

Iraqis tortured and killed by British troops

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The following is the concluding part of a two-part article. The first part appeared March 10.

In another case of allegations of brutality last September, reported in Rupert Murdoch's fervently pro-war tabloid *Sun*, British troops from the Queen's Lancashire Regiment (QLR) allegedly captured "pro-Saddam bandits" near the British-occupied city of Basra. Nine captives were taken to an army base in the city and among them was a man known only as Mr Al-Maliki.

An investigation was launched following claims that Al-Maliki was beaten to death by a British soldier. According to a report in last weeks' *Sun*, Al-Maliki suffered at least 50 injuries—internal and external. A second prisoner was severely beaten and suffered kidney failure, a third suffered serious internal injuries and the other six all lodged complaints about their treatment, the paper said.

Suggesting a motive of vengeance, the paper pointed to the fact that the Queen's Lancashire Regiment ("in Iraq on peacekeeping duties") had a month earlier lost one of their number after coming under attack. Captain Dai Jones of 1st Battalion, QLR was killed on August 14 in a bomb attack on a military ambulance in Basra.

The paper carried a detailed account, by an anonymous private, of the horrific treatment of the nine captives by soldiers in the QLR. The squaddie described how feelings were running high after the death of Jones. He said that the Iraqis were thrown off the trucks and held in a 12 ft by 12 ft cell and made to hold out their arms or kneel with their heads against the wall.

"They were kept like that until they fell over and could stand it no longer. Then they were either kicked and punched or put into another position... They were being treated worse than animals."

Bouts of beatings and verbal abuse would be interrupted by interrogation sessions, before a return to the beatings. "Some of the lads were just coming up, booting them in the stomach and punching them. It was, bang ... bang ... bang; kick ... punch ... bang. The moans, groans and yells were going for ages. The prisoners were pleading: 'Please stop, please stop.' ... You take a baby's cry, multiply it by a thousand times and add hurt and anger and pain into it. That's what it was like."

The squaddie said that the screams from the Iraqis kept some of the soldiers in nearby barracks awake. The constant beatings and torture continued until one of the men, Al-Maliki, died. According to the squaddie, the culprits then sought to dispose of cloth hoods and other clothing which was now soaked in blood.

Concluding his account, the squaddie said; "I feel sick to my stomach that I didn't do anything to save them as I'm sure other people do. It's something we will have to live with. The soldiers who did this should be locked up for life ... all who took part are guilty of war crimes. I fear there is going to be a cover-up over it and it seems that just one person is going to carry the can for it."

* The *Guardian* reported on February 28 that lawyers acting for an

Iraqi civilian whose brother was killed by British troops are claiming compensation in a test case "with serious implications for UK occupying forces."

The claim is being tabled at the high court on behalf of Mazin Jumah Gatteh, whose brother and another Iraqi were shot dead last August during a funeral ceremony in Basra. Shortly after the killings, a senior British officer wrote to the Beni Skein tribe, to which the victims belonged, expressing regret at the deaths and offering a "small donation" to the families, but declined to offer any official compensation.

In a witness statement, Gatteh described how his relatives were gathering for a funeral ceremony in August in Basra's Majidiya district. "I was engaged in receiving guests who had arrived for the ceremony," said Gatteh. "My brother was in the street walking towards the house about 10 metres from me when he was fired upon by British soldiers. Automatic machine guns were used and there were bullets flying, with shrapnel all over the place.

"My brother was unarmed and I have no idea why he was shot at. I believe that he was hit by a number of bullets including in the stomach. Death was more or less instant and he was dead on arrival at the local hospital ... People suffered intense shock at the sheer number of bullets fired in such a short space of time."

Following the shootings, Lieutenant-Colonel Ciaran Griffin, commander of the 1st Battalion, the King's Regiment, gave his version of events to the Beni Skein tribe. He described a patrol seeing shooting and believing it was a "dangerous gun battle." The patrol had gone on foot to investigate.

"The night was very dark as there was no electricity for street lighting," the officer wrote. He added: "The patrol encountered two men, who appeared to be armed and a direct threat to their lives, so they opened fire and killed them."

Colonel Griffin continued; "In retrospect, it became clear that the heavy shooting ... was in sympathy for the funeral of a dead man and that the two men who were shot by the British patrol had not intended to attack anyone."

Colonel Griffin said he had donated two million dinar (about £540) to the Hassan family and three million dinar to the Gattehs.

* The body of Ather Karim Khalaf, 24, has been dug from its grave in Najaf for analysis by British military officials. Khalaf died on April 29 last year, two months after he was married. He had been queuing in his taxi at a petrol station in the al-Mouwaffakia district of Basra when British soldiers ordered all the drivers to pull back. Mr Khalaf reversed his car but the passenger door swung open and knocked a soldier to the floor.

"He didn't intend to do anything to the soldier," said his brother Uday, who was standing nearby at the time. "The soldier cocked his rifle and shot my brother through the open window. Then he pulled him out of the car and started to beat him on the ground."

