

US Army clears troops in Ishaqi massacre

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The US army moved quickly on Friday to clear US troops of misconduct in a March 15 raid that killed as many as many as 13 Iraqi civilians in the village of Ishaqi in the Abu Sifa district near Balad, 60 miles north of Baghdad. The army announced the findings of its investigation only one day after the BBC aired video footage which contradicted the initial US account of the incident. (See “Another US atrocity in Iraq: Eleven civilians massacred in Ishaqi”)

The swift exoneration of the troops involved in the Ishaqi events comes as numerous accounts of atrocities committed by US soldiers have received widespread coverage. The military is investigating the unprovoked killings of 24 unarmed civilians last November in the town of Haditha in Anbar province. (See “US Marines to stand trial for massacre of Iraqi civilians in Haditha”)

In addition, eight US troops are being investigated in the death of an Iraqi civilian near Hamandiya in April. Both the *Los Angeles Times* and NBC News have said the troops may have planted an AK-47 and shovel near the body to make it appear that the man was an insurgent burying a roadside bomb. The gunning down of two female civilians, one of them pregnant, near a checkpoint in Samarra is also being probed.

The announcement of the findings of the investigation into the Ishaqi killings seems timed to contain the political fallout, both internationally, in Iraq and within the US, from these civilian killings, particularly the massacre in Haditha. In clearing the troops of any misconduct in Ishaqi, the military is seeking to promote the view that such atrocities are extremely rare and isolated departures from the norm.

However, an aide to Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki, Adnan al-Kadhimi, rejected the US military’s findings in the Ishaqi incident, saying there were too many “questions and doubts” surrounding the raid. “The Iraqi government should continue its own investigation until the truth can be found,” he said. A

government committee made up of several Iraqi ministries is investigating the incident, al-Kadhimi added, and will demand an apology as well as compensation if it finds any misconduct on the part of US troops. A team will travel to Ishaqi over the next few days.

The army’s findings in the Ishaqi events, while clearing the US troops, contradict initial military accounts that said only four had died the night of March 15—two women, a child, and a man claimed to be a suspected Al Qaeda supporter. US officials said at the time that the soldiers were engaged in a firefight and that heavy shooting led to the collapse of the house in which the civilians were staying, resulting in the four deaths.

Reporting on the probe, military spokesman Maj. Gen. William Caldwell acknowledged that “possibly up to nine collateral deaths” had occurred, although the Army would not say when the other civilian deaths had been discovered. A US military spokesman in Baghdad declared bluntly that the “timetable of the investigation is not up for discussion.”

The military’s account of the events sharply contradicts numerous eyewitness accounts as well as video and photographic evidence. Iraqi police who investigated the killings contend they were deliberate. Even if the military’s account of the raid were to be accepted, however, it provides a picture of the brutal “rules of engagement” under which the US forces operate in Iraq.

The “Democracy Now!” radio program interviewed Ibrahim A’rad Khalaf, whose brother died in the raid. “The US forces raided my brother’s house on March 15 and started shooting into the air before entering the house,” he said. “This process lasted for about 20 minutes. And after that they entered the house and started shooting inside it. They gathered all the family members inside one room and executed all of them.”

Hassan Hurdi Mahassen told the *Sunday* London that following the shooting soldiers dropped several grenades on the house, collapsing it. When villagers searched the house they found the victims “all buried in one room,” Mahassen said. He added, “Women and even children were blindfolded and their hands bound. Some of their faces were totally disfigured.”

The video shot by an AP Television News cameraman and obtained by the BBC shows the wrapped bodies of five slain children lying in a row. At least one adult male and four of the children appear to have deep wounds to the head. One child has an entry wound on the side. A voice on the video says clear bullet wounds could be seen in two bodies, and bullet holes riddle the walls of the house.

An unidentified man on the AP video says, “Children were stuck in the room, alone and surrounded. After they handcuffed them, they shot them dead. Later, they struck the house with their planes. They wanted to hide the evidence.”

The military has flatly rejected these eyewitness accounts. “Allegations that the troops executed a family living in a safe house, then hid the alleged crimes by directing an air strike, are absolutely false,” Maj. Gen. Caldwell said.

The military has not revealed precisely which US forces were involved in the Ishaqi raid. But the operation has the characteristics of a Special Operations mission. The *Los Angeles Times* reported June 3 that an Army official confirmed that Special Operations forces were involved.

Major General Caldwell said that ground forces were fired on when they approached the house, and they then called in “close air support.” According to the *Times*, “Officials said that support came from an AC-130, a powerful gunship often used by Air Force Special Operations personnel,” and that the “side cannons of the AC-130 leveled the house.”

The AC-130’s combat history dates back to Vietnam, and the gunship has been used by the US military in Grenada, Panama and the first Gulf War. According to the web site of the US Air Force, “These heavily armed aircraft incorporate side-firing weapons integrated with sophisticated sensor, navigation and fire control systems to provide surgical firepower or area saturation.” Their utilization as air support in a

populated village is an indication of the degree to which Iraqi civilian life is held in contempt.

In an AP television interview, Issa Hrat Khalaf, whose brother died in Ishaqi, lashed out against the atrocity. “Where are the terrorists?” he asked. “Are they the old lady or the kids? It looks like the lives of the Iraqis are worthless.”

In the three years of the war the Pentagon has refused to count the deaths of Iraqi civilians—which they refer to as “collateral damage.”

As the investigation into the Haditha massacre proceeds, the wife of one of the staff sergeants involved has described the type of atmosphere that pervaded the Marine unit that carried out that atrocity. Her comments give an indication of the demoralized mood that must prevail in significant sections of the occupying army.

She told *Newsweek* magazine that there had been a “total breakdown” in the unit’s discipline after it was pulled out of Fallujah in early 2005. “There were problems in Kilo company with drugs, alcohol, hazing, you name it,” she said. “I think it’s more than possible that these guys were totally tweaked out on speed or something when they shot those civilians in Haditha.”

The *Newsweek* article describes how the soldiers from Kilo Company, 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines prepared for the siege of Fallujah in November 2004, staging a mock chariot race, “complete with captured horses, togas and heavy metal music.” The battalion lost 17 men in 10 days of fighting in Fallujah.

“The Marines were given loose rules of engagement in the vicious urban warfare that followed,” *Newsweek* writes. “‘If you see someone with a cell phone,’ one of the commanders was quoted as saying, half-jokingly, ‘put a bullet in their f___ing head.’”



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