

Australian soldiers fire on unarmed Iraqi civilians

Terry Cook
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After an initial airing, all mention of the shooting and possible killing of an Iraqi civilian by Australian troops late last week has disappeared from the pages of the Australian media. The incident occurred on the evening of November 5 when a “security detachment” of the Australian Defense Force (ADF) on a routine foot patrol near the Australian Embassy in Baghdad fired on a car containing two Iraqi men.

Early reports claimed that the patrol opened fire after “signaling continuously” for the car to stop. An Australian Defence Force public relations spokesman stated that the car had increased speed and continued in an “erratic” manner towards the patrol. After the shooting the car’s occupants—one of whom was injured and may have since died—were taken away from the scene by other Iraqi civilians in another car. The ADF spokesman said Australian officials were having difficulty confirming the identity of the man who was wounded or whether he had died.

Both the Australian government and the ADF then went into damage control, dismissing the attack as a legitimate response by troops facing imminent danger. Australia’s foreign minister Alexander Downer said, in a statement over the weekend, that “eventually, in self-defence, the Australian soldiers had used small arms fire” while emphatically insisting that the car’s occupants had “refused to stop”.

ADF chief General Peter Cosgrove declared that, “at first glance”, the soldiers who fired were responding to a “serious threat”. An initial report had shown, he said, that “soldiers felt that their lives, or at least one soldier felt that his life, was endangered.”

Cosgrove went on: “You can imagine anybody perceiving an immediate threat to his or her life is entitled to take action to prevent their own life being taken.” While the ADF spokesman had earlier told

media that the patrol had acted within the “rules of engagement”, which specify under what conditions troops are allowed to fire, when Cosgrove was asked to detail just what these rules were, he declined.

Downer and Cosgrove are both aware there was no “serious threat” to the soldiers. Neither of the Iraqi men was armed and their vehicle was not carrying explosives.

It remains unclear whether the Australian soldiers did, indeed, signal the car to stop or whether they shot at the vehicle immediately, or soon after sighting it. It is possible that the occupants were driving in an “erratic” manner because they were already being fired upon. Cosgrove’s strange claim that “at least one soldier felt his life was endangered” suggests that a member of the patrol may have been excessively trigger happy, setting off further shooting.

It is, in fact, highly likely that the soldiers were extremely nervous following the injury of three members of the Darwin-based Second Cavalry Regiment, whose vehicle was blown up by a roadside bomb on October 26. The soldiers were on patrol just 300 metres from the Australian Embassy and their base in the international zone in Baghdad. This was the first time since the invasion that an Australian military vehicle had come under attack.

Under the increasingly dangerous conditions provoked by the illegal occupation of Iraq, it has become all too common for Coalition forces to fire on and kill innocent civilians in cars that approach roadblocks or just proceed down the roads. Amid the confusion and shouting, Iraqis are unable to understand the troops’ signals or verbal orders—most times delivered in English—to stop or slow down. On many occasions highly-strung troops have simply opened fire, sometimes killing entire families.

Cosgrove maintained that the ADF would conduct a “detailed review” into the events of November 5, including interviews with witnesses. Despite promising what he called “a quick assessment”, no further report has been forthcoming.

The Howard government is extremely sensitive about reports reaching the public that touch on the actual activities of Australian troops in Iraq—especially if it involves the injury or death of civilians. Canberra has done everything possible to project an image of its remaining small military force being engaged in “rebuilding” the country, or providing routine security for Australian diplomats and embassy personnel.

The aim has been to put a humanitarian face on Australia’s ongoing participation and support for the criminal and bloody US-led occupation. The role of the Australian military, however, has nothing to do with “rebuilding” Iraq and is certainly not “humanitarian”. A large part of its operations is devoted to training a new Iraqi army that will work alongside Coalition forces in the brutal suppression of the legitimate resistance of the Iraqi people to the takeover of their country. Some 2,000 newly trained and equipped Iraqi army personnel are at present involved, alongside 10,000 US troops, in the murderous assault on the city of Fallujah.

The real nature of the Howard government’s participation in the Iraq war can be gauged from the activity of Australian SAS forces prior to the US-led invasion in March 2003. In the course of a sneak attack, using superior weaponry—including Javelin anti-tank missiles—they killed scores of poorly-equipped Iraq soldiers, deployed in converted four-wheel drive vehicles mounted with machine guns. Speaking to the media about the operation, one SAS commander boasted “stealth and superior weaponry” had enabled his unit “to poke out their eyes” and “crush their spirit and will”.



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