

Witnesses, video document massacre in Haditha

US Marines killed Iraqi civilians “in cold blood”

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US Congressman John Murtha said on Wednesday that a Pentagon investigation into the deaths of civilians in Haditha, Iraq, last November will show that US Marines “killed innocent civilians in cold blood.” Murtha (Democrat, Pennsylvania) was referring to a probe launched into a November 19 incident in which at least 23 civilians—including seven women and three children—were gunned down by US troops. Haditha is a predominantly Sunni town 200 kilometers northwest of Baghdad in Anbar province.

From the beginning, Haditha residents have maintained that the victims were deliberately shot at close range by the US soldiers. The Marines initially claimed that one Marine, Miguel Terrazas, 20, and 15 civilians were killed “from the blast of a roadside bomb.” Interviews with witnesses to the killings, however—as well as a video shot in their aftermath—contradict this claim and provide a harrowing account of what can only be described as a massacre.

Murtha, a former Marine intelligence officer and Vietnam veteran and the senior Democrat on the House Defense appropriations subcommittee, called last November for the pullout of all US troops from Iraq within six months. At Wednesday’s news conference on Capitol Hill he said he had not read the official findings of the inquiry, but had been briefed by officers he identified as commanders. He contended the number of Iraqi civilians killed in the incident was about twice the initial report of 15. The military now concedes that 23 died.

“I understand the investigation shows that in fact there was no firefight,” Murtha said, “there was no explosion that killed the civilians on a bus. There was no shrapnel. There were only bullet holes inside the house where the Marines had gone in.”

“One man was killed with an IED [improvised

explosive device],” he added. “After that, they actually went into the houses and killed women and children.”

The incident was first publicized in a March 19 article in *Time* magazine by Tim McGirk, headlined: “One Morning in Haditha: U.S. Marines killed 15 Iraqi civilians in their homes last November. Was it self-defense, an accident or cold-blooded revenge?” It was not until January, after *Time* presented military officials in Baghdad with information they had gathered for their story, that the US opened its own investigation. A criminal inquiry began last week.

According to the *Time* account, at around 7:15 a.m. on November 19 a US humvee carrying Marines from Kilo Company, 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines, was struck by an IED attached to a large propane canister, triggered by remote control.

Eman Waleed, a nine-year-old girl living in a house with her family 150 yards from the explosion, told *Time*, “We heard a big noise that woke us all up. Then we did what we always do when there’s an explosion: my father goes into his room with the Koran and prays that the family will be spared any harm.” She said the rest of the family, including her mother, grandfather, grandmother, two brothers, two aunts and two uncles—gathered in the living room.

The Marines say at this point they came under fire from the direction of the Waleed house and returned fire, a claim contradicted by the fact that video footage after the incident shows no bullet holes on the home’s exterior. Eman said the Marines entered the house, shouting in English. Military officials close to the investigation say the Marines claim to have heard the sound of an AK-47 being readied for fire, a charge disputed by surviving family members who say there were no weapons in the home.

The young girl told *Time*, “First, they went it to Reuters. *Time* also obtained a copy of the video, which captures scenes at the local morgue and at the homes where civilians were gunned down. An abridged version of the video, minus some of its more gruesome segments, is available on the ABC News web site.

Video taken inside the houses shows walls and ceilings riddled with bullet holes, as well as splattered blood and flesh. Blood is smeared across the floor, apparently where the dead bodies were dragged out. Shoes, clothing and other household items are scattered amidst what appears to be blood.

The US military has confirmed that seven people were killed inside the house, including two women and a child. They say they also chased and shot dead a man running from the house. Relatives say a woman, Hiba Abdullah, escaped with her baby.

The Marines claim they then started taking fire from a second house. According to *Time*, this prompted them “to break down the door of that house and throw in a grenade, blowing up a propane tank in the kitchen. The Marines then began firing, killing eight residents—including the owner, his wife, the owner’s sister, a two-year-old son and three young daughters.”

At another house, four men were killed. Yousif Ayed told *Time*, “The Americans gathered my four brothers and took them inside my father’s bedroom, to a closet. They killed them inside the closet.” Although the four were found dead, the Marines admit to shooting only two of them. They claim one of them was wielding an AK-47 and dispute that the men were shot dead in the closet. All told, military officials said the series of raids spanned five hours and left at least 23 people dead.

Dr. Wahid, the director of the local Haditha hospital, said the Marines brought 24 bodies to his hospital around midnight November 19. He told *Time* the Marines claimed the victims had been killed by shrapnel, “But it was obvious to us that there were no organs slashed by shrapnel. The bullet wounds were very apparent. Most of the victims were shot in the chest and the head—from close range.”

NBC news reports that anonymous military sources say photos taken immediately after the incident “show many of the victims were shot at close range, in the head and chest, execution-style. One photo shows a mother and young child bent over on the floor as if in prayer, shot dead.”

Video shot by a Haditha journalism student corroborates residents’ accounts. The footage was turned over to the Hammurabi Human Rights Group, which in turn provided

Reuters reported that the video shows bodies piled up in the back of a pickup truck outside the morgue, including that of a young girl about three years old. One man’s face had been torn apart by bullets; legs and forearms were missing from another corpse.

“This is my father,” a young boy says in the video, “He didn’t do anything wrong. Why did they kill him?”

Another man cries, “They were children. Are you telling me these were terrorists?”

A local resident recounts: “They came and started shooting all at once. They didn’t even knock on the door. They killed them wholesale.”

The US has paid relatives of the victims \$2,500 for 15 of the dead civilians, plus smaller payments to others injured. Three Marine commanders in Haditha have been relieved of duties and at least 12 Marines are under investigation.

The Haditha incident is being cited as potentially the worst single incident involving the deliberate killing of civilians by the US military in Iraq. It is widely accepted, however, that well over 100,000 Iraqi civilians have been killed in the three years since the US invaded the country.

Just last week, the Muslim Clerics Association, a Sunni religious grouping, accused US occupation forces of killing 25 civilians in a weekend raid in the rural area around Latifiya and Yusifiya, south of Baghdad.

Thousands perished during the deadly US offensive on Fallujah in November 2004; countless other innocent men, woman and children have fallen victim in air strikes and house-to-house raids. The majority of these casualties go unreported, and are ignored or dismissed by American authorities, who do not keep a tally of civilian deaths.



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