US military suppresses information on death of contractors in Iraq

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25 October 2005

US military officials in Iraq are suppressing information on an incident last month in a town in the Sunni Triangle in which four American contractors were killed by insurgents and their bodies dragged through the streets, while crowds denounced the US occupation.

The incident took place September 20 in Duluiya, a town on the Tigris River, when a convoy of contractors for Kellogg, Brown & Root (KBR), the construction subsidiary of Halliburton Corporation, took a wrong turn while traveling to an Army base. According to a report October 22 in the *Daily Telegraph*, a conservative British newspaper, "As the lorries desperately tried to reverse out, dozens of Sunni Arab insurgents wielding rocket launchers and automatic rifles emerged from their homes."

Two contractors were killed in the firefight that ensued. Two more survived the initial shooting but were then dragged from their pickup trucks, forced to kneel on the street in front of the insurgents, executed and their bodies set on fire. Residents began clapping and chanting in support of the resistance and threw straw and other inflammable materials on the fire. Two other contractors survived the attack and were rescued by US soldiers.

The violence at Duluiya reveals far more about the real sentiments of the Iraqi people—their hatred of the US occupation force and its civilian servants—than all the ballots cast in the referendum staged by the Bush administration and its stooge regime in Baghdad.

The popular celebration over the deaths of the contractors recalls the attack that killed four Blackwater Security contractors in Fallajuh in the spring of 2004. That event was given enormous publicity by the Bush administration and the American media, with videotape of the burning bodies of the contractors shown incessantly on US television in order to depict the Iraqi insurgents as savages. (No similar video has ever been shown of Iraqi civilians incinerated by US bombing raids).

Fallujah was twice targeted for full-scale invasions, first in April 2004, just after the contractors were killed, when the resistance proved so ferocious that the US military pulled back and negotiated a ceasefire. The second attack, in November-December 2004, used massive firepower to level the city. Virtually the entire population fled the city, and barely half have since returned.

According to the *Telegraph*, which has fervently supported both the Bush administration and the war in Iraq, the Pentagon had political reasons for keeping quiet about the Duluiya killings. "Perhaps fearful of public reaction in America, where support for the war is falling, US officials suppressed details of the Sept 20 attack," the newspaper wrote. The attack came less than a month before the referendum on a new constitution for Iraq, during a period when the Bush administration was at pains to claim great progress was being made in pacifying the country.

The *Telegraph* added that conditions in the Sunni Triangle, despite official optimism, were actually becoming more difficult for the occupation. Both Iraqi and foreign fighters were able to move freely through the region, relying on popular support in towns like Duluiya.

"If the Americans do not close off these boltholes, it seems unlikely the war can be won. But hopes for progress are growing more remote. The insurgency in eastern Salahuddin province [where Duluiya is located] is growing more intense, more deadly and more sophisticated," the newspaper noted. "Even routine patrols are fraught with danger."

After the report on Duluiya was published in London, a US military spokesman confirmed the details of the incident, but would give no explanation of why more than a month passed before the news was made public. A total of 320 non-Iraqi civilian contractors have been killed in Iraq since the war began in April 2003, according to one estimate.

A major factor in the decision to keep the Duluiya attack quiet was undoubtedly concern over the collapse of domestic political support for the war.

Over the past ten days, there has been a constant stream of unfavorable news from Iraq. This has been largely overshadowed, in the volume of US press coverage, by reports on the referendum vote and the brief hearing for Saddam Hussein and several co-defendants October 19. But the indices of deteriorating conditions on the ground are far more significant.

The *New York Times* reported October 14 that Pentagon officials had increased the estimate of the number of Iraqi security forces required to defeat the insurgency by 20 percent, from 270,000 to 325,000 by 2007. The current total of US-controlled security forces is 356,000, at least on paper, when 156,000 American troops are combined with the 200,000 Iraqi military and police, whose loyalty and effectiveness are doubtful.

The next day the US command headquarters in Baghdad released figures showing that the number of insurgent attacks per week has steadily increased from April 2003 to the present, belying claims of progress in the military counterinsurgency campaign. In February and March 2004, attacks averaged under 200 per week. That figure doubled over the next year, and continues to soar, hitting 723 in the first week of October.

On October 16, the *Washington Post*, another fervent editorial supporter of the US war, reported in passing that anti-American guerrillas are operating openly in the Iraqi capital city. "In insurgent strongholds, such as Baghdad's southern neighborhood of Doura," the newspaper said, "gunmen sometimes take to the streets by the score."

Four days later, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that American troops could be fighting in Iraq indefinitely. She refused to declare that US troops would be out of Iraq in five or even ten years. In response to questions from senators expressing pessimism about the US effort in Iraq, she conceded, "I understand that, yes, it might not work."