Khalaf had been shot through the abdomen and died in hospital two days later. Only due to pressure from a local human rights group and Khalaf's visiting uncle, an American citizen, did the family start to see the beginnings of a case. Still they have no written apology, no offer of compensation and no idea of how far the investigation has proceeded 10 months after Khalaf was shot.

* The Ministry of Defence (MoD) has admitted that another four cases are being investigated. Little is known about Said Shabram, who died on May 24, or Hassan Abbad Said, who died on August 4.

* Another case is of Ahmad Jabbar Kareem, 16. He was arrested with another teenage boy, also on May 8. According to a statement by the second boy, Ayad Salim Hanoon, and signed by an Iraqi police officer, the two were arrested in Basra by British troops. They were driven to the Shatt al-Basra waterway with several other prisoners, and ordered to swim to the opposite bank.

"We reached the deepest point but Ahmad couldn't swim. He sank and I couldn't find him."

The family has been told there is an investigation taking place, but that is all.

Ahmad's father, Jabbar Kareem Ali, wrote to the British military asking them to pursue the investigation. "He wasn't only my son. He was like a friend since he was just six years old," he said. "If an Iraqi did that to a British boy can you imagine what they would do?"

In several other cases families in Basra complain that they have been promised investigations into the deaths of relatives without result.

* The above cases are not the only instances that British troops have been found to have tortured and humiliated Iraqis in their custody. In May last year staff at a British photo-processing shop handed-over photographs to the police that revealed British troops torturing and sexually abusing Iraqi prisoners of war. The increasing number of legal challenges over British army conduct, however, is causing concern amongst the ruling elite in Britain. It threatens to throw an even uglier light over an already unravelling foreign policy.

These concerns were aired in a leader piece in the *Guardian* on February 23. Throughout last year, the paper championed the liberal establishment's backing of Blair's decision to join the US led war in Iraq. It is now clearly sounding a note of caution over the recent revelations.

The editorial begins with the usual mantra proclaiming the civility of the British Army:

"British troops operating in Iraq are generally held to have performed a highly professional job during and since last year's invasion. The British sector centred on Iraq's second city, Basra, has seen far less violence involving armed resistance and far less friction with the civilian population than have American-controlled areas in central Iraq."

It goes on to warn that this image is now under threat:

"For these reasons, increasingly detailed reports of brutality and torture allegedly used by a few British soldiers against Iraqi detainees are all the more disturbing—and dismaying... [T]he primary, all-embracing issue is how and why these men died and whether any investigation by the Royal Military Police can be deemed sufficiently independent and impartial, as required under international law as it applies to occupied countries. The RMP is, when all is said and done, an arm of the British army. If its investigations are not concluded swiftly, if its findings are not made fully public, and if a firm course of action is not urgently determined, local confidence in the processes of justice and in the army's continuing presence in southern Iraq will inevitably suffer. Since British troops are expected to be there for at

least another two years, this is an outcome that must be avoided."

The editorial writers know full well that the opposition to the occupying forces—US, British and others— is intensifying, and that what is being witnessed is an increasingly bloodthirsty drive by the British Army to suppress it. It will not do, as the *Guardian* leader piece concludes "... to weed[ing] out the wrong 'uns.'" The only way to stop the human carnage is to pull all foreign troops out of Iraq—something the *Guardian* has repeatedly argued against.

The MoD is also facing the prospect of a string of lawsuits over the deaths of at least 18 Iraqi civilians allegedly killed by British soldiers.

The incidents are separate from the deaths of Iraqis who were held at Camp Bucca and relate to incidents in which Iraqis have died when they were apparently fired on by mistake or were innocent bystanders of operations allegedly being conducted by British troops.

While the MoD has refused to accept liability for any of the deaths, it has offered and paid compensation to some of the families.

One family was offered about \$1,000 (£530) for the death of Waleed Fayayi Muzban, who was killed when his vehicle was hit by a barrage of bullets allegedly fired by British troops. Lawyers said the sum was derisory, and are preparing to sue the MoD in civil courts in the UK to provide better compensation.

The new cases include:

* The death of Mr Muzban in August last year. He died from chest and stomach wounds in a military hospital.

* Three days later, on August 27, Raid Hadi Al Musawi, an Iraqi policeman, was allegedly shot by British soldiers patrolling Basra.

* Hanan Shmailawi was shot in the head and legs while sitting down to her evening meal in November. British soldiers were on the roof of Basra's Institute of Education complex, where the family lived and worked, investigating a crime.

* Muhammad Abdul Ridha Salim went to visit his brother-in-law at around midnight on November 5. British troops raided the house and one allegedly shot him in the stomach. He died later in hospital.

* Jaafer Hashim Majeed, 13, was playing in a Basra street in the morning of May 13 when a cluster bomb exploded. He died on the way to hospital.

In another incident a senior British army officer has acknowledged responsibility for killing and wounding members of a family who were legitimately carrying arms. Phil Shiner, whose firm Public Interest Lawyers is acting in these and other cases, said on February 20, "The 18 Iraqis are the tip of the iceberg. All have lost relatives and loved ones in circumstances where it is crystal clear the UK armed forces are to blame, often because they've shot people by mistake.

"The government must act immediately to set up an independent inquiry to establish the precise cause of these deaths."



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