

More killings of civilians by US-led forces in Iraq

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Through the general fog of censorship, propaganda and one-sided reporting that surrounds the occupation in Iraq, revelations of US-led forces killing Iraqi civilians continue to surface.

The most recent is the suffocation of 10 men in Baghdad on July 10 after they were left locked in an Iraqi police commando van in the intense summer heat. The case was reported by Al Jazeera, the BBC and other networks the following day. Further details were published by US newspapers on July 12. The attention had forced the Iraqi interior ministry to announce that an investigation will be held.

The circumstances leading to the men's detention points to the arbitrary character of the arrests and killings being carried out by US and Iraqi government troops as they seek to suppress a popular and intractable insurgency against the occupation.

In the course of a gun battle in the western suburb of Amariyah, the circumstances of which are not clear, three men from the suburb of Abu Ghraib who were seeking work on a nearby construction site were wounded. Their workmates took them to Baghdad's Noor hospital, where one of the injured men died.

Shortly after, police commandos arrived at the hospital. In one of the more detailed accounts, the hospital director told the *New York Times* that the police accused the men of being involved in the attacks, at which point some of them attempted to run. "Eventually the commandos captured them all, including the injured men, and took them away," the doctor said. "That was all we knew until we heard that the dead bodies of most of the men were delivered on Monday [July 11] to the Yarmouk hospital in Baghdad."

In all, 12 men were detained at the hospital, including one who was there with his pregnant wife and had not been present during the earlier incident. The detainees were allegedly beaten at the commandos' headquarters and then locked inside an unventilated van in temperatures approaching 50 degrees Celsius. The BBC reported that when the van was opened at 1 am on July 11, eight men were dead. Two more died while being treated at the Yarmouk hospital, where they were dumped by the police.

A doctor explained to the BBC that a survivor told him that the police commandos had tortured them with electric shocks before throwing them into the van. A spokesman for the Association of Muslim Scholars—the umbrella organisation for hundreds of Sunni Muslim clerics—also told the *LA Times*: "They [the police] tortured them and left them in an airless chamber, which led to the suffocation of 10 of them."

The police commandos have denied the charges. An anonymous

local police officer, however, told the *New York Times*: "What happened to those men from Abu Ghraib was a crime against the Iraqi people. When their relatives arrived to claim the bodies, I heard them saying many bad things against the police. With crimes like this, it's not hard to see why the insurgents keep attacking the police. Those in authority should do something to stop it."

The allegations follow in the wake of a series of reports that the operations of the interior ministry police commandos involve pervasive abuse, torture and extra-judicial killings. The units were formed by the US military in late 2004 and were recruited primarily from ex-members of Saddam Hussein's regime's special forces and Republican Guard. While they have switched their allegiances to the US-installed government, they are using the same methods of terror they previously used against opponents of the Baathists.

A detailed account of police commando atrocities was published on June 27 by Knight Ridder journalists Yasser Salihee and Tom Lasseter—three days after Salihee was killed by a suspected US sniper as he approached an American checkpoint (See "Journalist killed after investigating US-backed death squads in Iraq").

On July 3, the British *Observer* published further accusations against the unit and the Iraqi government's interior ministry (See "US 'democracy' in Iraq: death squads, torture and terror"). A number of the alleged extra-judicial killings took place during the recent Operation Lightning—a massive crackdown by occupation forces in Baghdad that has led to over 1,700 people being detained.

On July 13, the AMS accused the commandos of torturing and killing 11 more men, including a Sunni cleric, who were arrested on Sunday. Their bodies were found two days later dumped in north Baghdad.

Killings by US troops

As well as the stream of charges against commando units, US marines stand accused of the indiscriminate killing of the 21-year-old cousin of Samir al-Sumaidaie, the Iraqi government's ambassador to the UN, during ongoing counterinsurgency operations in the restive province of Al Anbar. Last November, the city of Fallujah was laid waste by the American military. The provincial capital, Ramadi, has been subjected to repeated sweeps

in order to locate and destroy guerrilla cells.

According to a letter sent by Sumaidaie to friends and subsequently given to Associated Press, his relative Mohammed, a student at the University of Technology in Baghdad, was gunned down at his family home in the village of Al Shaik Hadid on June 25.

Sumaidaie explained that US marines carrying out a cordon-and-search in the area around Al Shaik Hadid demanded entry to the house and to know if there were any weapons inside. Mohammed took them to his parent's bedroom where his father kept a rifle for personal security. His mother, sisters and brothers then heard a "thud".

