarra's hatred for Hussein and his ruling Baath Party. Since arriving in mid-April, US forces have carried out dozens of nighttime raids, detained hundreds of people and imposed a nighttime curfew.... 'The Americans made serious mistakes from the very beginning,' said Shaker Mohammed, the city's US-appointed mayor and a former Iraqi army general. 'When US soldiers search houses at night, they tie up the men and they frighten the women and children. This breeds resentment.'"

Bazzi spoke to a guard at the local soccer field that had been attacked by US helicopters, who told him: "No matter how much food they hand out or how many schools they say they're going to build, we're never going to accept the Americans here.... They are occupiers and we will drive them out."

Mahmoud, the town's US-appointed police chief, told the *Financial Times* that American forces had gone too far in "provoking" the town, and said they should stay out from now on. "Were the French happy under the Nazis?" he asked. "It is the same thing here."



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