

US forces kill Iraqi civilians every day

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For more than four years of US occupation, the Iraqi people have known that coming too close to American troops can be a death sentence. Now, internal statistics presented to US Iraq commander General David Petraeus, and subsequently leaked to the McClatchy news service, shed some light on the extent of civilian killings. In the 12 months since July 2006, according to McClatchy's sources, the US military has officially admitted to killing or wounding 429 Iraqis in 3,200 "escalation of force" incidents—situations where US troops on patrol, manning checkpoints or escorting vehicle convoys have opened fire on men, women and children they considered a threat.

The figures indicate that civilians are shot at by US forces somewhere in Iraq at least every three hours. The rate at which civilians are being fired on has sharply risen with the deployment of 30,000 additional US troops to Iraq and the intensification of American operations in densely populated residential areas of Baghdad and other cities. In July 2006, 22 civilians were reported killed or maimed. In February 2007, as the Bush administration's "surge" went into motion, 46 Iraqi civilian casualties were officially documented by the US military.

A number of factors come into play in the wanton civilian deaths caused by US troops: sheer fear of being killed themselves; the devaluation of Iraqi lives by military propaganda; and the general brutalisation of military personnel who are exposed to constant death and destruction.

Interviews with 50 Iraq combat veterans published by the *Nation* magazine on July 9 and soon to be presented in a new book, *Collateral Damage*, provide first-hand testimony of the conduct of US troops against the Iraqi population. The current July 30 edition of the *Nation* contains a lengthy presentation of the veteran's statements. (See "The Other War: Iraq Vets Bear Witness")

Specialist Ben Schrader, who served with an armoured unit from February 2004 to February 2005, told the *Nation*: "One example I can give you, we'd be driving down the road in a convoy and all of the sudden an IED

blows up. And you know, you've got these scared kids on these guns and they start opening fire. And there could be innocent people everywhere. And I've seen this. I mean, on numerous occasions where innocent people died because we're cruising down and a bomb goes off."

Sergeant Dustin Flatt, who also served in 2004, recounted how troops protecting a convoy that passed his position near Mosul opened fire on a civilian car behind them: "Basically they took shots at the car. Warning shots, I don't know. But they shot the car. Well, one of the bullets happened to just pierce the windscreen and went straight into the face of this woman in the car. And she was, as far as I know, instantly killed... Her son was driving the car and she had her three little girls in the back seat... And they came up to us, because we were actually in a defensive position right next to the hospital... she was obviously dead and the girls were crying."

Another soldier, Geoffrey Milfred, told the *Nation* about an incident he knew of that occurred at a checkpoint: "This unit sets up this traffic control point and this 18-year-old kid is on top of an armoured Humvee with a .50-calibre machine gun. This car speeds at him pretty quick and he makes a split-second decision that that's a suicide bomber and he presses the butterfly trigger and puts 200 rounds in less than a minute into this vehicle. It killed the mother, father and two kids. The boy was aged four and the daughter was aged three. And they briefed this to the general... And this colonel turns around to this full division staff and says, "If these **** hajis [derogatory term for Arabs] learned to drive, this **** wouldn't happen."

Lieutenant Jonathan Morgenstein, an officer attached in 2004-2005 to a marine civil affairs unit—which investigated "escalation of force" incidents—told the *Nation*: "You physically could not do an investigation every time a civilian was wounded or killed because it just happens a lot and you'd spend all your time doing that." Attempting to sum up the prevailing mentality, Specialist Jeff Englehart told the magazine: "I guess while I was there, the general attitude was 'A dead Iraqi

is just another dead Iraqi.””

At a July 13 press conference in Arlington, Virginia, US Defence Secretary Robert Gates and Joints Chief of Staff General Peter Pace were not asked by any journalist to confirm, deny or comment on either the McClatchy report, which had been published two days earlier, or the publication of the *Nation* interviews.

The media silence is remarkable considering that the official figures are clearly a vast underestimation of the real scale of civilian killings in occupied Iraq. As McClatchy’s Nancy Youssef noted in her July 11 article: “The statistics don’t include instances of American soldiers killing civilians during raids, arrests or in the midst of battle with armed groups, and it remains unclear how the US military tracks such information. Often rotating units use their own systems and there have been several incidents of soldiers not reporting the deaths of civilians, most notably the November 2005 shooting of 24 civilians in the northern Iraqi town of Haditha.”

In the November 19, 2005, marines went on a rampage in Haditha after a roadside bomb killed one of their squad. Five civilians were murdered in a taxi, one gunned down on the street and 18 men, women and children were slaughtered in their homes. Despite the obvious evidence of a massacre, both the marines’ commanding officer and US military intelligence reported the dead Iraqis as armed insurgents.

There is no reason to believe the cover-up surrounding Haditha was an isolated incident. In a recent US military mental health survey, published in May, 45 percent of army personnel and 60 percent of marines in Iraq stated they would not report a fellow serviceman for killing or injuring an innocent non-combatant. In the trial that began on June 30 of two US soldiers charged with murdering civilians, the defendants are accused of placing weapons beside their victims so they would be classified as insurgents. A third soldier of the same unit was charged with murder and cover-up on July 2. (See “US troops charged with murders, cover-ups in Iraq”)

Moreover, the official figures do not include the civilians who have been killed or wounded at the hands of the thousands of private security contractors employed by the US government in Iraq. Security contractors have the same right to fire on Iraqi civilians they believe to be a threat as the US military. They are obliged to display a sign in English and Arabic stating “Danger. Keep back. Authorised to use lethal force”. Unlike US troops who travel in recognisable military vehicles, contractors generally travel in unmarked civilian vehicles and

sometimes disguise themselves in local attire.

How many Iraqis have been victim to contractor killings is unknown. Some incidents have come to light, however. In May, employees of Blackwater Security shot and killed an Iraqi who drove “too close” to their vehicle. According to an Iraqi official cited by the *Washington Post*, the man had just driven out of a petrol station onto the road and witnesses stated the shooting was “unprovoked”.

In 2005, a so-called “trophy” video was posted on a website, showing four incidents in which contractors fired into Iraqi cars that appeared to come within 30 metres or so of their vehicle. In at least one of the shootings, bullets clearly impacted on the driver-side windscreen and the vehicle veered suddenly off the road. The website was allegedly connected to employees of the British security company Aegis.

At the time, Captain Adnan Tawfiq of the Iraqi Interior Ministry told the British *Sunday Telegraph*: “When the security companies kill people, they just drive away and nothing is done. Sometimes we ring the companies concerned and they deny everything. The families don’t get any money or compensation. I would say we have had about 50-60 incidents of this kind.”

As the WSWS has warned before, the carnage being inflicted against civilians will have ramifications in the United States as well as on generations of Iraqis. Thousands of young men and women—both former soldiers and contractors—are returning from Iraq bearing the psychological scars of having participated in, or witnessed acts of staggering brutality and indifference to human life.

The primary responsibility for these war crimes rests with the Bush administration, which ordered the illegal invasion of Iraq and is waging a vicious neo-colonial war to suppress any opposition to its continued occupation of the country.



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