

Another war crime: US air raid kills Iraqi family

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American warplanes killed at least eight members of an Iraqi family in an air raid late Monday that demolished a house in the town of Baiji, about 200 km north of Baghdad. The attack, which provoked outrage among local residents, was covered briefly in the US and international media on Tuesday and Wednesday then subsequently dropped—one more on the long list of US crimes in Iraq that is being ignored.

According to US military spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Barry Johnson, three men were observed via an unmanned US drone digging a hole in a road “following the common pattern of roadside bomb emplacement. The individuals left the road site and were followed from the air to a nearby building. Coalition forces employed precision guided munitions on the structure.”

As in other similar cases, Johnson offered no evidence for any of his assertions, which are completely at odds with the statements of survivors, local police and officials, as well as on-the-spot reporters. A *Washington Post* journalist in Baiji observed that the bodies of women and children, not armed gunmen, were being recovered from the rubble. The exact death toll is unclear, but all the victims belonged to the extended family of 56-year-old Ghadban Nahd Hassan.

According to Hassan, 14 family members were in his house at the time of the attack. Those killed included a 9-year-old boy, an 11-year-old girl, three women and three men. Another two women and an 8-year-old boy were badly injured and as of late Tuesday afternoon, another three people were missing.

“I was with some friends in a small shop 100 metres away from the house when I heard the bombing at around 9.30 p.m.,” Hassan told Agence France Presse. “I rushed over to see. My house was destroyed and

there was smoke everywhere.” He said he did not know why his home, in an industrial part of the relatively quiet town, was bombed.

Speaking to Reuters, local police chief Colonel Sufyan Mustafa said he believed there were no anti-US insurgents present in the house. “Even if there had been, why didn’t they surround the area and detain the terrorists instead?” he asked.

Nahi Mohammed, a Baiji car salesman, told the *Los Angeles Times* that the town’s curfew might have caused more deaths by delaying rescue efforts. “We had to wait until morning. We’d have saved those kids if we had the opportunity.”

Major Muthanna al-Qaisi, a spokesman for the governor of Salahaddin province, reported that nine people—all members of Hassan’s family—had been killed in the raid. “The owner of the house is a very simple man,” he said. “The American forces did not provide us with any justification for the attack and the governor requires an investigation.”

Three days after the attack, the official Pentagon story is full of holes. Rescuers sifting through the rubble have not found the bodies of any “terrorists” or weapons. A BBC report noted that local police officials could not even confirm whether the alleged roadside bomb had been found.

Nasir Ani, a spokesman for the Sunni-based Iraqi Islamic Party, angrily told the *Los Angeles Times*: “If such incidents would occur in any other country, I can just imagine their reaction. But in Iraq it is just like any other news.”

The BBC reported that a local official from the same party called for protests. “This is a historic crime and another catastrophe for the people of Baiji. If there were gunmen or criminals in that house, is it right to blow up the whole family?”

Hussein al-Falluji, a lawyer and leader of the Sunni-dominated Iraqi Accordance Front, told the BBC: “Once again the occupiers have shown their barbarism. They never learn from their mistakes... People’s resentment is increasing.”

In a crude attempt to justify the air raid, White House spokesman Scott McClellan told the media on Wednesday: “Our military goes out of the way to avoid civilian casualties; they target the enemy, they target terrorists and the Saddam loyalists who are seeking to kill innocent civilians and disrupt the transition to democracy.” He said the circumstances were “still unclear” and an inquiry had been opened.

While details remain sketchy, it is clear Navy F-14 fighters levelled a house on the basis of scant information and with complete disregard for the lives of innocent men, women and children. This callous indifference for civilian life underscores the fact that the Pentagon regards the Iraqi population as a whole, particularly in predominantly Sunni areas, as the enemy.

A shift in US strategy

What took place in Baiji was not a mistake but part of a calculated plan to terrorise a population that is overwhelmingly hostile to the US occupation and legitimately sympathises with those engaged in armed resistance to the US presence. The killing of civilians in air attacks will become more frequent as the Bush administration adjusts its strategy in Iraq.

President Bush announced plans on Wednesday to increasingly take US troops out of the firing line and replace them with Iraqi security forces. While the initial drawdown would only reduce the number of US troops in Iraq to the level prior to the December election, the Pentagon hopes to further reduce levels later in 2006. One element of the plan is to intensify the air war, which has already escalated from 25 airstrikes in January 2005 to 120 in November.

An article entitled “Up in the Air: Where is the Iraq war headed next?” by veteran journalist Seymour Hersh in the December 5 *New Yorker* provided details of the little publicised plan. “Quick, deadly strikes by

US warplanes are seen as a way to improve dramatically the combat capability of even the weakest Iraqi combat units. The danger, military experts have told me, is that while the number of American casualties would decrease as ground troops are withdrawn, the over-all level of violence and the number of Iraqi casualties would increase unless there are stringent controls over who bombs what,” Hersh wrote.

Behind the shift in strategy are fears in Washington that the war in Iraq, as well as generating widespread domestic opposition, is seriously undermining US military capacity. Military analyst Michael O’Hanlon told Hersh: “If the President decides to stay the course in Iraq some troops would be compelled to serve fourth and fifth tours of combat by 2007 and 2008, which could have serious consequences for morale and competency.”

Much of Hersh’s article is preoccupied with serious concerns in the military over the consequences of allowing Iraqi officers to direct US air attacks. “Will the Iraqis call in air strikes in order to snuff rivals, or other warlords, or to snuff members of your own sect and blame someone else?” one senior military planner at the Pentagon asked.

A second unnamed planner declared: “Airpower can be used as a tool of internal political coercion, and my attitude is that I can’t imagine that we will give that power to the Iraqis.” He then pointedly added that even today, with Americans doing the targetting, “there is no sense of an air campaign, or a strategic vision. We are just whacking targets—this is a reversion to the Stone Age.”

The results were all too obvious on Monday when the US military “whacked” the family of Ghadban Nahd Hassan.



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