US military "mistake" claims 14 lives in occupied Iraq

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US military and Iraqi officials admitted on Sunday that an American F-16 made a "mistake" when it dropped a 500-pound satellite-guided bomb on a house in the village of Aaytha, 30 miles south of Mosul. According to the US military's statement, the intended target was the home of a local Iraqi resistance leader. Instead, the bomb struck a nearby house. An AP photographer reported that 14 members of an extended family were killed and six more people wounded, including some neighbouring residents.

The US military declared that it "deeply regrets the loss of possibly innocent lives". An investigation is said to be have been launched into why the wrong building was reduced to rubble. Meanwhile, the US forces and the interim government have moved on to next business and there is good reason to believe that little more will be heard of the 14 who died in Aaytha. Not even the name of the family has been reported. The media, in general, has provided no more than the off-hand reportage of the incident.

The bombing, however, is a microcosm of what has happened day in and day out in Iraq since the Bush administration and its international allies illegally invaded and occupied the country. The Iraqi people, regardless of their attitude to the US presence, live under the constant risk of being "mistakenly" killed, maimed or dragged off to detention centres. Overwhelmed American troops, who are fighting a losing war against a resistance movement that exerts effective control over large parts of the country, treat the entire population as potential enemies.

What the US military calls "precision strikes" against resistance targets are based almost entirely on speculation or dubious intelligence. In the course of attempting to suppress the insurgency in areas such as Baghdad's Sadr City and Adhamiyah suburbs, Karbala, Najaf, Samarra and Ramadi—to name just some of the most prominent locations—many civilians have been killed by US bombing. The exact number is unknown. The US military and the puppet interim government do not keep any record of civilian casualties. The website Iraq Body Count, which tallies media accounts of civilian deaths, had recorded a minimum of 15,229 as of January 11.

It is known, for example, that hundreds of civilians were killed during the three-week invasion by the missile and air strikes launched against buildings declared to be housing Iraqi political and military leaders. US military officials admitted last year that the intelligence used to identify targets was "just guesswork". Human Rights Watch noted in December 2003: "The targeting of Iraqi leadership resulted in dozens of civilian casualties that the United States could have prevented if it had taken additional precautions."

Last year, frequent air strikes were conducted against houses in the city of Fallujah—then the focus of the resistance. While the US military declared dozens of "foreign terrorists" were being killed, television crews and journalists in the city documented that the casualties were primarily noncombatants, including women and children. A sample of 40 or so households in Fallujah surveyed to establish a national mortality rate reported a staggering 52 violent deaths in the 18 months following the invasion—mainly caused by US air strikes.

(The results of the survey were published by the *Lancet* medical journal. See: "Study estimates 100,000 additional Iraqi deaths since the invasion")

In one of the few widely reported cases of a US strike gone wrong, at least 40 members of a wedding party were killed last May when US aircraft attacked a house

in the western Iraqi village of Mukaradeeb. The US military continues to insist that the wedding was a gathering of "foreign fighters", crossing into Iraq from Syria to join the fighting around Fallujah. Television footage from the scene showed the corpses of women and children. (See: "US military strafes Iraqi wedding party, killing at least 40")

In addition, hundreds of Iraqi noncombatants have been gunned down for failing to stop or slow down in time when approaching American checkpoints and roadblocks, shot for getting too close to American convoys, or killed in the crossfire between US troops and insurgents.

American troops were confronted from the earliest days of the occupation with the reality that the Iraqi people viewed them as invaders and oppressors—not liberators. Former marine sergeant Jimmy Massey recounted to a number of sources, including the WSWS, that his unit killed at least 30 civilians over a two-day period while manning a checkpoint in 2003, out of fear they could be suicide bombers. (See: "Iraq veteran Jimmy Massey speaks to the WSWS")

A feature in the British-based *Economist* on January 2 provided a chilling insight into the mentality and actions of US troops who are currently fighting in the most volatile parts of the country. A marine officer in Ramadi told the magazine: "If anyone gets to close to us, we f***king waste them. It's kind of a shame, because it means we've killed a lot of innocent people."

Another officer recounted: "It gets to a point where you can't wait to see guys with guns, so you start shooting everybody. It gets to a point where you don't mind the bad stuff you do." According to the *Economist*, marines in Ramadi "shoot at any Iraqi they see handling a phone near a bomb blast", as roadside bombs are sometimes remotely detonated by a mobile telephone call.

The fear and insecurity that pervades the US troops in Iraq was highlighted within hours of the "mistaken" air strike on Sunday. The Iraqi interim interior ministry released an account of another American "mistake", which resulted in four Iraqi deaths. A roadside bomb exploded as a US convoy approached an Iraqi police checkpoint south of Baghdad. The American troops, apparently assuming the police had trigged the bomb, unleashed a hail of bullets in their direction. Witnesses claimed that two police were killed, along with two bystanders.

This incident produced a denial, not an admission. On Monday, a US military spokesman declared that all the casualties at the checkpoint had been inflicted by either the bomb, or by gunshots fired by resistance fighters. The Iraqi puppet government has since dutifully retracted its initial statement blaming American troops and is now supporting the US version of events.

Whatever the truth of the incident, the overriding fact in Iraq is that the invasion has not brought the Iraqi people the promise of a better life or the prospect of democratic rights. It has brought only death and destruction. The occupation is opposed by the majority of the population and will be fought until it ends.

American soldiers have been placed in a situation where they are carrying out atrocities on a daily basis. Whether the deaths of Iraqi civilians at US hands are a "mistake" or deliberate, they are the direct consequence of the criminal policies of the Bush administration, for which its members should be brought to account. The only solution is the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US forces, along with all other foreign troops.

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