Marines allegedly then came out of the room and dragged a younger brother into the corridor leading to the bedroom where he was beaten and questioned. The remaining family members were ordered to go outside and wait on the porch. A marine went to their vehicles and came back with a camera. As they left, the interpreter accompanying the American troops told the family they had killed Mohammed. The young man was found with a single bullet to the neck in the bedroom.

Sumaidaie described the incident as the "killing of an unarmed innocent civilian—a cold blooded murder". As the case involved a family member of the UN ambassador, it received media attention and a response by the occupation forces. The acting US ambassador to the UN, Anne Patterson, reportedly "expressed her heartfelt condolences on this terrible situation" and promised that an investigation would be conducted. A US military spokesperson, cited in the *Washington Post*, admitted only that the "allegations roughly correspond to an incident involving coalition forces".

In most cases, however, where the victim's family and friends lacks the means to access the press, arbitrary killings are not reported at all.

The July 4 editorial of the English edition of the Iraqi newspaper *Azzaman* reflected the tremendous hostility that has been engendered toward the occupation forces and the Iraqi government due to the constant killing and abuse of civilians.

The paper commented: "US troops in Iraq kill innocent Iraqis almost on a daily basis but our UN envoy spoke up only when the troops murdered a relative. In his capacity as a public official and representative of a nation, Samir Sumaidaie should have presented the case of the fathers, mothers, children, women and whole families who perish on Iraqi roads and highways allegedly for approaching a passing US military convoy. The only words US troops and their commanders may utter are 'we are sorry', or 'we express our heartfelt condolences'".

The indifference to human life emerges out of the character of the occupation. It is a colonial war of repression intended to crush local opposition to the transformation of Iraq into an American protectorate in the Middle East and US corporate domination of its resources. Indiscriminate violence by the US military and Iraqi government troops serves to maintain an atmosphere of fear and intimidation. American troops work with rules of engagement that give them sweeping freedom to use deadly force, while the thousands of private contractors taking part in the occupation have immunity from prosecution.

The impunity that prevails toward the shooting of Iraqi civilians

is aggravated by the climate of fear among the occupation forces. The scale of the resistance—which is constantly fuelled by the indiscriminate killings—has cultivated a mindset that any Iraqi male or any lone driver could be an insurgent or a suicide bomber. A civilian who takes any action that can be construed as threatening, or who is simply in the wrong place at the wrong time, is liable to be shot or detained.

An insight into a typical US patrol in Baghdad's streets was given in an article in *Stars & Stripes* published on June 15. The article described what the platoon from a National Guard artillery regiment in Louisiana called a "slow day"—a day in which they did not suffer any ambushes, car bombs, drive-by-shootings or mortar attacks. The unit has suffered three dead since March.

In the course of the "slow day", however, the American troops fired three warning shots at Iraqi civilian cars they believed were getting too close to their vehicle. Describing the final incident, the article reported: "After another hour, a driver suddenly slams on the brakes just parallel ... [to the US truck] 'Age', the gunner, lets off a warning shot that flattens one of the driver's tires."

In this case, the only damage caused to the civilian was a flat tyre. But dozens of men, women and children have been killed or maimed in similar incidents. An Iraqi interior ministry official stated last month that at least 12 Iraqi civilians are killed every week in Baghdad alone by contractors working for the occupation forces. Since June 26, two journalists, Maha Ibrahim and Ahmad Wail Bakri, have been shot dead by US troops in Baghdad for allegedly driving "too close" to military vehicles.

One of the few cases to receive prominent international coverage is the May 29 killing of Farqad Mohammed Khinaisar, a 57-year-old Baghdad school teacher. According to a Knight Ridder report, US troops opened fire on her car as she drove toward a traffic circle, allegedly out of suspicion that she was a suicide bomber. She died five days later from a shot in the head. Lieutenant Colonel David Funk told Knight Ridder that "soldiers get anxious".

An Iraqi police officer informed the newsagency that no investigation separate to a US military inquiry would be conducted: "If the Americans are part of the investigation, we don't investigate. We have no authority over the Americans."

Since the occupation began, only limited details have ever been made public from such US investigations. American military courts have consistently dropped the charges against the handful of personnel brought to trial over the abuse, torture and death of Iraqi civilians.



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