Iraqi prime minister accused of murdering detainees

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In an exclusive report in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Age* newspapers, two Iraqi men claim to have witnessed Iyad Allawi, the US-installed Iraqi interim prime minister, murder six handcuffed and blindfolded prisoners. The summary executions allegedly occurred in mid-June, while Allawi was visiting the Al-Amariyah security center in Baghdad.

The newspapers appear to have had the story for several weeks. They finally decided to publish the article on July 17, noting that "the failure by Iraqi and US officialdom to mount convincing denials makes the witness accounts impossible to ignore". According to their Baghdad correspondent, Paul McGeough, who conducted the interviews, the two witnesses were found independently of one another and spoken to separately. Neither received payment.

One of the men told the journalist: "The prisoners were against the wall and we were standing in the courtyard when the interior minister [Falah al-Naqib] said that he would like to kill them all on the spot. Allawi said they deserved worse than death, but then he pulled the pistol from his belt and started shooting them."

The other witness said the prisoners, all young men who had been detained on suspicion of involvement in the anti-US resistance, had been subjected to repeated torture in the days before Allawi gunned them down. He stated: "They were happy to die because they had already been beaten by the police for two to eight hours a day to make them talk."

The two witnesses alleged that Allawi shot seven men in cold blood. Six died instantly, while the other was severely wounded. The article gave the names of three of the victims as Ahmed Abdulah Ahsamey, Amer Lutfi Mohammed Ahmed al-Kutsia and Walid Mehdi Ahmed al-Sammarrai.

One of the witnesses said he watched as Allawi's bodyguards threw the bodies into the back of a Nissan utility and drove off. The other claimed the bodies were buried in the desert on the outskirts of Baghdad, west of the Abu Ghraib prison. The fate of the wounded man is unclear from the report.

According to the witnesses, as many as 30 people were present during the murders, including Iraqi police and five or six civilian-clad Americans from the US Special Forces assigned to Allawi's security detail. Allawi allegedly told them after murdering the six men that he wanted to show the Iraqi police how to "deal with" the opposition to the US occupation of Iraq.

One of the witnesses explained: "Allawi wanted to send a message to his policemen and soldiers not to be scared if they kill anyone—especially, they are not to worry about tribal revenge. He said there would be an order from him and the Interior Ministry that all would be fully protected. He told them: 'We must destroy anyone who wants to destroy Iraq and kill our people'."

Allawi's office did not issue an official denial for almost a week after the newspapers informed it of the accusations, and rejected outright any suggestion of an investigation. US officials were informed 10 days before the story was published and to date the Bush administration has not issued a denial. The US embassy in Baghdad baldly dismissed the allegations as rumors and declared: "As far as this embassy's press office is concerned, this case is closed."

Iraq's Human Rights Minister Bakhtiar Amin told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation today that he would investigate the allegations but added that he did not believe them to be true. He also threatened defamation action against the journalist.

Australian Defence Minister Robert Hill attempted to downplay the allegations, claiming that the Australian, British and US missions in Iraq knew nothing of the story. He was joined by newly appointed Labor shadow defense minister Kim Beazley who declared that the Middle East was a "giant bazaar of rumors" and that "in this country two anonymous sources would be regarded as rather thin to go to print".

To dismiss the story as "rumors" amounts to a cover up. McGeough is an experienced and recognized journalist, whose sources were eyewitnesses and have provided specifics of the incident, including the names of three of the dead. To date, no one has refuted the details. That the two

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Iraqis were reluctant to be named is hardly surprising. Given the nature of the allegations, they clearly fear for their lives.

Thus far, no major American newspaper or television network has reported the allegations, which were considered credible enough to publish by two of Australia's leading dailies and which, if substantiated, should result in the immediate arrest of Allawi on murder charges. The censorship is continuing despite calls over the weekend by figures such as former British foreign secretary Robin Cook for an independent inquiry headed by the International Red Cross.

The same American media that promoted last year's invasion with stories of murder, torture and rape-rooms under the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein is displaying no interest in the growing evidence that the US-installed regime of Allawi will rule in essentially the same fashion.

Allawi has a particularly unsavory past, which is well known in Washington. He was an alleged spy and hit-man for the Baathist dictatorship until 1975, an agent of British and American intelligence agencies from the 1980s, a collaborator with the US ambitions to conquer Iraq in the 1990s, and a supporter of the American invasion of his country in 2003.

A recent article in the *New York Times*, citing comments by former CIA agents, alleged that Allawi's organization, the Iraqi National Accord (INA), had been involved in a series of bombings in Iraq in the mid-1990s that killed a number of civilians. The INA includes a significant number of former Baathist military officers and intelligence officials.

In an accompanying article entitled "Hard Man for a Tough Country", McGeough cites the opinion of former CIA case officer, Reuel Marc Gerecht, who told the *New Yorker*: "He [Allawi] was a very effective operator and a true believer. Two facts stand out about Allawi. One, he likes to think of himself as a man of ideas; and two, his strongest virtue is that he's a thug."

In the first three weeks of the interim government, Allawi's unelected and despised administration has assumed the power to impose martial law, ban demonstrations and monitor citizens' phones and email. He has declared his intention to recruit the military and intelligence operatives of Hussein's regime and this week announced the formation of a secret police agency to "annihilate" opposition. He is already being contemptuously referred to in Baghdad as "Saddam without the moustache" or "America's Saddam".

Far from denouncing the Bush administration for establishing a US-protected police-state in Iraq, commentary over the past week in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* has lauded Allawi for his reputation for sadism and ruthlessness. It is part of a shift that is underway: previous claims that the US occupation was to establish democracy are being jettisoned in favor of increasingly open support for the "strongman" Allawi and his methods.

On July 11, the *New York Times'* Dexter Filkins wrote with relish of the rumor that Allawi had used an ax to chop off the hand of a man during a recent interrogation. Describing the alleged atrocity, Filkins wrote: "No-one was talking. 'Bring me an ax,' the prime minister is said to have announced. With that, the story went, Mr Allawi lopped off the hand of one of the Lebanese men, and the group quickly spilled everything they knew."

In Filkins' opinion, Allawi "seems to be the perfect man, under the circumstances, to bring this fractious country together".

On July 14, David Ignatius of the *Washington Post* hailed Allawi for projecting "the image of a burly ex-Baathist who is tough enough to manage this unruly country". Just last November he declared that "America did a good deed in liberating Iraqis from a tyrannical regime".

The American people were told by such commentators that last years' invasion would bring democracy and liberation to Iraq. The reality is that the Bush administration, as part of a criminal imperialist strategy to dominate the resources of the Middle East, has imposed an unelected, pro-US cabal that is under siege from the Iraqi people. Lacking any legitimacy or popular support, the regime of Allawi is dependent upon repression to terrorize the population into submitting to indefinite US control over the country.

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