

US raid on mosque leads to massacre in Baghdad

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12 April 2007

Scores of people were left killed or wounded and bodies littered the streets of two crowded urban neighborhoods in central Baghdad following a major battle between US occupation forces and city residents Tuesday.

The fighting erupted in the predominantly Sunni Fadhil and Sheikh Omar neighborhoods after what appeared to be deliberate provocation by US-backed Iraqi troops.

According to residents of the area reached by the *New York Times*, the battle erupted early Tuesday morning after the US and Iraqi puppet forces cordoned off an area and began house-to-house searches.

“The Iraqi Army raided a mosque and killed two men in front of other worshipers at the early morning prayers,” the *Times* reported. It quoted Qais Ahhmed, a laborer who lives close to the mosque, as saying that one of those executed was the muezzin, the person chosen to lead the call to prayer.

“Then the locals took their guns and went out to fight the Iraqi Army and the police in reaction to these executions,” Ahmed added.

It was at that point that US troops joined the battle, calling in helicopter gunships to launch air strikes on the neighborhood.

The episode, which has all the earmarks of a deliberate provocation aimed at drawing out opponents of the American occupation in order to slaughter them, provides a revealing glimpse into the reality of the so-called “surge” ordered by the Bush administration. Touted by the White House and the Pentagon as an effort to provide “security” for the residents of Baghdad, the escalation of some 30,000 more troops is, in reality, a last-ditch effort to drown the growing popular resistance to US domination in blood.

The Sunni-dominated Muslim Scholars Association issued a statement condemning the killing of civilians—including women and children—in the operation. “The association condemns this horrible crime carried out by occupiers and the government,” the statement said. It continued, “The civilians of this district call for the free world and human rights organizations to stop this massacre that does not differentiate between men and women and children. They call for relief and for help with their injuries.”

According to various reports, the number of civilians killed in the operation numbered in the dozens, with many more

wounded. US-Iraqi military forces prevented ambulances from entering the area, leaving those injured without care. It was also reported that an elementary school was struck during the fighting, with a rocket killing a six-year-old child.

As details of the carnage in Baghdad emerged, a British newspaper published an account of documents spelling out the Pentagon’s plans for a draconian counterinsurgency crackdown that would turn much of the Iraqi capital into a virtual prison.

The *Independent’s* veteran Middle East correspondent Robert Fisk reported Wednesday that the “operation will seal off vast areas of the city, enclosing whole neighborhoods behind barricades and allowing only Iraqis with newly issued ID cards to enter.”

As Fisk points out, this strategy has a long and inauspicious history in the attempts to suppress anti-colonial struggles from Algeria to Vietnam. In Vietnam, the US military attempted something similar with its ill-fated “strategic hamlet” program.

Fisk reports that the strategy was developed by the new US commander in Iraq, Gen. David Petraeus, during a six-month course at the Army’s command and general staff college in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Among those involved in drawing up the plans were reportedly “at least four senior Israeli officers.”

The strategy calls for mass arrests of men of military age, Fisk reports. Indeed, part of the US troop surge is made up of 2,200 military policemen sent to Iraq to guard the burgeoning population of detainees.

After neighborhoods have been cleansed of potential resistance fighters, they are to be walled off and “gated,” with only occupants bearing American-issued ID cards allowed in and out. Meanwhile, US and Iraqi puppet troops will establish fortified “support bases” inside these sealed off areas, conducting regular patrols. “Civilians may find themselves inside a ‘controlled population’ prison,” Fisk writes.

He goes on, however, to quote an unnamed former senior US officer’s “pessimistic conclusions” about the strategy:

“Once the additional troops are in place the insurrectionists will cut the lines of communication from Kuwait to the greatest extent they are able. They will do the same inside Baghdad, forcing more use of helicopters. The helicopters will be vulnerable coming into the patrol bases, and the enemy will

destroy as many as they can. The second part of their plan will be to attempt to destroy one of the patrol bases ... The American reaction will be to use massive fire power, which will destroy the neighborhood that is being 'protected.'"

In other words, the so-called surge will produce a massive escalation in bloodshed, claiming the lives of countless Iraqis and many, many more US soldiers.

The horrific conditions inflicted upon the Iraqi people by the US war and occupation found fresh confirmation in a stinging report issued Wednesday by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which effectively dismissed the Bush administration's hollow claims about "progress" in Iraq.

"The suffering that Iraqi men, women and children are enduring today is unbearable and unacceptable," ICRC director of operations Pierre Kraehenbuehl told the media in releasing the report. "Their lives and dignity are continuously under threat."

He added, in relation to the US military operations, "We're certainly not seeing an immediate effect in terms of stabilization for civilians currently. That is not our reading."

"The conflict in Iraq is inflicting immense suffering on the entire population," the ICRC report states. "Civilians bear the brunt of the relentless violence and the extremely poor security conditions that are disrupting the lives and livelihoods of millions. Every day, dozens of people are killed and many more wounded. The plight of Iraqi civilians is a daily reminder of the fact that there has long been a failure to respect their lives and dignity."

In addition to the daily slaughter that has killed and maimed hundreds of thousands, while turning millions more into refugees, the ICRC report cites the destruction of the country's health care system and basic infrastructure, creating a humanitarian disaster.

"Health-care facilities are stretched to the limit as they struggle to cope with mass casualties day-in, day-out," the report states, adding, "Many sick and injured people do not go to hospital because it's too dangerous ..." The ICRC reports that fully half the country's doctors have already fled into exile.

The Red Cross report cites growing food shortages and an increase in malnutrition. It warns that the country's "vastly inadequate water, sewage and electricity infrastructure is presenting a risk to public health ... Water is often contaminated owing to the poor repair of sewage and water-supply networks and the discharge of untreated sewage into rivers, which are the main source of drinking water."

The report also confirms that the US occupation is resulting in the massive detention of Iraqis without charges. "Tens of thousands of people are currently being detained by the Iraqi authorities and the multinational forces in Iraq. Many families remain without news of relatives who went missing ..." The ICRC estimates that the number of Iraqis arrested and interned by the US occupation forces has increased by 40 percent since

early 2006.

Meanwhile, the desperation of the White House and the Pentagon as they seek to reverse the debacle that the war of aggression in Iraq has produced for US imperialism is becoming increasingly apparent.

On Wednesday, Defense Secretary Robert Gates appeared at a hastily organized Pentagon press conference to announce that the tours of duty for all regular Army units deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan are being extended from 12 months to 15 months, effective immediately. The announcement was one more indication of the immense strain that the two deployments are placing on the all-volunteer Army, which some former senior officers are already describing as "broken." The public announcement, before any of the troops presently deployed in Iraq were informed that they will spend three more months in combat, will undoubtedly further erode already plummeting morale.

Also on Wednesday, the *Washington Post* reported that White House has been unable to convince anyone to fill a new position overseeing the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and coordinating the operations of the Pentagon, the State Department and other agencies.

The newspaper cited at least three retired four-star generals who rejected the appointment as so-called "war czar," apparently out of disagreement with the administration's policy or belief that the Iraq war is unwinnable.

"The very fundamental issue is, they don't know where the hell they're going," retired Marine Gen. Jack Sheehan, a former NATO commander, told the newspaper. "There's the residue of the Cheney view—'We're gong to win, Al Qaeda's there'—that justifies anything we did," he added. "And there's the pragmatist view—how the hell do we get out of Dodge and survive? Unfortunately, the people with the former view are still in the positions of most influence."

Summing up his decision to refuse the appointment, Sheehan concluded, "So rather than go over there, develop an ulcer and eventually leave, I said, 'No thanks.'"



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