US military massacres dozens in wake of Iraq referendum

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In the space of a few hours on Sunday, less than a day after voting finished on the draft constitution in Iraq, the US military used laser-guided bombs and helicopter gunships to massacre as many as 70 people in two incidents in the predominantly Sunni Arab city of Ramadi.

The killings expose the utterly cynical character of the Bush administration's propaganda that the October 15 referendum marked a genuine step toward democracy and sovereignty. Iraq is a conquered country, where US occupation troops are using the most ruthless methods to intimidate any opposition by the Iraqi people and force them into accepting neo-colonial American rule.

In the first incident, at least 25 people were blown to pieces when an F-15 dropped a bomb on a crowd that was gathered around the wreckage of an American humvee. It had been destroyed on Saturday by an insurgent roadside bomb, killing five marines and two soldiers of the Iraqi government armed forces and taking the total of US fatalities in Iraq to 1,976.

The US military asserted the airstrike resulted in the "death of terrorists" who had been planting another bomb. Witnesses and Ramadi hospital staff, however, have insisted that the casualties were young people and children who were pulling parts from the wreck.

Ahmed Fouad told the *Washington Post* that his son and eight-year-old daughter were among the dead. "She was killed with her brother when they were near the humvee. Her mother had a stroke out of shock," he said. A local police officer told Reuters: "Their bodies were completely ripped apart."

On Sunday evening, at least another 50 people were killed in the village of Al-Bu Faraj, on the outskirts of Ramadi. The US military claimed that helicopter gunships monitoring an alleged "terrorist safe house" killed 10 armed men who fired on them. The house was then destroyed by a precision-guided bomb dropped by an F/A-18 fighter, claiming the lives of a further 40 people.

Witnesses told Associated Press that at least 14 of those killed in the house were civilians. A local told Reuters: "The planes came and bombed us right after prayers. These are innocent civilians. To hell with this constitution."

Usage of the word "terrorist" has assumed the same character in Iraq as the term Viet Cong or "VC" during the Vietnam War. It is the convenient label applied to any casualty caused by the occupation forces. As far as the US military is concerned, the entire population is the enemy in areas such as Ramadi. Civilians are being butchered and their deaths included in the body-counts reported by the Pentagon to try to convince the American people that the war is going well.

The reality is that Sunday's attacks—like the numerous atrocities committed against civilian communities in Vietnam—are acts of collective punishment by the US military for opposition to the occupation and the support in cities like Ramadi for the armed Iraqi resistance.

Ramadi is the most populous city and capital of the western province of Anbar, which has a predominantly Sunni Arab population and has been a focus of the insurgency since the 2003 invasion. The province has endured continuous repression. Tens of thousands of people—men, women and children—have been killed or wounded, or dragged off to US-run concentration camps. The city of Fallujah was laid waste last November by American marines. Ramadi has also been the target of brutal anti-insurgency operations.

Over the past several months, towns and villages along the Syrian border and in the Euphrates Valley

have been subjected to US offensives, aimed at disrupting the ability of Sunnis to vote in the referendum. Tens of thousands of civilians have been forced to flee from cities such as Tal Afar, Qaim and Haditha by operations named "Iron Fist" and "River Gate".

Contradicting the constant propaganda claims of the White House that the insurgency is the work of "foreign terrorists", marine Major General Stephen Johnson told a press conference on October 7 his troops had been fighting "largely locally based insurgents":

"[T]he insurgent we fight here is from here, he's from those communities in which we are engaging them. They are generally young people, 20 to 30-years old. They are day laborers, agricultural workers. They are disaffected and there's a lot of unemployment. But they're local people and they can come and go within the community."

The chaos, dislocation and instability caused by the US operations ensured that as many as one third of the polling stations in Anbar province did not open on Saturday. Nevertheless, those who could vote, overwhelming opposed the constitution. In Fallujah, where initial results have been reported, 97 percent rejected the document, while at the same time making clear they viewed the entire process as illegitimate.

The British *Guardian* reported on October 17: "Voters in Fallujah said they would continue supporting the insurrection. 'The resistance will go on,' said Hamid Jassim, 60, queueing to vote at al-Khansa primary school. Those within earshot nodded vigorously. 'God willing it will go on,' they said." Initial reports indicate a similar rejection of the constitution in other Sunni areas and determination to continue fighting the occupation.

The massacres on Sunday are a foretaste of what is to come over the coming weeks and months. Iraqis of all backgrounds—Sunni,ShiiteandKurdish—facedisastrous conditions of life, none of which will be altered by a constitution or the new government to be elected in December. While at present the resistance is concentrated in Sunni areas, it can only spread as the resentment and hostility to the occupation and the political parties collaborating with US imperialism intensifies across the country.

In order to crush the opposition to its war aims, and to a puppet government in Baghdad that hands over territory and oil to US interests, the American ruling elite is prepared to slaughter tens of thousands more Iraqis.

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